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Factsheet – Learning disabilities.

What is a learning disability?

Someone with a learning disability has a lower intellectual ability. They find it harder to learn and understand new information, and learn and do everyday tasks. Learning disabilities are generally diagnosed in childhood.

The UK charity Mencap describes a learning disability as:

“A reduced intellectual ability and difficulty with everyday activities – for example household tasks, socialising or managing money – which affects someone for their whole life.

People with a learning disability tend to take longer to learn and may need support to develop new skills, understand complicated information and interact with other people.”

Learning disabilities can be mild, moderate or profound. They often co-occur with other disabilities and learning difficulties.

According to Mencap, 2.16 per cent of adults in the UK have a learning disability.

What is the difference between learning disabilities and learning difficulties?

In the UK, the term ‘learning difficulties’ refers to conditions that affect the learning process but do not affect intellect. These include neurodiverse conditions such as ADHD, autism and dyslexia, which do not affect a person’s intellectual ability.

We use ‘learning disabilities’ when referring to reduced intellectual ability and difficulty with everyday activities

This is not the case in other countries though, and even in the UK the terms are often used interchangeably. This is often because:

In some countries, learning disabilities include learning difficulties.

Other terminology is used for ‘learning disability’, such as ‘intellectual disability.’

A significant number of people with a learning disability will also have learning difficulties, such as autism.

Some people with learning disabilities prefer to use the term 'learning difficulties' to describe themselves.

In this factsheet, we are focusing on 'learning disabilities' and not 'learning difficulties.' We appreciate that terminology can be a contentious issue and we have chosen to use the UK's lead definitions for consistency. However, it is important to respect individuals' personal preferences when communicating with them. This may mean using the term learning 'difficulty' rather than 'disability' in conversation.

Why employ people with learning disabilities?

Good work is a part of living well, and this is just as true for people with learning disabilities.

However, people with learning disabilities are some of the least likely to be employed.

According to [DFN Project Search](#), only 4.8 per cent of people in England with a learning disability who are known to their local authorities go on to obtain work (41 per cent in Scotland).

This compares with 54.2 per cent of disabled people and 82 per cent of non-disabled people (according to [2024 House of Commons Library research](#)).

Many people with learning disabilities want to work and would thrive in roles that suit them.

Which roles can suit someone with a learning disability?

For some roles, a person with a learning disability might be the best person for the job.

They can often excel at tasks that others find monotonous with lower error levels. At our 2023 Global Conference, Danielle Meadows of JP Morgan talked about the strengths people with learning disabilities have at inputting data into AI models.

Reputation and brand.

Employing people with a learning disability can also promote diversity in the organisation and reflect the diversity of customers and clients you serve.

It can also promote understanding of learning disabilities generally and what skills and attributes they can bring to a workplace.

How can a learning disability impact a person?

Each person's experience of a learning disability is unique in both the severity and functionally. Below are common challenges and barriers a person with a learning disability may face:

- Sight loss
- Hearing loss
- Bowel and bladder conditions
- Difficulty swallowing
- Epilepsy
- Weight issues
- Diabetes
- Heart conditions
- Reduced ability to learn and process complex tasks and information
- Communication difficulties
- Poverty
- Isolation and loneliness
- Bullying and harassment
- Lack of education, job opportunities and experience.

The law.

In the UK, employers have duties to:

- prevent discrimination, and
- provide reasonable adjustments

for their disabled employees. This means that it is unlawful for employers to treat applicants, job candidates and employees unfavourably because of their disability.

The Equality Act also requires employers to make 'reasonable adjustments' for their disabled employees.

Many other countries worldwide have similar legislation.

Suggested adjustments for people with learning disabilities.

Every person has their own strengths, challenges, barriers, and strategies. The range and specific workplace adjustments will be unique to each person and their job.

As with any new employee, you should have a detailed conversation about what support and adjustments they need to do the job. These should be carried out promptly and reviewed regularly to ensure that any adjustments are meeting the needs of the individual.

Below are a few examples of adjustments that are often helpful for people with learning disabilities.

- Recruiting people with learning disabilities
- Make sure your job descriptions are accessible and realistic for people with learning disabilities.
- Provide Easy Read versions of job ads and other documents.
- Include images in the job ad.
- Advertise roles where people with learning disabilities can find them easily.
- Ask the person (and their support worker or job coach if necessary and if they have one) if they need any adjustments to the recruitment process.
- Consider having an interview in which allows the candidate to show what they can do, rather than a question-and-answer interview. This is sometimes referred to as a 'work trial' or 'working interview.' It can legally be a reasonable adjustment under the Equality act 2010. For many people, a traditional interview is not the best test of whether they can do the job. It is not just people with learning disabilities who will benefit from this assessment method.

Adjustments for employees with learning disabilities.

- You may have to break tasks down into very small steps and show them in order several times until the individual has learnt them. Training in Systematic Instruction (TSI) is a recognised structure approach often used to help people with learning disabilities learn complex tasks.
- Picture reminders for steps in a task, wearable technology or other technology that can act as reminders can be very helpful. Having a work buddy on a temporary basis when someone starts a job, or on a more permanent basis can also be very helpful for some people.
- In the UK, you can work with Access to Work and any support workers a person may have. Access to Work may also fund a support worker.
- The individual may need guidance on workplace etiquette, especially if this their first job. This might be on what to wear, how to communicate and what the 'rules' are. What seems obvious to you might be totally new for someone with a learning disability.

- Reconsider your approach to breaches of workplace etiquette. As in the point above, consider that the person may not know that this behaviour is not acceptable. It is important to always check the individual's understanding before escalating to any kind of performance process.
- Consider task swapping to fit the skills of the person. This can also benefit the person they are swapping with.
- You can also 'carve' out a role that matches the skills of the person with a learning disability. This could mean removing some tasks that find difficult or grouping together a set of tasks from different roles which may not seem immediately obvious or connected.
- They may need adjustments for other visible and less visible disabilities that are often associated with learning disabilities such as sight loss, hearing loss, bowel and bladder symptoms, epilepsy and congenital health conditions.

There are organisations that can help you introduce supported internships for people with learning disabilities. For example, [DFN Project Search](#). Supported internships are structured and supported so they help both employers and people with learning disabilities. They are also an excellent bridge into successful paid employment for people with learning disabilities.

Further information.

- [Mencap](#).
- [DFN Project Search](#).