Disability Awareness

Self-Study Guide

Working with People with Disabilities
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How to Use This Guide

This Self-Study Guide is designed and laid out in a way that will guide student learning much in the same way that an instructor would. This workbook is comprised of modules called Sessions. Each Session focuses on a major concept in the course.

In each Session, we have included short-answer and (in some instances) multiple choice questions which relate directly to the session material. Throughout the guide, you can take the opportunity to internalize what you have learned by completing various self-reflection exercises.
Session One: Course Overview

Course Overview

People with disabilities represent a significant and largely underutilized resource for businesses. Many disabled persons are underemployed or unemployed. As a result of advocates for diversity, as well as a shrinking labor pool, employers are taking a serious look at hiring and retaining people with disabilities. This course will give supervisors, managers, and human resource consultants tools and tips for creating a diverse workplace.

Learning Objectives

At the end of this course, you will be able to:
- Prepare to welcome people with disabilities into your workplace
- Interact with people with disabilities
- Identify and overcome barriers in the workplace
- Use respectful, appropriate, acceptable language in any circumstance
- Understand what your company can do during hiring and interviewing
- Understand what job accommodation is and how it applies in your workplace

Why did you take this course? Use this opportunity to consider your personal learning objectives and reasons for taking this course.
Pre-Assignment

Please answer the following questions.

What does disability awareness mean to you?

________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________

What kind of disability awareness and accommodation is going on in your workplace today?

________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________

What improvements would you like to see?

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________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
Pre-Course Assessment

1. True or False: The term disability is an umbrella term for impairments, activity limitations, and participation restrictions.

2. If a person does not wish to speak about their disability, you should:
   a. Make a few vague but encouraging comments
   b. Make a few pointed comments to try to make them comfortable
   c. Respect their wishes and move on to other subjects

3. What do people with disabilities need?
   a. They need assistive devices such as wheelchairs, crutches, service animals, etc.
   b. They need to be treated as people
   c. They need labels so that we can categorize them properly

4. What is the proper term for referring disabled people?
   a. Disabled people or as a person with disabilities
   b. Handicapped person or person with handicaps
   c. Try to avoid terms when you speak

5. True or False: Accommodating someone means that you recognize their needs.

6. True or False: Accessibility is a general term to describe the degree to which a product, device, service, or environment is available to as many people as possible.

7. In order to make your business more accessible, you can:
   a. Clear pathways
   b. Install ramps and walkways on a reasonable slope
   c. Install power assisted doorways
   d. All of the above

8. True or False: Not all disabilities lead to accommodation in the workplace.

9. A service animal may be useful for people with the following disabilities:
   a. Blindness
   b. Brain injury
   c. Seizures
   d. All of the above
10. If you say the wrong thing to a disabled person you should ______________.
   a. Rephrase what you said and try to fix the situation
   b. Walk away
   c. Say you are sorry and move on
Session Two: Defining Terms

In order to get some new learning underway, it helps if we are working with the same definitions and starting in the same place. What do you think of when you hear the term disability, impairment, or limitation?

In this session, you’ll consider some definitions, contemplate stereotypes, and look at some common phrases.

What are Disabilities?

The World Health Organization (WHO) defines disabilities using terms that encompass three main ideas:

- **Impairment**, which is a difficulty with body function or structure
- **Limitation in activities**, where a person has difficulty doing something
- **Participation restrictions**, which describe having difficulty with a particular situation

Disability is a complex topic. It strongly reflects the society and culture in which we live, the places we work, and the functions that our bodies and minds can undertake.

The number of people with disabilities varies depending on the reports you read, although the WHO reports that worldwide, about 15% of the population has some kind of disability, and about 2 to 4% of the population has significant difficulties.


As the world’s population ages, the numbers appear to creep higher due to increased incidence of chronic disease, a population that is able to live longer due to medical technology, and more reporting. One important factor for workplaces is that reporting tends to focus on numbers, but the workplace perspective tends to look at function. We really want to consider what a person can or cannot do (functional abilities and restrictions), rather than knowing if a person has a disability that impacts their work, or what that condition is.

Can you think of some medical conditions that have practically little or no visible effect on work?
About Stereotypes

One of the biggest barriers to diversity is our tendency to stereotype. Stereotypes can be so subtle that we don’t even realize we’re applying them.

The human mind thinks in categories, and we need these categories to help us organize all that we experience as we go through daily life. Without categories, our brains would be filled with a jumble of disconnected facts, impressions, sights, sounds, thoughts, ideas, and sensations. The categories help us make sense of the world we live in and give us a shorthand way to respond to people and events.

The categories in our minds contain not just facts and data; they also contain meaning and evaluation. Our categories are not neutral. We usually have feelings about categories. These feelings may be positive or negative. Mention of a category often triggers an instant reaction, almost a reflex.

For instance, how do you feel when the following words are mentioned to you?

- Americans: ________________
- Women: ________________
- Blondes or Brunettes: ________________
- Athletes: ________________
- Mercedes: ________________
- Scientists: ________________

As you can see, your reactions are rarely neutral. Most of us have judgments, opinions, and feelings about most categories of things. This is appropriate and normal.

While categories are not a problem in and of themselves, they become a problem when we cannot distinguish between the characteristics of a category and the characteristics of an individual item, or individual person, within that category. Put another way, the category turns into a stereotype when we can no longer see an individual tree, but only see the forest. When we assume that all trees within a forest are identical, and cannot see that each individual tree has some characteristics in common with the others, that is when our category turns into a stereotype.

A common defense is, “Stereotypes are sometimes true.” Stereotypes, by their very definition, cannot always be true. For example, think of the stereotype that all African-American men are good at basketball. Some African-American men may be very good at this sport, but there are certainly African-American men out there who are not good at this sport. Therefore, for the man who is good at basketball, that is simply an attribute of his character, not proof that all African-American men are the same as he is.
We make the same kind of stereotypes when it comes to people with disabilities. Can you think of some examples?
Some Common Phrases and the Stereotypes Behind Them

There are many phrases that connote stereotypes and are derogatory. One that I often hear, although it is becoming less popular as people become more aware, is “That was a stupid thing to do. You must be retarded or something!” This reveals two stereotypes: that if someone makes a mistake, they are stupid; and that being stupid, they must have some form of mental disability (which used to be referred to as “retardation”). No thought is given to other possible factors: that someone made a mistake or failed to forecast the consequences accurately because they were rushed, fatigued, distracted, or all kinds of other reasons.

Why do we find it so natural to make quick judgments about some people, even when we know that we don’t have enough information about them?

How can we tell that we have stereotyped ourselves (placed limits on our aspirations that are unnecessary and unrealistic)?
Can you recall any situations in which the potential contribution of someone was limited because they had been stereotyped?

____________________________________________________________________________________

____________________________________________________________________________________

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____________________________________________________________________________________

If you see a group stereotyping one of its members, how can you make them aware of what they are doing and what negative effect it is having?

____________________________________________________________________________________

____________________________________________________________________________________

____________________________________________________________________________________

____________________________________________________________________________________

If you see that someone has underestimated their competence, how can you help them to get a more accurate and positive picture of themselves?

____________________________________________________________________________________

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____________________________________________________________________________________

How can you detect that someone has been stereotyped? What are the indicators?

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Session Three: Misconceptions and Realities

What’s true and what’s not? Can you think of some misconceptions about disabilities and diversity? What did you believe to be true when you were in school that you know is not really the case?

In this session, we’ll work through some misconceptions and work on developing your competence with diversity and disability issues.

