



Workers with Disabilities

Module 4



Health & Safety
Essentials

Registered charity number 207890

Control measures

Quite often, simple adjustments are all that is required to ensure that the worker with a disability does not experience any unnecessary risk or difficulty in carrying out his or her work. These range from minor changes to building access, slight alterations to time and attendance expectations, or relevant training to the appropriate staff members. There is no 'one-size-fits-all' approach and management must keep an open mind when broaching this subject.

Hierarchy of control measures

There are a variety of controls that can be applied when addressing the health and safety risks for people with disabilities. These follow an established hierarchy, which is summarised by the *ERICSP* acronym:

E = Elimination of the risk by substitution or other method.

R = Reducing the exposure to the substance or activity.

I = Isolating the person from a hazardous substance or activity.

C = Controlling measures that limit exposure/access to hazards.

S = Safe System of Work is ensured through administrative controls and procedures.

P = Personal Protective Equipment such as safety specs and lab coat (this often comes with limitations so should be the last line of defence).

The upper options of the hierarchy are the most robust/reliable. The lower options of the hierarchy require effective maintenance of management, supervision and cooperation, all of which are inherently unreliable.

In addition, national representative bodies, such as the Royal National Institute for the Blind (RNIB) and the Royal National Institute for the Deaf (RNID), can be consulted about best practice relating to specific disabilities. They will also be able to provide advice on different options available with regard to making reasonable adjustments.

Reasonable adjustments

A reasonable adjustment involves making a change to the way that typical procedure is carried out in the workplace to ensure that all disabled employees are treated fairly. An employer should not make any assumptions about whether a disabled person requires any adjustments or about what those adjustments should be. Instead, the employer should discuss the circumstances and options with the employee to reach an agreement on what may be reasonable. The point at which an employer must consider making a reasonable adjustment to their premises is if any feature of its operation causes a substantial disadvantage to a person with a disability.

Finding a 'reasonable adjustment' can be a creative process, and the person in question will be fully aware of their capabilities. Therefore, involving them in the assessment process together with the employer's knowledge of the job role is likely to give the best solution.



There are four tests that are normally accepted when identifying what adjustments may or may not be 'reasonable'. In principle, these apply equally well for safety. The four tests are as follows:

1. The effectiveness in preventing disadvantage

The more effective an adjustment is in reducing disadvantage, the more reasonable it is likely to be.

2. The practicality of the step

It is more likely that an employer will be expected to take a step that is easy than to take a step that is hard. If disadvantage can easily be removed by changing the way things are done, or the equipment that is used, then the adjustment is likely to be considered reasonable.

3. The financial impact and the extent of any disruption caused

When trying to decide whether an adjustment would be reasonable, the cost of the adjustment and any disruption it might cause should also be considered. Cost is not just about the price of making physical adaptations, but also includes:

- how experienced and skilled the employee concerned is;
- the cost of readjusting the laboratory should the employee leave the organisation;
- how long the employee has been with the organisation (it is more likely to be reasonable to make an expensive adjustment for a permanent member of staff than a temp); and
- whether the adjustment may be of benefit to other employees (disabled and non-disabled).

4. The extent of an organisation's financial and other resources

An organisation with lots of money would be more likely to have to make a reasonable adjustment than one with fewer resources. However, financial help from government schemes, such as Access to Work, is available to help in providing reasonable adjustments for employees. These funds must be taken into account when deciding how 'financially reasonable' an adjustment is.

The most commonly encountered types of reasonable adjustments are **physical features** (see table below for examples) and they can be permanent or temporary, dependent on the situation.

Where a particular disability is likely to affect the way a job is performed with respect to ensuring safety, then an agreed way of working (safe system of work) may be required for persons with disabilities. Depending on the work activity, the workplace and the disability in question, reasonable adjustments include non-physical changes such as:

- allocating some of the persons duties to another person;
- altering the persons working hours;
- assigning the person to a different work space;
- allowing absences for rehabilitation, assessment or treatment;
- providing training;
- modifying instructions, procedures or reference manuals; and
- providing a reader, interpreter or scribe.



