Workplace Communication for Blind & Low Vision Employees

AccessATE

Employers often have concerns regarding communication when hiring a student who is blind or has low vision. Explain to your industry partner how you effectively communicated and worked with your student. The best advice to give your industry partner is to not make assumptions, but instead just ask. Below are some strategies for communicating with people who are blind or have low vision.

One-on-One Conversations

- **Ask the person how they identify** - do they prefer person-first language (person who is blind) or identity-first language (blind person) – and follow their lead.
- Immediately **greet the person by name** when they enter a room. This allows you to let them know you are present and it eliminates uncomfortable silences.
- **Identify yourself** when approaching the person or entering an ongoing conversation. Don't assume the person will recognize you by your voice.
- **Tell the person when you are done** with the conversation before walking away. This will prevent any unintended embarrassment or insult.
- **Speak directly and naturally** to the individual in your normal tone.
- **Avoid using nods, head shakes, and hand gestures** without verbal cues in conversation. To clarify and avoid accidents, tell the person what you are doing, e.g., "I'm going to reaching across the table in front of you, Sue, to get a pen."
- **Give specific directions** such as "the bookshelf is 5 feet to your right". The use of landmarks is helpful when providing directions.
- **Be precise and thorough when you describe** people, places or things. Don't leave things out or change a description because you think it is unimportant or unpleasant. Don't overload with details when the person who is blind just wants to know what's happening.
- **Use everyday language**. Don't be afraid to use words like "look", "watch", or "see". It is acceptable to say phrases such as "Nice to see you", or "I was watching TV."
- **Be aware of distractions or noises** in the environment that can disrupt effective communication. Avoid situations where there is competing noise.

Group Communication and Meetings

- **Providing an agenda or meeting materials in advance** in an accessible format allows a person who is blind or has low vision to use a screen reader or other assistive technologies to review the materials. Make sure all photos, charts and other graphics have text descriptions. Materials should be made available in the person's preferred accessible format.
- When entering a conference room or other large meeting space with someone who is blind or has low vision, **describe the layout of the room**.

- At the beginning of the meeting, **have each person introduce themselves** and share any information that may be wearing on their name tag.
- If the meeting will include visual presentations (slides, charts, posters, etc), make sure the presenter **verbally describes them**.
- Set **rules** at the beginning of a meeting for **taking turns speaking**. It can be confusing and difficult for a person who is blind or has low vision to follow the conversation when multiple people are talking at the same time or having side conversations.
- **Call on people by name** when it is their turn to speak.

Telephone or Video Conference Meetings

To ensure these meetings are accessible for all participants, consider the following strategies:

- **Take roll call at the beginning** of the meeting so that everyone is made aware of who is involved in the meeting.
- **Have one person speak at a time**. For videoconferencing, have people raise their hand and wait to be called on before speaking. Call on people by name when it is their turn to speak.
- Ask meeting participants to **identify themselves by name before speaking**.
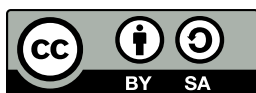- **Address people by name**.

Additional Resources

- JAN Accommodation and Compliance by Disability - **https://askjan.org/publications**
- Disability Etiquette - **https://disabilityin.org/resource/disability-etiquette**
- Accommodation Strategies for Blindness - **https://www.washington.edu/doit/blindness-0**
- American Foundation for the Blind - **https://www.afb.org**
- Perkins School for the Blind - **https://www.perkins.org/stories/make-your-meeting-accessible**