Misconceptions and Realities

There are plenty of misconceptions, as well as realities, to working with people with disabilities. We’ll explore some of those here.

1. Employees with disabilities will cost my sick leave and extended health benefit plans money.

Your current employees are aging and using those benefit plans, too. Someone with a disability who is well and working may not add any more pressure to those plans, and sometimes they also receive support from provincial or state agencies to help offset costs. People with chronic health conditions do help push up costs for benefit plans, but many people already working with you may be dealing with those problems. Legally, most jurisdictions will prevent you from discriminating against current employees by not accommodating them.

A good disability manager can help you design a plan that works for your company, providing you with financial integrity and looking out for the needs of your employees.

2. People with disabilities are less likely to have accidents than other employees.

Safety and accident reduction in the workplace is clearly related to safety training, reinforcement of safe work practices, support of the company, effective health and safety committees, and the cooperation of labor and management. In order to keep disabled employees safe, they need the same support as the rest of the workforce.

3. It is expensive to accommodate workers with disabilities.

A lot of people with chronic health concerns and disabilities do not require much in the way of accommodation. As well, as technology continues to advance, the costs of adaptive equipment becomes more reasonable. The individual’s ability levels will dictate the cost. You will, however, also see that if you work with a rehabilitation consultant, they can come up with very reasonably priced, creative solutions. Again, consider the costs that go into keeping your existing staff at work by making similar accommodations to the workplace.
From a societal perspective, if you stop to consider the cost of making an accommodation compared to the costs of that individual not working but having to rely on government services, the argument is even easier to make.

4. Certain jobs are better suited to disabled people.

That phrase should really be that certain jobs are better suited to certain people. We need to consider suitability for a job from the perspective of abilities, not disabilities. For example, it would be very hard for a person that is five feet tall to play basketball, since professional basketball players are well over six feet tall. Likewise, it would be very difficult for a deaf person to work in a call center on the phone all day, but there are plenty of other tasks within a call center or office environment that can easily be completed by a deaf person.

5. Employees with disabilities are not able to meet performance standards.

This is not true. It emphasizes a stereotype that there is something “wrong” with a person who has a disability. Employees need to have the ability to perform the tasks of their job, and to do so successfully. Making sure that every employee is the right fit for a job and is functionally able to do the work will mean that they can meet performance standards.

6. People with disabilities will have problems with transportation.

In some cases this is true, and in many others it is not. People with disabilities who are able to work are also capable of arranging their own transportation: walking, cycling, driving, bussing, taking a cab, or carpooling with someone from work are all options. If your workplace is in a remote area it will be more difficult for all of your employees to get there. However, you can expect a disabled employee to be just as effective at planning to be at work as the rest of their co-workers.

7. Disabled workers are a good influence within the workplace.

Disabled workers are as unique as everyone else. Some of them will have great interpersonal skills and get along with just about everyone they meet. Others will not be as personable, just like in the rest of the population. However, hiring workers with a disability brings value to your business and it can help the company to become more aware of disability related matters (like accessibility).

Others can also share what they have learned and mentor your existing staff. For example, workers with learning disabilities or attention deficit hyperactivity disorder may have outstanding coping and learned skills for staying organized. They can share these ideas with their colleagues, helping everyone to be more productive.
Session Four: A Business Case

If you are an advocate for hiring people with disabilities, but you meet resistance in your workplace, consider approaching the topic from a business perspective and creating a business case.

In this session, we’ll use case studies as a tool to help develop your awareness. These case studies will help you build strong business cases back in the workplace.

Getting Into It

It’s important to understand why companies should hire people with disabilities. In addition to a reflection of what affirmative action did for America in the 1960’s (which was to create a picture at work that reflects the diversity of the community people live in), there are additional reasons to up the ante with your company.

Case Study #1

You are the operations manager at a manufacturing plant with 400 employees in a remote region. The plant operates 24 hours a day, seven days a week, with three shifts per day. Your health and safety manager has moved on to a new job. You have one replacement that you are considering.

George is about 60 years of age and has an excellent record for safety, communication, and being a mentor to new staff in his previous work. He worked in the fishing industry as a fisherman and later as a plant manager before he took early retirement. George is a large man, about 250 pounds on a five feet seven inch frame. You are wondering if he has any health concerns, but he has not mentioned any limitations for work. You do know that he has had diabetes for many years.

Do you hire George? What concerns do you have?
Case Study #2

You are a manager of operations for a regional ambulance company. One of your senior paramedics, Joseph, age 50, is involved in an automobile collision while he is on vacation. He has to have his arm amputated almost at the shoulder as a result. Four months after his surgery, he wants to return to work, although he is clearly not going to be able to do the work of a paramedic since much of his work requires lifting, moving, splinting patients, and doing heart compressions.

He could drive, however, and also has a lot of knowledge and experience in the field. He was never interested in an “inside” role as a supervisor, shift manager, or administration, so he never completed courses for those roles.

Do you have to accommodate Joe? How difficult would it be?
Case Study #3

Carter is a 30 year old accounting supervisor with a great reference from a colleague of yours. Carter is looking for a change and the opportunity to move up within a business setting. He does not feel he can move beyond supervisor where he is, partly because he has a severe speech impediment. Although he has excellent people skills, he feels that he will not be promoted. (Your friend admits that Carter is probably right, although he has also said that after you get to know Carter it easier to understand him.)

You can really use some help in your business office, which is drowning in work but already has six staff and a capable manager in place. You are not sure if you can bring someone in the office who is in a wheelchair and is hard to understand. As well, there would probably need to be some rearranging of the office set up to accommodate a wheelchair. You might need a ramp in the parking lot too, and a better door to the bathroom. You do know that hiring someone is justified, and the current manager plans to retire in three or four years, so there should be some potential for the existing staff to complete for that job.

Carter finished school with a diploma in accounting, and has since completed a supervisor’s certificate. You were impressed with him when you met. You have not advertised the job, but the workplace is not unionized and people are not going to gripe if you do not advertise it.

What should you do? How can you make this work for you, the company, and Carter?
Case Study #4

You are interviewing a woman for a human resource consultant’s position in your office. She has been very honest and open with you. She wants this job for a fresh start. She is leaving her current job because she went through a couple of years with a lot of problems, and she feels like she is no longer welcome there. She tells you that she is healthy now, but in the past five years she had been hospitalized several times. They accommodated her at work by allowing her to take work home, which she appreciated. She also worked in the hospital at times because she ran out of sick leave benefits.

She has a doctor she has been working with for the past eighteen months, is on a better treatment regime, and shares with you that she is being upfront over her history for a few reasons. One is that she has also lived with bipolar disorder for many years, and she thinks it’s better if you know, and that way you can decide whether to hire her or not with all the information that you need. She states that she knows that her history does not make her a great prospect, but says that she always takes her medications and she does great work.

Indeed, her portfolio does look great. Her references are good, although the previous employer admits attendance was a problem, but this woman did not have external customer service tasks, so it wasn’t unmanageable for them.

There are other candidates for the position who have equal qualifications and abilities, and who do not appear to have any disabilities. What will you do?
Summary

Labor shortages mean that businesses will have to get creative to find great people to hire. Candidates are not going to be knocking on your door: you need to find them. In order to find people, you need to learn where they are, who they are, and what strengths they bring to your work. People with disabilities are educated, valuable, and can bring you a perspective that is different than people without disabilities. Tap into their strengths. Hiring people with disabilities makes sense and will help support the growth and success of your business.
Session Five: Dissecting Labels

We use labels naturally all the time. Everyday tasks like organizing information, setting schedules, and deciding on priorities would all come unraveled if we did not categorize each of them in our minds. Labeling people, however, can really interfere with communication.

