



## DISABILITY EMPLOYMENT AND ADVOCACY SERVICES

# communicating with people who are blind or have vision impairment

a fact sheet for staff of disability employment  
and advocacy services



Blindness and vision impairment have many different causes. Each person with blindness or vision impairment is affected differently.

Some people may have been coping with these effects since birth, but many more will have experienced an accident, injury, condition or disease that has affected their vision.

For some people, vision will become more and more impaired as they get older.

## Blindness

A fully sighted person can see an object that is 60 metres away. A person who is legally blind cannot see that same object if it is only six metres away. Legal blindness is determined by the sharpness of a person's vision, or their **visual acuity**. A person who is legally blind has a different visual acuity than a fully sighted person does.

Legal blindness also applies if a person has a significant loss to their **field of vision**. People who are fully sighted can see in a span of about 180 degrees in front of them. If this span is reduced to 20 degrees or less, the person is considered legally blind.

Sometimes, both visual acuity and visual field are affected.

## Vision impairment

Vision Australia ([www.visionaustralia.org.au](http://www.visionaustralia.org.au)) defines a person with vision impairment as having 'some degree of sight loss'. Some forms of vision impairment can be corrected through the use of glasses or contact lenses.





A person with normal vision may see this.



A person with macular degeneration may see this.

## Advocating for and working with people who are blind or have vision impairment

Advocacy and disability employment services have a common aim, that being to assist and encourage people with disability to be self-determining, know their rights, be treated equally, be informed and make choices.

If your team, work group, or organisation includes people who are blind or who have vision impairment there is a range of ways you, they and other team members can make sure they contribute effectively. This includes considering:

- ▶ communication
- ▶ safety
- ▶ how work and other areas are set up.

This sheet includes some strategies to approach each of these things. They may not be exactly right for your organisation because every person and every organisation is unique. Use them as a starting point for developing your own strategies that also take account of people's skills and interests, their personalities and cultural backgrounds, and the work that the team is doing.

## How vision loss can affect people

Because someone is defined as 'blind' does not mean they cannot see anything at all. In fact, around 90% of people who are legally blind have some useable (and useful) vision. How much sight people have varies enormously: the person may only see whether it's light or dark, they may see shapes, or they may be able to read large print.

Problems with visual acuity lead to blurriness, patchiness, wobbliness or distortions in vision. Each person's unique eye condition means that everyone will have different degrees of useful vision.

If their visual field is affected, a person may be able to see quite well, but only in certain directions.

Sometimes, central vision is affected, which means that seeing faces, or reading, can be difficult. Getting around unaided may be possible.

If central vision is intact, but peripheral vision is affected, mobility is difficult. In this case the person may have trouble with steps, kerbs, or items left in their path.

## Progressive impairment of vision

Some of the most common causes of vision impairment are degenerative (they tend to get worse). People who are vision impaired because of conditions such as age-related macular degeneration (which affects the central vision making it difficult for people to recognise faces and read) are likely to find that the impairment worsens with age.

A vision impairment may also be the result of changes in other conditions such as multiple sclerosis.

## Creating large print materials

Large print refers to any printed matter that uses a font that is 14 point or larger. While the size of the font is important there are other factors that you need to consider when producing large print material, including:

- ▶ using simple and clear fonts
- ▶ using simple and clear design with good contrast between text and background colours
- ▶ using a left-justified margin so that the right margin is ragged and easily seen by the reader
- ▶ people with vision impairment can find print on heavily coloured paper more difficult to read
- ▶ avoiding pictures or abstract designs under the text
- ▶ using photos in preference to cartoons where appropriate
- ▶ considering the use of a poster rather than text to convey information.

## Strategies

### Communication

#### 1 When you are talking with a person who is blind or has low vision:

- ▶ identify yourself – *Hi Peter, it's Bob*
- ▶ introduce other people who are present – *Fran's here and Sarah's over at the coffee machine*
- ▶ speak naturally and use everyday language – don't avoid words like 'look' and 'see'
- ▶ indicate when you are moving away or leaving the conversation – *I'm going to the other section now. I should be back about lunchtime*
- ▶ use accurate and specific language when giving instructions – *The conveyer is on your left.*

#### 2 Make sure that written material the person needs to have access to is in an appropriate format.

For a person with low vision, large print may be what is needed. For a person who is blind, software such as a screen reader that converts information on a computer screen to audio or to a Braille format may be the most appropriate way to share written information.

If a person with vision impairment joins your team, for example, you may need to change the way you prepare written material so that it is accessible to them.

#### 3 Encourage other people to use communication strategies that effectively include the person with vision impairment.

### Safety

Some specific safety issues may arise for people with vision impairment. For example, low vision may make it difficult for a person to see markings indicating safe walkways in areas where machinery operates.