Adjustments to laboratory layout and facilities

The word 'disability' covers a wide range of conditions; therefore changes needed to the facilities should reflect the specific needs of the person or people involved.

Safe means of access to and egress from the laboratory may require a ramp at the main entrance to allow wheelchair access. Handrails at the sides of the ramps and easy-to-open doors should also be provided, with corridors and laboratory areas wide enough to allow wheelchairs to move along them easily.

Floors should be well maintained, and should not have any holes, unnecessary slopes or raised sections which can cause difficulties to wheelchair users or dangers for the partially sighted or blind. Where access to all floors is needed, then the doors of lifts should be wide enough to allow wheelchairs to enter and buttons arranged for ease of operation from seating height, with raised symbols or Braille for those with visual disabilities.

In order to ensure safe access and movement within the laboratory, good housekeeping is essential to prevent obstructions and spillages. It may also be necessary to relocate light switches, door handles or shelving for people who have difficulty reaching these.

Toilets and washing facilities should also be modified to allow easy access and use, particularly for those using wheelchairs. Ideally these should be on the same floor as those that use them, have handrails provided where appropriate, and pull cord alarms that should raise alarm in a permanently manned area.

Workstations for individual employees should be arranged to be suitable for the person using them and the task being performed. Possibly, this may involve altering the height or width of benches, fume cupboards and desks or the location of taps, electrical power points and other controls so they can be reached safely.

When designing new facilities and laboratories designers should anticipate usage by workers with disabilities and design in the 'reasonable adjustments'.

Some adjustments for disabled people may cost nothing, but for those that do, help is often available at work through 'Access to Work' funding and in education via the local education authority or further/higher education funding organisations.



The table below gives guidance on typical conditions and some options that could be considered:

Disability or condition	Example of potential difficulties	Possible reasonable adjustments
Visual impairment	Limitations on reading instructions and signs, negotiating routes.	Enlarge signs, improved lighting/contrast, training, and assistance from colleagues. Additional time in examinations, for task completion, as well as provision of a scribe or use of a personal computer. A helper to assist with a practical chemical experiment. Chemical containers equipped with Braille if necessary.
Hearing impairment	Response to fire and other alarms.	Fit flashing lights to fire alarm system. Consider 'buddying' whereby the person in question has another dedicated person to help with evacuation from the building.
Restricted written communication	Difficulty in communicating through written methods. Difficulty in presenting written work.	Consider use of a scribe. Consider use of a computer or laptop where necessary.
Speech impairment	Difficulty in communicating. Asking for help and assistance.	Agree simple signs, particularly for in the event of an emergency. Consider need for sign language.
Restricted mobility	Difficulty reaching or operating equipment designed/located for normal mobility. Slow/limited response to fire alarm/evacuation.	Move the persons work location to a more suitable/accessible area. Arrange for a specific emergency evacuation procedure to be developed and practised for the person in question.
Wheelchair users	Access to normal height lab benches/storage shelves/fume hoods.	Reduced height bench/storage shelves/fume hood available.
Limited lifting capacity/dexterity	Inability to perform certain tasks.	Arrange for help to be available or possibly supply some limited manual handling equipment.
Mental Health	Workload may be too large.	Flexible working hours.
Epilepsy	Possible driving restrictions.	Flexible working hours. Consider a 'buddying' arrangement to assist with transport if necessary.
Diabetes	Possible fatigue. Regular access to food.	Flexible working hours. Place to store food and medicine.

Information, instruction and training

Information provided to people at work may need to be modified for people with certain disabilities. Some key documents and labels may need to be printed in larger text, in Braille or perhaps be verbally explained. Safety information is often provided in the form of pictograms, so text size and clarity is less of a problem. However, improved lighting may still provide advantages.

Instruction to other staff may be required if there is to be a change of duties/responsibilities to remove barriers or risk for employment of the individual with a disability.

Training is particularly important where there needs to be good understanding of the expectations and limitations of a person with a disability with their work colleagues.

The employer must not overlook their legal duty to ensure sensitive and appropriate handling of personal data for all employees. Therefore, confidential details regarding the individual and his or her disability must not be disclosed without their explicit consent.