In this session, you’ll learn about resisting the urge to label, replacing negative labels, and getting to know people without labels.

Giving Your Words Some Thought

Although we categorize people in our minds in order to organize information, we’ve also spoken with many disabled people who tell us how labels become offensive, embarrassing, and serve no purpose except to stereotype and even discriminate. These days we make efforts to celebrate differences and our uniqueness.

It’s sometimes hard to know what will offend people and what will be acceptable. For example, paper on an easel is commonly referred to in training classrooms as a “flip chart.” This can be an insult to a resident of the Philippines, where “flip” is a derogatory term for Filipino.

Some words are easier to figure out than others. Some are pretty obvious, and others are more subtle. Two examples:

- **Dumb**: Meaning that someone lacks intelligence or is unable to speak. This is derogatory to people with speech or developmental disabilities.
- **Stupid**: Meaning that someone lacks intelligence, is dull, or is foolish. This can be insulting to someone with developmental or learning disabilities.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Instead Of...</th>
<th>Try...</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Handicapped</td>
<td>People with disabilities; people with special needs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Retarded</td>
<td>Developmentally challenged</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gifted children</td>
<td>Advanced learners</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uneducated</td>
<td>Lacking a formal education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Old people</td>
<td>Seniors; the elderly</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bitchy</td>
<td>Assertive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spaz</td>
<td>Spasticity; uncontrolled limbs</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
We do admit that in the attempt to be politically correct, things have gone a bit too far. A replacement word is of little use if no one knows what the new word means! Can you figure out what these terms are supposed to mean?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Word</th>
<th>Meaning</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Incomplete success</td>
<td>Failure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Possessing an alternative body image</td>
<td>Overweight</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sobriety deprived</td>
<td>Alcoholic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Processed tree carcasses</td>
<td>Wood</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cerebrally challenged</td>
<td>Unintelligent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Motivationally dispossessed</td>
<td>Lazy</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Both tables from *The Diversity Advantage* by Lenora Billings-Harris)

It’s also not productive if you are constantly worrying about what you say. Instead, let’s go over a few ground rules that will ensure your speaking is politically correct.

**Don’t make fun.**

Even if you’re making a joke about a person’s height or weight, it’s probably not funny. Usually, these remarks hit a sensitive area in the person they are directed toward. Even if a person pokes fun about their own abilities, their wheelchairs, or a shortcoming, that doesn’t mean it’s acceptable for you to do so. If you think about most popular comedians, they are funny because they make fun of themselves, not someone else.

**Ask what a person prefers.**

If you’re not sure what terms are acceptable, ask the person. This can save you time and heartache.

**Don’t include descriptive traits in a person’s description unless necessary.**

Let’s say you’re telling a story about your CEO and you describe her as having an artificial limb, or that she has Multiple Sclerosis or cerebral palsy. Ask yourself why those labels are necessary.

**Apologize if you goof up.**

No one is perfect. If you goof up, apologize sincerely, and then drop it.
Being Practical

When it comes to the workplace, there are several descriptors that are helpful when it comes to making decisions about accommodation. When an employer is making some adaptations to accommodate someone, they normally ask for (and receive) information from the employee’s physician, physiotherapist, psychologist, and/or occupational therapist. This information will outline whether limitations and restrictions for the particular job are permanent or temporary (and if so, how long they are expected to last at this level).

Depending on the type of work it can also be important to determine whether the condition itself and limitations or restrictions are mild, moderate, or severe.

For example, if a candidate being considered for a job has epilepsy, there can be a range of considerations for the employer. Let’s say the candidate works in an office setting, has a seizure of moderate severity about once every six months, and has mild seizures once per month. The employer will determine whether the office can be made safe for the individual and whether staff working with the individual should have first aid training in the event of a seizure.

On the other hand, let’s says the candidate is being considered for a manufacturing plant job where there is large heavy equipment and moving machinery and the job is as a shipping/receiving supervisor. Medication is controlling seizures and there have been no severe seizures in more than two years. There may be no need to make accommodations at all, although staff may be trained to recognize signs of a seizure, and in first aid. (Since this type of work usually requires that most or all staff are trained in first aid, this may not even be an extra step for the employer to take.)

If an employee never asks for an accommodation (because their disability is not noticeable or because they choose not to ask), the employer may not be under obligation to make any kind of accommodation. It’s important that if the employee wants something, they ask. It’s equally important that if the employer is asked, they respond appropriately.
Mingle with Me

People of all types and abilities want to be included. If you remember being in junior high or high school, you may recall seeing how hard it was for some students to be included, or you may have had trouble with it yourself. As adults, this situation doesn’t really change unless a workplace makes a commitment to be welcoming and inclusive.

If you take new people out to lunch during their first week on the new job, do it with everyone, whether they are disabled or not. If you have a social gathering, invite everyone. (Just make sure to choose an accessible location.) If you’ve gotten into the habit of storing materials on ramps, in wide doorways, or in accessible washroom stalls, get them out of there without making your disabled staff feel like they are putting you out or as if you are doing them a favor.

Develop relationships.

Be friendly and welcoming to people. Just because someone is disabled does not mean they are looking for special treatment. Everyone wants to be accepted. Inclusion means that we include people, consider their needs, and treat them with courtesy.

Ask, instead of always offering help.

Sometimes we automatically leap to help people, despite the fact that they do not want our help. If you see someone in a wheelchair reaching for something that is on a high shelf, do not automatically reach for it. Ask them if you can help them.

People with disabilities are people, not the equipment that serves them.

Do not talk down to people who are seated in a wheelchair. Grab a chair and sit level with them. Don’t push or touch their wheelchair without asking them. Don’t use their wheelchair as a perch for your coat or supplies.

Be clear in your communication, including your instructions.

People with developmental disabilities and some learning disabilities may not be able to follow complex, multi-step directions. This can happen to non-disabled people too! Make sure your instructions are in easy-to-follow chunks. Sometimes having them in writing is best (like a recipe); other times you simply need to break things down.
Aim to please.

Most of us look for acceptance, and some of us want to please. This can create challenges in the workplace, so it’s important that you understand your staff, their abilities, and their limitations. For people with developmental disabilities, routine work and familiarity will help them succeed. A change in work responsibilities or the environment may require a period of adjustment and understanding as they adjust.

Treat service animals with respect.

Service animals work for their owner. They are specially trained to respond to very specific needs. Guide dogs can be trained to guide the blind, act as hearing assistance for the hearing impaired, and work as service animals for people with conditions such as brain injuries, seizures, and much more.

You should never, ever touch a service animal, or the person they support, without permission. The animal will be very committed to doing their job. Any distraction that you create can disrupt their concentration, upset that routine, and prevent them from serving the person they support.

Use sensitive language.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Insensitive Term</th>
<th>Sensitive Term</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Handicap</td>
<td>Disability</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The handicapped</td>
<td>People with disabilities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Crippled with</td>
<td>Person who has (name the illness or disease)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deaf and dumb</td>
<td>Deaf person who is unable to speak</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Birth defects</td>
<td>Disabled since birth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wheelchair bound</td>
<td>Person who uses a wheelchair</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Session Six: Accessibility

Next time you go to visit a store or a public building, change your approach and look at the building from an accessibility standpoint. Are the doors heavy? Are the mats recessed into pavement and floors or floating on the top? Are ramps in good repair?