Creating a safe environment is a shared responsibility. It is important to communicate with a person with vision impairment to find out what they need to **be** safe and **feel** safe, as well as to ensure that they understand their responsibilities to act and work safely.

#### 1 Gather information about the person's safety skills and knowledge and review it regularly. For example, in the workplace:

- ▶ are they able to recognise and work within safety regulations?
- ▶ do they know how to identify a hazard?
- ▶ are they able to perform emergency shut-downs of machinery etc?
- ▶ will they need particular assistance during an emergency evacuation?

#### 2 Identify any procedures, activities or equipment/ machinery that are particularly hazardous for a person who is blind or vision impaired.

If possible eliminate the hazard. Alternatively, develop strategies to separate the person from the hazard.

#### 3 Clarify safety rules and responsibilities.

A person who is blind or has vision impairment may well be especially reliant on their other senses (hearing and touch) to stay in contact with their environment. In the workplace, for example, they may be reluctant to isolate themselves further by wearing hearing protection or gloves – indeed they may feel unsafe doing so. In these circumstances, it is important to stress that safety rules apply to everyone and that there are procedures in place to ensure their safety in an emergency.

## From a supervisor's diary

A new employee, Jelena, joined our team this week. Jelena is blind and she has a guide dog called Jessica. An Orientation and Mobility (O&M) instructor from State Vision has been in to assess her work area and train her in getting around. The O&M instructor has also given us instructions on how to deal with Jessica. You should never pat or distract a guide dog unless the owner has given you permission. We were told we must treat Jessica as an aid, not a pet!

The O&M instructor also gave me a set of guidelines so we can all learn how best to communicate with Jelena – things like identifying ourselves when we speak to her, letting her know when we're leaving, etc.

It's a big change for us all. None of us have ever worked with anyone who is blind. Some of the other employees are a bit apprehensive, I think. I'll have to get Jelena to show me how to use the screen reader software that she uses and she and I are already talking about the best way to set up her work station. Then of course we've got the problem of Tyson who is terrified of dogs, but I've got an idea how we might solve that.



#### 4 Plan for emergencies.

All staff of disability employment and advocacy services should be aware and up-to-date regarding their specific responsibilities to assist a person who is blind or vision impaired in an emergency.

### Setting up work and other areas

Carefully analyse any need the person who is blind or has vision impairment has for assistive equipment or modifications that enable them to use tools, workplace or other equipment. Your service may need to access assessment services or specialist suppliers.

#### Further information:

Able Australia (1300 225 369)

Australian DeafBlind Council

Australian Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission

Blind Citizens Australia

Department of Human Services

Seeing Eye Dogs Australia

Vision Australia

While each person will need different equipment or modification, the key areas are likely to be lighting, the placement of objects in the area and moving around easily and safely.

#### 1 Check the environment.

Ensure the physical environment suits the needs of people who are blind or have vision impairment.

If the person has a seeing eye dog with them, advise staff not to talk to the dog.

- ▶ Do switches and controls for machinery etc have raised markings that identify their purpose?
- ▶ Are walkways and doorways accessible and appropriately marked (for example, tactile markings)?

<http://www.ableaustralia.org.au/>  
<http://internex.net.au/~dba/>

<http://www.hreoc.gov.au/>  
[www.bca.org.au](http://www.bca.org.au)

<http://www.humanservices.gov.au/>  
<http://www.seda.org.au/>  
[www.visionaustralia.org.au](http://www.visionaustralia.org.au)

- ▶ Are there appropriate audible substitutions for visual signals?
- ▶ Is the lighting of the appropriate strength and placement to maximise the use the person can make of their sight?
- ▶ Does the person's work area need modifications for safety or productivity reasons?
- ▶ Is the lunchroom furniture arranged to be inclusive of everyone in it, to avoid possible social isolation?
- ▶ Are interview rooms quiet and private, and equipped with required audible or tactile substitutions?
- ▶ Arrange furniture with open spaces.
- ▶ Ensure no sharp edges protrude.

#### 2 Ensure consistency.

Tools and equipment are best kept in the same place, and within reach of the person.

### Peter's story

In addition to his mobility limitations, Peter has age related macular degeneration, which affects his central vision and makes it difficult for him to see things in detail that are right in front of him. They are beginning to appear blurred and distorted. Reading is becoming a particular problem.

He works in administration doing a range of office tasks including attending the reception area. Peter has always been efficient and accurate. Recently he's had problems filing things correctly and delivering messages to the people they are meant for. Peter was frustrated and angry about the problems and was worried he'd be moved to another area.

His supervisor arranged for a vision specialist to come in and work with Peter and as a result there have been some changes to his work area. The lighting has been modified, Peter now has a magnifier, he is learning to use screen reader software to check incoming mail and a bright, high contrast colour coding system is being used on the filing cabinets.



Photos included in this publication were kindly provided by Vision Australia.