

- Do I know much about disability?
- What kinds of disabilities are there?
- What's the correct terminology to use?
- When or how should I help someone with a disability?
- How accessible is the workplace and society for persons with disabilities?

If you've answered "No" or "I don't know" to these questions, don't worry. You're no different to many South Africans who are ignorant about the reality of Disability. So read on.

Q What is Disability? Is it just a guy in a wheelchair?

A Definitely not. People using wheelchairs form a relatively small proportion of People with Disabilities (PWDs). Definitions of disability include: "A restriction or lack (resulting from an impairment) of ability to perform an activity in the manner considered normal for a human being"; and "A long-term or recurring physical or mental impairment that substantially limits an individual's existence in society."

Q What kinds of Disabilities are there?

A Disability is very broad, but we can try to look at it in terms of three groups: physical, mental and sensory.

Physical Disabilities

Physical Disabilities include loss of or damage to muscles, nerves, skin or bones. They lead to difficulties in mobility or performing daily activities. Some examples include cerebral palsy, spinal cord damage or injury, cystic fibrosis, arthritis, multiple sclerosis, muscular dystrophy and postpolio paralysis.

Mental Disabilities

People often fail to distinguish between mental disabilities and mental illness. The distinction is that when mental illness is managed by therapy or by medication, it need not be disabling. On the other hand, cognitive, psychiatric or learning disabilities, depression, severe head trauma and undiagnosed or unmanaged conditions like bipolar disorder or schizophrenia, can be disabling.

Impairment is defined as: "A loss or abnormality of psychological, physiological or anatomical structure or function."

Accessible environments make it easier for people with physical Disabilities to access all aspects of society, reducing much of the disabling component of their condition.

Conditions like Down's Syndrome, Autism and Fetal Alcohol Syndrome are regarded as intellectual disabilities. Intellectual disabilities can make it difficult to learn, retain new information and adapt to new situations. Individuals with intellectual disabilities often develop more slowly than their peers and need additional care to develop - but with the right support they can contribute significantly to society.

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Sensory Disabilities

Sensory Disabilities include visual and hearing Disabilities.

Less than 10% of the Blind or visually impaired are completely sightless. Braille, computer hardware, software programmes, talking (audio) books and other media have reduced the barriers significantly in allowing visually-impaired people to participate normally in society and in the workplace.

Hearing Disabilities range from profound Deafness to hearing difficulties. Sign language, lip reading, hearing aids, SMSing, e-mailing and good signage go a long way towards supporting communication and greater interaction with people who have hearing difficulties.

Epilepsy and Diabetes are common 'invisible' Disabilities. Although epilepsy can be controlled using medication, people with epilepsy need to be aware of stimuli like excessive computer use, flashing lights and alcohol. Diabetes, too, need not be disabling if well managed.

The first language of Deaf South Africans is South African Sign Language, but not all Deaf or hearingimpaired people use full Sign Language.

Q What's the correct terminology to use?

A The most damaging word is "disabled". If you think of technology or hardware that is "disabled", you know that it's broken, damaged, obsolete or dysfunctional. The best way to refer to PWDs is just that: "People with Disabilities".

Q When and how should I help People with Disabilities?

A Ask yourself what you'd expect if it were you. Chances are, you'd want to be asked first, right?

Here are some useful tips

- Don't start pushing a wheelchair unless the person asks you to.
- Don't grab a blind person's arm. Rather ask if they'd like to take your arm.
- Maintain eye contact when speaking to a deaf person. It helps them to read your lips.
- Don't be embarrassed when you accidentally say things like "Look here,..." to a blind person, or "Listen,..." to a deaf person.

Albinism is not a Disability, although people with albinism often identify with PWDs due to the discrimination they experience. Albinism is an inherited condition which means that a person can't produce normal colouring of the skin, hair and eyes. People with albinism have a very pale skin, blonde hair and light brown or blue eyes. They are also very sensitive to the sun.

Q What are the rights of PWDs in the workplace?

A South Africa has the only Constitution in the world that recognises the rights of PWDs. In addition, the

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Employment Equity Act, the Equality Act and Section 5 of the Building Regulations Act endorse the rights of PWDs to live, work and play in South Africa.

Q What are the realities regarding PWDs in the workplace?

A The realities are rather more sobering:

- PWDs typically make up 10-15% of any population.
- This translates into over 5 million PWDs in mSouth Africa.
- Over 95% of these individuals are unemployed.
- Most buildings, facilities, schools and public transport – private and public – are inaccessible to PWDs.
- Job opportunities remain largely limited and stereotypical.

With 95% of South African PWDs unemployed, Disability constitutes a huge burden on society and Government. But this need not be the case. Real access can lead to more employment, more earning and more spending. The goal should be the natural and unhesitant inclusion of PWDs into society by viewing PWDs as citizens that can learn, earn, spend and pay taxes.

Q What job opportunities are out there for PWDs?

A There's a strong tendency to stereotype; to assume that PWDs can't do certain jobs because of their Disabilities. And the majority of PWDs in SA tend to work at lower levels. For instance, it's common to find blind or partially-sighted switchboard operators. This is why "reasonable accommodation" is crucial.

Reasonable accommodation requires an employer to provide (within reason) the aid or assistance that will allow a PWD to function normally: software that will enable a blind person to read and operate a computer, or an accessible workplace for persons with physical Disabilities.

Tips for job-seekers with disabilities:

1. Don't allow yourself to be pushed into a stereotypical career path.
2. If you're studying further, ensure that your course is relevant and that the skills you acquire are of value in the workplace.
3. Very few recruitment agencies successfully specialise in Disability placement. Use "normal" agencies. They too need to learn about Disability.
4. Know that, like everyone else, you'll have to prove your value. Ensure, for example, that the format, content, grammar, spelling, focus and professionalism of your CV are perfect (see Job-Seeking).
5. In your CV, feel free to mention your disability under "Personal Details". But draw attention to your abilities, competencies and experience – your disability should be largely irrelevant.
6. Understand that there may be those in the job-market who are reluctant to hire you. Be assertive enough to recognise that reluctance is largely based on ignorance, and challenge it.
7. Be confident. You have the same rights as any other job-seeker!

Information courtesy of Jeremy Opperman, Disability Solutions Tel: (021) 683 3667 Web: www.disabilitysolutions.co.za

In South Africa, the Employment Equity Act requires employers to target people with disabilities in order to make the country's labour force more representative of the South African population

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