In this session, you’ll learn about the essential elements of accessibility, including elements of physical access.

Physical Access

Accessibility refers to making your workplace, and your business, available to people. It means that parking spaces, doorways, washrooms, service counters, and people are usable to workers and customers alike.

Depending on where you live, there are likely laws which require you to have certain accessibility features available. Check with your regional government. We’ll go through some typical ones here.

Parking

You will usually find that the number of total parking spaces dictates that a certain number of spaces are designated for disabled parking and that they are the closest spaces to the door. (Regulations differ by region.) Remember that some disabled workers will drive large vehicles to transport a wheelchair or motorized scooter. These vehicles and their lifts sometimes require additional width for maneuverability.

Spaces for disabled parking need to be clearly marked so that they are available for disabled drivers. This is the international symbol for accessibility:
Ramps
There’s not much point in creating accessible parking spaces unless everyone can get in the building. Ramps need to be in place so that people can get from their vehicles to the building. They also need to be kept in excellent repair and free of snow, ice, and debris.

Doorways
Doors must meet certain criteria in order to be considered accessible. Again, this varies between regions, but all doorways need to be wide enough to allow a wheelchair. (32 inches is standard in North America.) The door opening force needs to be as low as possible so that people can open the door independently, even if they are usually assisted with an electronic motor.

Restrooms
There should be accessible restrooms throughout the workplace (usually one stall within a multi-stall washroom). Single stall washrooms should have handrails, accessible sinks, towel holders, soap dispensers, etc. If you are not sure whether your restrooms are adequate, make sure to ask people who are using them to give you some feedback.

Barriers
People with disabilities face many barriers when it comes to work. Many of these are perpetuated by attitudes. Some of us feel sorry for people with disabilities, while others feel parental toward them. Old attitudes about people with disabilities not being able to contribute don’t help either. We have built stereotypes around so many things. These stereotypes also contribute to the notion that things (including people) must be a certain ideal to do anything – work, drive, or be our friends, for example.

Feeling sorry for people with disabilities can lead to patronizing them. What we really want to do with this course is open up your receptors and show that people with disabilities do not need patronizing. Just like everyone else, they need to make a living, look after themselves and their families, and to do so with dignity.
Case Studies

Generate a list of places in your own workplaces and/or your communities where they see poor accessibility and barriers. With each example, provide a solution of how to eliminate or reduce the barriers.

**Example One**

**Accessibility Issue**

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

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________________________________________________________________________

Possible Solutions

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________
Example Two

Accessibility Issue

Possible Solutions
Example Three

Accessibility Issue

Possible Solutions
Session Seven: The Cornerstones of Diversity

Sometimes we discuss diversity in terms of integrating people with disabilities, while other times we focus on people from different cultures. Whichever aspect you are considering right now, the core ideas behind inclusion are the same.

_in this session_, you’ll learn about a model for diversity that includes knowledge, acceptance, understanding, and behavior.

About the Cornerstones

Diversity experts Armida Russell, Amy Tolbert, and Frank Wilderman have identified four cornerstones of diversity development. They are knowledge, acceptance, understanding, and behavior. We’ll apply these in a disability awareness context.

Knowledge

The best way to battle stereotypes is to inform yourself about the truth. Some activities you can do on a personal level include:

- Get to know people with disabilities.
- Take classes with a focus on understanding disability issues, especially those related to employment.
- Travel to different places and see how people with disabilities are treated and live.
- Work with different support organizations to learn more about the world you live and work in.
- Involve yourself with people that your own stereotypes could apply to. Find out what they’re really like.
Understanding

Once you have some knowledge about diverse groups, put that knowledge into action. If you understand why a person is acting in a particular way, it may be easier to empathize with them, to form a relationship, and to ultimately work together.

Some other ways you can put yourself in other people’s shoes:
- Try placing a phone call using a TDD device.
- Rent a wheelchair and go to a shopping mall. Make sure to visit the restroom.
- If you are an athletic person, get involved with a wheelchair basketball, sledge racing, or sledge hockey. Also think of sports where your senses might be compromised, such as blind cricket or golf.
- Volunteer for an organization that provides services or builds awareness for people with disabilities.

Acceptance

Acceptance does not mean adopting the behaviors or rituals of a culture or of another person as your own. It also does not mean condoning behaviors that clash with your value system.

Acceptance does mean respecting the values and behaviors of others. Let’s say that we need to schedule team meetings and I feel that the best time to do this is before the day starts, at 8 am every morning. However, Roger has a conflict: he attends physiotherapy every morning before work. Although I don’t work out, and don’t have a disability to manage, I can respect the fact that Roger has this commitment. Rather than ask Roger to alter his physiotherapy appointment, I can respect it and schedule the meeting for another time.

Developing acceptance can open up a whole new range of possibilities for everyone involved. To start, if you listen with an open mind, you’ll probably learn something about your colleague. And, when different viewpoints are exchanged in a respectful manner, amazing ideas are bound to result. This respectful, healthy exchange builds respect and communication skills, resulting in a stronger team.
Behavior

Now that all the pieces are in place, you can begin to change your behavior and influence what happens in your workplace.

Case Study #1

Your company has beer and pizza every Friday at lunch. Everybody likes to go to the Purple Bee, which is located on the second floor of an old building downtown. There is no elevator there. How can you make this gathering more inclusive?

Case Study #2

You’re in a training class and you’ve noticed that one person is being excluded from the activities, seemingly because they have difficulty speaking as quickly as other people do. What do you do?
Case Study #3

Some of the other members of your team are making jokes about their colleague’s use of a wheelchair, social skills, or style of dress. What do you do?
Session Eight: Pre-Assignment Review

A pre-assignment is a way to introduce a topic and get you thinking about it before you start learning. Please bring out the pre-assignment that you completed before or at the beginning of this workshop.

In this session, you’ll consider your answers on the pre-assignment in light of the learning that you have done so far today.

Pre-Assignment Review

As a pre-assignment you were asked to think about a few questions in order to get you thinking about disability awareness. The questions were:

- What does disability awareness mean to you?
- What kind of disability awareness and accommodation is going on in your workplace today?
- What improvements would you like to see?

Given what you have learned today, would you add anything to your answers?

What are you prepared to do with disability awareness in your workplace?
Session Nine: Encouraging Diversity by Hiring

Interviewers and interviewees alike can experience nervousness during interviews, so it’s important to develop skills beforehand to help you feel confident. Practice doesn’t hurt either, since it provides a safe place to refine skills and take risks.

In this session, you’ll learn about your responsibilities in the interviewing and hiring process, as well as some tips on what you can (and cannot) ask.

What Can We Ask?

Human rights legislation puts the onus on the interviewer to be aware of what you can and cannot ask a person. That same legislation protects people from discrimination against someone on the basis of a disability. Really, you just want to know if the person you are interviewing can do the job that you are hiring for and if they can do it well. The fact that they come to work in a wheelchair shouldn’t matter.

You cannot ask questions that might bias your decision making and push you to discriminate against someone. You also cannot ask questions that will make the individual feel like they must disclose their diagnosis (although they may choose to do so).

