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Quick Facts

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Disability Etiquette

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Smart business people continually strive to improve customer service and employee relations. When the customer or employee has a disability, simple etiquette can pave the way for a successful relationship.

DID YOU KNOW?

- Nearly one-third of American families have a member with a disability.
- The word "handicapped" is derived from the phrase "cap in hand," signifying a beggar. It is derogatory and should not be used.
- People first language should always be used. Say someone "uses a wheelchair" instead of "wheelchair-bound."
- People with disabilities go to school, get married, have families, pay taxes, take vacations, and dream like everyone else.
- It's appropriate to assume that people with disabilities can perform tasks for themselves.

VISUAL DISABILITY

Customers and employees with visual disabilities may have limited sight, distorted sight, or may not be able to see at all. Some of these individuals will need written information in large print, audio tapes, or a disk formatted for Braille.

- As you approach the person, clearly state your identity.
- Ask the person if you may be of assistance.
- If you need to move to another area, offer to serve as a guide by offering your arm.
- Allow the person to hold your arm, and lead by walking slightly in front.
- When offering a seat, place the person's hand on the chair back or arm.
- A dog in a harness is a working animal; do not do anything that would distract the dog from the job.

AUDITORY / HEARING DISABILITY

Customers and employees with an auditory disability may not be able to hear at all, while others may be able to hear a small amount. Many will use hearing aids, read lips, and/or use sign language. Others may need assistance from technology or live interpreters.

- Gain the person's attention before you begin to talk by gently waving your hand or lightly touching the individual on the shoulder.
- Always use a normal volume of voice; don't shout.



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- If the customer reads lips, speak slowly and clearly, keeping your face clearly visible at all times.
- If the person requires the assistance of an interpreter, always respond to the person, not the interpreter.

MOBILITY DISABILITY

A variety of disabilities may make it difficult for an employee or a customer to stand for prolonged periods or move around. The person may use an assistive aide such as a cane, walker, scooter, or wheelchair.

- Consider the wheelchair as an extension of a person's space.
- Never lean on the wheelchair.
- Put yourself at eye level when talking to a the person.
- Offer to open heavy doors.
- Try to keep a wide, clear, and clutter-free route through the place of business.

DISABILITY AFFECTING VERBAL COMMUNICATION

Some customers or employees may have difficulty speaking. It may be related to the physical production of sounds or a cognitive impairment that leads to difficulty in finding the right words.

- Concentrate on what the person is trying to say.
- Indicate when you understand and when you don't understand.
- Give the customer time to repeat what he or she is saying.
- Avoid completing the person's thoughts or sentences.
- Avoid showing frustration or impatience.

DISABILITY AFFECTING LEARNING AND COGNITION

A customer or an employee having difficulty with memory, attention, concentration, or word retrieval may have a disability associated with intellect, mental cognition, brain injury, or a mental health illness, such as bipolar disorder.

- If the person does not understand what you are saying, repeat the information or rephrase it in another way.
- Ask the person to repeat back to you what you've said.
- Give the person adequate time to respond to your statement.
- Draw a picture, use a symbol, or put a word in writing to help in communicating.

RESOURCES

- Job Accommodation Network -- www.askjan.org
- Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM) -- www.shrm.org
- Disability & Business Technical Assistance Centers -- www.adata.org
- United Spinal Association -- www.unitedspinal.org
- U.S. Department of Labor, Office of Disability Employment Policy (ODEP) -- www.dol.gov/dol/odep
- Virginia Commonwealth University, Rehabilitation Research and Training Center (VCU-RRTC) -- www.vcurrtc.org

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