Questions you can ask, without prying for a diagnosis and without making someone feel that you might be discriminating, include:

- I’ve described the job to you. Do you feel that you would be able to perform the job as described? If not, which duties would you find difficult or not possible?
- The hours for this position are 8:30 a.m.-4:30 p.m., Monday to Friday and every second Saturday. Do you have any questions about this expectation?
- Staff who work in this position need to be fit for sedentary work. They mostly work at a computer and phone to cover the reception area. There is no lifting heavier than a package of paper for the photocopier or bringing your laptop to meetings. Staff also move from one area of the floor to another to get files. Do you feel that you are able to perform those duties on a daily basis? If not, can you please explain?
- I’d like you to observe our workplace, and the person currently in that position, for a few hours. Would you be open to that?
o Can you please tell me if you would require any consideration outside of our normal schedules? (What you are getting at here is whether their transportation normally travels on time or will lead this person to be late for work frequently. Also, you give them the option to disclose that they have a regular physiotherapy, occupational therapy, or chiropractic treatment each week, which you can consider accommodating.)

o I see you have a service dog with you. He looks lovely. We do have people who work here and have allergies to dogs which require weekly allergy shots already, so having him here might be a challenge. Do you have the option of leaving the dog at home? How would you feel about that? If you worked from home most of the time but came in for team meetings or birthday cake from time to time, could you leave the dog at home for those brief absences? What would you think of working from home if I came to see you there for some of our meetings, and we brought the rest of the team in over a conference call?

o All of our new staff undergo a baseline medical assessment and functional analysis to ensure they can perform the duties of their job. We are happy to share the results of that assessment with your physician if you like. Do you have any questions or anticipate problems with that assessment? (Note that ALL new staff undergo the assessment, not just this individual.)
What Can the Candidate Expect?

So, you’re going off to an interview and you’ve got this cloud hanging over your head about whether or not to disclose your condition. Maybe you’ve had this condition much of your life and you are used to talking about yourself. Maybe you aren’t so comfortable: perhaps the condition is new and you’ve had little to no chance to talk about it.

What Do You Do?

You are not required by law to disclose your diagnosis. That is confidential information. The question is: do you discuss your ability levels and any accompanying restrictions at the interview? If your condition is obvious, you can be sure that you need to discuss it in the interview. The difficulty is in deciding how much to disclose. What’s important for the employer is to know that you can do the job well, just as well as anybody else, so that their business remains viable.

If you are outgoing and comfortable with this style, you might offer something like this: “I need my wheelchair (or crutches, or whatever), and aside from needing a place to park it, I don’t need any accommodation to do this job.”

Or, perhaps a minor accommodation is needed: “I am hard of hearing in both ears, so I do need a special headset for the phone, but otherwise I don’t need any accommodation to do this job.”

Or, perhaps a more sizeable accommodation is needed. “My condition is well managed, and that’s why I am able to manage a full time job. I would appreciate some flexibility with hours because I do have a 40-minute physiotherapy appointment three times a week, but I can book the first appointment in the morning and still work full time and do all the work related to this position.”

Do You Wait to Disclose after You’ve Been in the Job a While?

This is a tricky decision to be faced with. You don’t want to miss out on the job, but we also know that despite their public face, some employers still have a hard time creating a diverse workplace. If they know you have some kind of medical need, they cannot help but think of the impact your condition could have on existing work teams, their benefit plan costs, or even the viability of their workplace.

In a labor shortage situation, where employers are having a hard time finding enough workers, they will deal with the impact your condition will have. If there are lots of potential candidates, however, the reality of it is that the employer is likely to choose someone else, unless you come with a very strong and unique skill set.
Depending on your condition and whether it will improve or become worse over time, you’ll have to decide whether to disclose or not. It is up to you. Sometimes, the choice not to disclose means that you can get into the workplace, work hard, and establish your value to demonstrate that hiring you was a good decision.

Employers with long time employees will see some of them develop conditions at work and they will accommodate those individuals without a second thought. We have to keep working with those same employers to help them realize that hiring someone with an existing condition is no larger an issue to their business.
Session Ten: Using the STOP Technique

Sometimes we hear people say things, and in that moment we have to make a choice: do we say something or not? Have you ever had the opportunity but something got in the way, and instead you said nothing?

In this session, you’ll learn a brilliant technique to step in and correct someone else’s behavior in a respectful yet clear way.

The Four Steps

Diversity expert Lenora Billings-Harris has developed a four-step technique that you can use when someone is behaving in an inappropriate manner. It’s called STOP. Although it can be applied to almost any situation, she has designed it for dealing with diversity issues. You may find it a very useful tool to increase the level of diversity and disability awareness in your workplace.

S: State the inappropriate behavior objectively.

Tell the offender what needs to be changed in a specific, objective way. If you show your feelings, the offender will often respond with anger and denial, which will get both of you nowhere.

Example: “Bob, when you call my ideas retarded…”

T: Tell the offender how you feel when s/he performs this behavior.

This is where you can add your feelings or opinions, although feelings are usually best so that this doesn’t become a debate. Make sure you stay as logical and unemotional as possible.

Example: “... it really hurts my feelings and makes me feel devalued.”

O: Give the offender options.

In addition to telling the person what you don’t want them to do, offer several suggestions for what they can do.

Example: “I would prefer that you use a different word, like silly or illogical. It would be even better if you could simply ask me to explain my idea further.”
**P: Positive results.**

Let the offender know what the results will be if they change their behavior. Dale Carnegie states that in order to change behavior, the person must know WIIFM (what’s in it for me?). Example: “I really feel that this could improve our working relationship and our communication skills. I think our ads would be a lot more creative, too.”

**Here are some tips for making STOP work for you.**

- The first few times you use STOP, test it on a child when they act inappropriately.
- Plan out what you’ll say. This will help you identify your feelings, options, and possible results.
- When you talk to the offender, make sure you’re in private.
- Don’t expect miracles. If the person does not change their behavior, you can try the process again until it does work.
- If the behavior does not change and it interferes with work, bring it to your supervisor’s attention.
- If the behavior does change, show appreciation as soon as you can.
Making Connections

Scenario One

Cindy and Bob are in a one-on-one meeting to discuss Bob’s performance review. (Cindy is his direct manager.) Cindy is reviewing some new reports that Bob has had difficulty preparing on time and correctly. Bob replies, “Geez, you’re right uptight, are you on your period? Quit bitching at me!”

If you are Cindy, what do you do?

________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________

Scenario Two

Tom is the company’s administrative assistant. He is blind. He has noticed that his manager, Samantha, has a unique way of introducing herself: she comes up behind him and squeezes his shoulders. He often finds this startling and uncomfortable.

If you are Tom, what do you do?

________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
**Scenario Three**

Mark is one of the company’s senior accountants. He is preparing a major report for the company’s CFO. When he asks Tom, his manager, to review his figures, Tom says, “It’ll be alright; you’re an Asian so you must be good at math.”

**If you are Mark, what do you do?**

__________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________

**Scenario Four**

Jamie, Alice, Sarah, and Susan are all sales representatives managed by Steven. Jamie is gay and Steven knows this, although he is not very understanding and accepting. At a business gathering, Steven introduces himself, and then says, “And these are my gals” to introduce his salespeople.

**If you are a team member, what do you do?**

__________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________
Scenario Five

As a Catholic, Mary does not eat meat on Fridays. Her co-workers are aware of this belief. One Friday, she attends a company lunch and is dismayed to find that the menu items are meatballs and beef lasagna. One of her co-workers says, “Geez, I’m sure God will forgive you for eating meat on a Friday.”

If you are Mary or one of her co-workers, what do you do?

Scenario Six

You have just started a new job in a multi-story office building. You are in a wheelchair, and you’ve found the entrance ramp a little tricky, but you’ve figured it out. However, one of your co-workers often comes up behind you and starts to push your chair without saying anything.

What do you do?
Session Eleven: Communication Essentials for Disability Awareness

Sometimes when we think about communication essentials we focus on processes like listening, asking questions, or checking for understanding. Conversations around diversity and disability awareness require a more comprehensive approach.

In this session, you’ll learn some basic communication skills especially for our context. In addition, we’ll share some insight on confidentiality and writing documentation.

Ground Rules to Get Started

When it comes to diversity and disability awareness, we suggest that you call on the absolute best of your communication skills. You also have to call on your ability to read people and take a leadership role. Be confident and speak with authority in your meetings, whether you are meeting with managers about diversity and disability awareness or trying to arrange an accommodation. When you speak with current employees or prospective employees about what you can and cannot do, be truthful and don’t exaggerate. If you don’t know if something will be possible, say so. This will serve you well in coaching conversations around disabilities and accommodations.

When arranging for or assisting with accommodations, there are things that people need to know. For example, the employee needs to know what to expect, to what extent you are able to accommodate them, and if you can’t, why not. A manager who is hiring an employee with disabilities, or accommodating an existing employee, also needs to know exactly what to expect of the disabled employee and the company (for example, support and resources available and who to turn to for questions). If there is a physician or other health care providers involved, they may be providing you with information on functional abilities and limitations so that you can properly plan the work environment.

As you work through this process, we recommend that you use tools that demonstrate your knowledge of the work you are doing, and your understanding of the role you have. For the human resources consultant involved in these situations, this may include booklets and fact sheets for employees, letters and questionnaires to treatment providers, e-mails with return to work or hiring plans for managers, and more.

There are some companies where all accommodation efforts are managed by one person who is a coordinator for all required areas. Other companies have other approaches. If you live in a region where all of this is new, there can be a range of possibilities.
We like the courses for workplace disability management by international companies. The National Institute of Disability Management and Rehabilitation, based in British Columbia, Canada, is an excellent resource (www.nidmar.ca).

(NOTE: Velsoft is not associated with and does not endorse any third-party companies mentioned in our courseware, including the National Institute of Disability Management and Rehabilitation.)

Respecting Confidentiality

Although we are within a business context, and as workplace leaders we understand confidentiality, sometimes our employees do not. It is of critical importance that when we speak to an employee, or a prospective employee, about their medical status they understand the limits of confidentiality in certain circumstances. We will tell their supervisors only limited information, such as return to work or start dates and ability levels or limitations for work. We will not (and must not) disclose condition names, symptoms, medications, or physician’s names.

That being said, of course, in some cases it will assist the employee if the supervisor has a better idea what is going on. In any case, we must obtain signed consent from the employee to even discuss the situation with the supervisor. Advise the employee that it may help the supervisor to know what is going on. If the employee is comfortable, they could share more details with their supervisor than you are going to.

You’ll find that employees who have serious or life threatening illness (e.g., cancer, heart disease, etc.) will have already told their supervisor. This is not the case with mental health conditions, where employees may prefer to simply say that they are feeling unwell. It’s not always in the employee’s best interest to disclose their mental health issues due to stigma in the workplace and a lack of understanding in society when it comes to mental health issues. These types of issues in particular need to be handled carefully.

If you are in a role where you are not ready or able to manage these types of situations, you can get help from your human resources consultant. Consider contracting out disability management or case management services to a vocational rehabilitation consultant.

No matter which route you choose, you will need to ensure that the work that you do with people with disabilities is done with the individual’s consent and cooperation. You will need to create a consent form that you can have the employee sign and share with caregivers that are involved with the work plan. We have provided a sample below.
Sample Consent Form for Release and Exchange of Information

I, __________________________ (name of employee or prospective employee) authorize and permit __________________________ (name of physician or treatment provider)

-and-

  Diversity (or HR) Consultant
  ABC Company
  City, State

  to exchange medical information relevant to managing my work plan / absence from work / return to work plans, and providing rehabilitation and other services relating to my work plan including modified, graduated, or accommodation opportunities.

I agree that a photocopy or facsimile of this authorization is as valid as the original. This consent shall be valid for six (6) months from the date of signing.

Date: __________________________
Signed: __________________________
Printed Name: __________________________
Preparing Documentation

Asking the Right Questions

When you are asked by an employee for an accommodation, you need access to good information in order to make good decisions. This will start with information from the individual themselves. You will often need corroboration, explanation, or additional support from caregivers involved. Information may be sought from physicians, psychologists, physiotherapists, or occupational therapists.

As a general rule, we recommend that you seek support from the family physician but do not ask for specific ability levels unless they have a way to measure them. You’ll need information that explains the functional abilities of the individual. This is a specific focus of occupational therapists and physiotherapists (for physical conditions), and psychologists, psychiatrists, rehabilitation specialists, and occupational therapists (for mental health conditions).

In order to create the best possible plan for an individual coming to work with you, or for someone who has been off work following an illness or injury, you need concrete information. Remember that you need to have the employee’s signed consent in order to ask questions.

When you begin preparing a work plan, make sure that you provide a copy of the job description and the physical demands of the job to any caregivers you will work with. (Sometimes a job title will lead people to assume certain job duties are required. You need to ensure that they are working with accurate information.)

You should also keep your questions simple so that your correspondence is returned quickly. A simple summary of the demands of the job in categories such as the ones below is easy for practitioners to complete.
**Sample Work Plan Information Request**

Please place a checkmark next to the appropriate work placement.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interim Work Placement</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>o Sedentary activity (i.e., mainly sitting)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>o No requirements to lift, carry, or climb</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Light Duties</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>o Standing and/or sitting as required</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>o Walking or moving from one task area to another</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>o Limited lifting, pushing, pulling (no more than 10 kg/22 lbs.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>o Limited carrying (no greater than 5 kg/10 lbs.)</td>
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<tr>
<td>o No climbing</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Medium Duties</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>o Standing, walking, sitting as required</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>o Limited lifting, carrying, pushing, pulling (no more than 15 kg/33 lbs.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>o Limited climbing</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Regular Duties</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(no restrictions)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

List any restrictions not captured above:

Are restrictions and limitations temporary or permanent?

Indicate the anticipated duration at the level indicated above by writing in a date or number of weeks below:

Name:

Signature:

Date:
Sending the Right Message

When you prepare documentation for care providers, make sure that they see you are serious and professional. Sending documentation that has been photocopied or faxed until it is of poor quality doesn’t endear you or your cause. Also, if you have an abilities style of form that the doctor fills out, remember that quality of your form says something about your organization.

In many regions, note that the employer is responsible for any charges a care provider invoices for answering your letters or completing forms. Do not expect that your employees or potential employees will pay for medical information.
Session Twelve: Communication Styles

A dichotomy is something that is divided into two non-overlapping parts or opinions. Different groups can be discussed in terms of their preferences in communication styles. Knowledge of those dichotomies will help you develop more sophisticated communication skills.

In this session, we will explore communication styles as you consider one side and another of a dichotomy.

Dichotomies in Theory

Understanding Dichotomies

Differences among groups of people can be identified by marked preferences among pairs of opposites like those in the following list. We will call these pairs of words “dichotomies.” Some examples:

- Cooperative and Competitive
- Assertive and Passive
- Direct and Indirect
- Individualistic and Team-oriented
- Optimistic and Pessimistic

Most people's preference is shaped partly by the groups they belong to and the people they associate with, rather than by logical analysis and decision making. In addition, communication can be direct or indirect.

Think of direct communication as what you say, such as, “You have spinach in your teeth.”

Indirect communication can be subtler messages (“Check your smile!”) or even gestures and body language (tapping your teeth while making eye contact, for example).
Making Connections

Do you prefer direct or indirect communication?

Why do you think you feel this way?

How do you communicate with others?
Advantages and Disadvantages

Both modes of communication have some advantages and disadvantages.

Advantages of the direct mode of communication:
- People easily understand what you are saying.
- You don't waste time being sensitive about people’s feelings.
- You are more likely to produce a desired change in behavior.

Disadvantages of the direct mode of communication:
- Some people may think that you are rude and impatient.
- The listener may reject your feedback because they feel that you are unfairly focusing on only one part of their behavior.
- Your honest feedback and straightforward language may hurt the listener’s feelings.
- It may damage your relationship with the other person.

Advantages of the indirect mode of communication:
- You will not alienate too many of your listeners.
- You will appear to be sensitive and considerate.
- You will balance constructive feedback about undesirable behavior with praise for desirable behavior.

Disadvantages of the indirect mode of communication:
- Listeners may not understand what point you are trying to make.
- People may misunderstand your message.
- Listeners may exploit a vague message for their personal benefit.
Dichotomies in Action

Step One

Choose three of these dichotomy pairs.
- abstract - concrete
- accommodating - competing
- active - passive
- animated - lethargic
- arrogant - humble
- assertive - meek
- attached - detached
- big picture - details
- decisive - indecisive
- deep - shallow
- direct - indirect
- factual - intuitive
- formal - informal
- harmonious - disruptive
- hesitant - impulsive
- individualistic - team oriented
- listening - talking
- objective - subjective
- optimistic - pessimistic
- organized - chaotic
- patient - impatient
- personal - impersonal
- playful - serious
- realistic - idealistic
- reflective - impulsive
- simple - complex
- structured - flexible
- taking turns - interrupting
- tense - relaxed
- yes, and - yes, but
Step Two

List the advantages and disadvantages or examples of each side of each dichotomy.

Dichotomy One: _____________________

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Advantages</th>
<th>Disadvantages</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Side A:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</table>

<p>| | | |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
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<th></th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Side B:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Dichotomy Two: _____________________

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Advantages</th>
<th>Disadvantages</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Side A:</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Side B:</strong></td>
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</table>
Dichotomy Three: _______________________

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Advantages</th>
<th>Disadvantages</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Side A:</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Side B:</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Step Three

What can you conclude from this exercise?


Session Thirteen: Critical Conversations

Communication skill development continues as we look at a coaching approach to conversations with employees or potential employees in the diversity and disability context.

In this session, you’ll learn what introductory elements to cover, how to introduce yourself, and how to ask exploratory questions to get all the information about accommodations.

Introductory Elements

If you’re daunted by the idea of conversations with disabled people, or about people with disabilities, we’ve got some help for you. This is a coaching methodology that is effective for all kinds of interactions, even beyond diversity conversations.

Remember that you are speaking with and about people. Try not to be intimidated. We’re all human beings with the same kind of needs and wants.

Focus on the immediate future. We do not need all the details of their past; we just need to know where we are going (back to work in some way or another). We don’t need to know why they stayed working under that same miserable boss for 5 years. We need to know what they are willing to do next.

When you ask, prepare to listen. It is much easier to focus on the close things and those that are negative. They are a part of our story, which we often love to share. Instead, focus on the future, pay full attention to what they say, and reflect back accordingly.

Suspend opinions and judgments. This is about them, not you. You will have opinions, but coaching is not about giving them your opinion. Sometimes they will ask for it and you need to turn the statement back to them. Use questions like, “What do you think that you ought to do?” or “What is best for you?”

When they get stuck, be honest. This is you reflecting back some reality if they get stuck in the past, on negativity, or in a fear based reaction. Listen for cues like “I can’t ever,” “At my age,” or “With my problems.” Tell them what you can and cannot do and what the impact of them not participating fully in their recovery and return to work will be.

Do not ask what you already know. If you’ve spoken with someone before, or you’ve received information, don’t ask again about it unless it is pertinent at that time. People do not appreciate you wasting their time. If they know you are asking something that you should already know (perhaps the doctor wrote the surgery
dates and details on the attending physician’s statement, for example), you will jeopardize the rapport you are trying to build.
Getting the Conversation Started

For those of you not familiar with putting a focus on diversity in your workplace, or who are new at arranging accommodations, we’re going to do a little work on starting those conversations. Naturally, the contents of any greeting you make will vary with the terms and nuances of your program, including union agreements.

The conversation outlined here is an ideal one that you can modify to fit your situation. This is set to take place in an initial phone call to someone who has been away from work for a while, but you can modify it to suit your needs. Consider how you might change it to prepare to accommodate an existing employee or someone who is considering coming to work with you.

Basic Script
- Hi, my name is Darryl, and I am calling you from HR with ABC Company. In addition to being your human resources consultant, I also help employees who are off work due to an extended illness or injury by coordinating return to work plans. I have received a note/form from your doctor and need to speak with you. I want to assure you that anything that we discuss is confidential, and not shared with your work area without your express permission. Is this a good time to talk, or do you need me to call back at another time?
- (Assuming this is a good time, proceed. If it isn’t, arrange a time to call back.)
- Thank you very much. Part of my role is to also help you to return to work when you are able to do so. Anything that you say to me is confidential, and so although it may seem that I am asking you some personal questions, I need to do that in order to get a good idea of how to help you come back to work successfully, and to get an idea of where you are at in your treatment.

If the absence is a result of a mental health issue:
- Your doctor has said that after your hospitalization you needed a few months to recover and continue with daily treatment. He has also said that now that you are feeling stronger, the two of you have determined that a gradual return to work would be helpful.
- I can speak with your supervisor in order to set up a schedule that will offer you some flexibility initially if you need it, and gradually increase your hours over a four week period. How does that sound to you?
If the absence is a result of physical disability issue:
  o I understand that you are still having some problems with maneuvering in your wheelchair, but you are getting stronger with it. I wanted to let you know that we have installed a new door in the main entry, so it’ll be easier for you to get into the office. We’re planning a pizza lunch next Friday, and I was wondering if you could join us for the lunch. That will give you an opportunity to see if the door will be a benefit.
  o Great! I am glad to know you will try to come.
  o I know that you are still in treatment regularly. Can you tell me how it’s going? What does your program consist of these days?
Taking it One Step Further

After you have used the introduction in the previous section, you are going to need to ask questions about individual function. The purpose is to ascertain what can and cannot be done at work, from the employee’s perception. Note that as the employer, you need to be careful not to ask for medical disclosure, although the employee may offer it to you as the conversation unfolds.

Two basic questions that you can ask are:
- What is the nature of your condition right now? Please briefly describe what contributes to your still being away, without telling me the diagnosis.
- Please outline any additional medical concerns that you may have if you believe that they should be considered in assessing this accommodation.

Treatment Questions

- Who is your primary physician and how often do you see him or her?
- Are there other caregivers involved (psychology, physiotherapy, occupational therapy, etc.) that we should contact about your accommodation?

Functional Abilities

- Do you have trouble taking care of your personal needs such as bathing, dressing, etc.? If so, please explain.
- Do you require assistance from another person to perform such tasks as stair climbing, household chores, using public transportation, or driving a vehicle? If so, please explain.
- Please describe your daily routine since you stopped working.
- Have you been able to continue with any hobbies or participate in any other activities such as sports or clubs?
- What duties of your job would be the most difficult to perform as a result of your medical condition?
- What duties would be the least difficult?
Education/Employment History

Note that you may already have some form of this in a personnel file. Don’t ask questions that you already know the answers to!

- Are you now able to do some part of your regular work? Please discuss.
- What kind of work other than your regular work do you think you would be able to do?
- What job skills and expertise have you acquired in your current and previous jobs?
- What’s the highest grade level of school that you have completed? In what year was this?
- Did you attend college or university? If so, what diploma, degree, or studies were completed?
- Have you taken any apprenticeships, trade courses, or other job training programs? If yes, please provide details.
- Please list any trade papers, certifications, and/or licenses held and the year obtained.
- Do you have any questions or comments?

These questions are designed to help you understand the person’s situation and to consider what elements of accommodation that you might be able to offer. When you speak of accommodation to someone, make sure that you do not go beyond your authority level. Do not make promises thinking that you will be able to work them out later. Accommodation can be quite a complex process.
Session Fourteen: How Do We Make It Happen?

Taking those first steps into diversity awareness, disability, and accommodations takes a good understanding of where you are going and what you want to do in order to be a part of a diverse workplace.

In this session, we’ll explore some ideas for making accommodations work, like consideration for existing staff and the value of job shadowing.

How Far Do You Go In Accommodation?

As you consider making an accommodation, there are also considerations for your existing staff. In some jurisdictions, the employer is expected to endure some kind of hardship to make an accommodation, as is the employee. One group that can sometimes feel left out of the accommodation process are the existing staff, and they must be considered.

Some things to consider:
- If a 22 year old maintenance worker becomes disabled, and as a result can no longer do their job as a maintenance worker, could they be accommodated as a safety officer? What do you do?
- Will you change your answer if you know that the position is highly sought after and most of the maintenance staff hope to do a stint as safety officer before they retire? If the disabled individual is placed in the safety officer position, he could potentially do the job for 30 years, giving the other staff that are much closer to the position in terms of seniority no chance of moving up. This could also have an impact on the group’s morale.
- In a small business where there are only three employees and a disabled worker needs many thousands of dollars invested in equipment in order to continue with their work, the costs could put the business in jeopardy. Are there other things that you could suggest, such as fundraising or offering assistance to find something that is a better fit?

Additional considerations for accommodations include:
- Does it seem that the individual can do all or a part of their job?
- Can they remain in their current position but trade some tasks away? Job bundling would mean that you gather tasks from other people that this individual could do (without leaving all the heavy, unwanted, or unpleasant task for the other staff).
- Making accommodations is not about creating a perfect job for an individual.

In some jurisdictions, there are limits as to how far an employer has to go to accommodate someone. In Canada this is referred to as a test of “undue hardship.” The test is pretty onerous on the employer to get committed and to be creative about making accommodations work.
However, the limits also give the employer reasons to restrict their accommodation. For example, they do not have to create a new position nor promote the disabled individual. They do not have to take all the light work and provide it to a disabled worker, which would leave colleagues doing all the heavy work. They do not have to put their business in financial jeopardy to facilitate an accommodation.

If you are not certain about what is required in your jurisdiction, please consult with your human resources department and legal counsel. The law continues to evolve in this area, and it’s important that you know what you are doing and that you are up to date with what’s going on.

Value of Job Shadows

If you are not certain how an accommodation will work out, get creative! If you are considering hiring someone who is disabled, trying to work out whether your workplace needs modifications, or you have a returning worker who needs some assurance, set up a job shadow.

Job shadows are usually held over a period of several hours to days. You can have a candidate or employee come into your workplace and test the waters. One very positive result of a job shadow is that the candidate has the opportunity to explore the physical environment and make suggestions for changes that will make things easier. This also allows the disabled person a chance to meet the other staff and develop relationships. These relationships help to alleviate any concerns, barriers, or fears that staff may have about working with people with disabilities.

Many of these changes are quite inexpensive, and without the experience working with people with disabilities, we may not think of them.

Create a list of modifications that could be made in your workplace which would make accommodating disabled people easier.
Personal Action Plan

You are nearly finished Disability Awareness, and we want to help you take what you have learned and apply it in a very meaningful way. Many people have all kinds of great ideas when they finish a dynamic course like this, but things can come up that we need to deal with, and those ideas can be forgotten.

In this session, you will complete a personal action plan to take what you have learned and set some concrete goals to help you to make the changes that you want. Writing your goals down, and then checking in on your progress and making adjustments from time to time, are essential steps in getting where you want to be. We recommend that you take screenshots of your plan, or copy your goals down in your notebook, so that you can refer to them regularly.

I am already doing these things well:

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

I want to improve these areas:

________________________________________________________________________

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I have these resources to help me:

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As a result of what I have learned in this course, I am going to...

My target date is...

I will know I have succeeded when...

I will follow up with myself on...

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Summary

Congratulations! You have completed the course “Disability Awareness.”

In this course, we talked about how you can create a diverse, aware workplace. We started by defining the term disabilities and we explored what the word “stereotypes” means. Next, we explored some misconceptions about people with disabilities and the realities behind them.

Next, we explored some case studies to help us understand why companies should hire people with disabilities. Following that, we looked at some terms that are commonly used but that can be hurtful. We considered some ways to make our language more sensitive and inclusive while still being practical.

The next portion of the course explored physical and attitudinal barriers. Then, we talked about how to overcome those barriers using some basic concepts and the cornerstones of diversity: knowledge, understanding, acceptance, and behavior.

With this in mind, we reviewed your pre-assignment and encouraged you to identify some areas for change. Next, we addressed two key hiring issues: what you can ask and what the candidate should expect. We also talked about the STOP technique, which you can use to curb inappropriate behavior.
To support the STOP technique, we covered some communication essentials, including ground rules, confidentiality, and communication styles. We rounded this off with a plan for conversations about disabilities.

The last part of the course provided some practical ideas for promoting inclusion, including accommodation and job shadows. You should now feel ready to help make your workplace more diverse, aware, and welcoming to people of all abilities.
Recommended Reading List

If you are looking for further information on this topic, we have included a recommended reading list below.


Post-Course Assessment

1. Select the picture that represents the international symbol of accessibility.
   a. 
   b. 
   c. 

2. To create a job shadow, you would invite a candidate into the workplace and:
   a. Have them observe someone doing the job
   b. Introduce them to members of the team
   c. Ask them to give you feedback after the job shadow
   d. All of the above

3. When you are discussing an accommodation, it is helpful to have:
   a. A script
   b. Practice at coaching conversations
   c. A clear understanding of applicable legislation
   d. All of the above

4. True or False. An advantage of using direct communication is that people easily understand what you are saying.

5. True or False. A disadvantage of the direct mode of communication is that some people may find you rude or impatient.

6. When you are working on accommodations, it is essential to have a(n) __________________ signed by the employee or a prospective employee.
   a. Application form
   b. Police background check form
   c. Consent form

7. In the STOP technique, the letter S stands for:
   a. Saying something
   b. State the inappropriate behavior
   c. Synergistic
8. In an interview, your questions must be designed to get to know the individual and what they can do, and avoid a tendency toward:
   a. Bias and discrimination
   b. Discussing pay and benefits in the first five minutes
   c. Making a job offer

9. True or False: Acceptance does not mean adopting the behaviors or rituals of another person as if they were your own.

10. When planning gets underway for an accommodation, the following information is important:
    a. Are the limitations and restrictions for a particular job permanent or temporary
    b. Is the condition mild, moderate, or severe
    c. Is the individual asking for an accommodation
    d. All of the above