

How to train your staff on accessibility

Information businesses and non-profits must include when training staff on how to interact with people with different disabilities, and some tips to help you.

Who you need to train

You must provide training to:

- all employees and volunteers (paid and unpaid, full-time, part-time and contract positions)
- anyone involved in developing your organization's policies (including managers, senior leaders, directors, board members and owners)
- anyone who provides goods, services or facilities to customers on your organization's behalf (such as external contact centres or facilities management companies)

You must provide the training as soon as possible after an employee or volunteer joins your organization.

Maintain records of training

You must also maintain records of your customer service training if you are:

- a private or non-profit organization with 50 or more employees
- a public sector organization of any size

You must:

- maintain written records of all training done to meet the accessibility requirements that apply to your organization
 - record when the training was delivered and how many people took the training
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Accessible customer service training

You must train all staff on how to interact with people with different disabilities.

Customers can be anyone who is accessing your organization's goods, services or facilities. This can include paying and non-paying members of the public and other businesses in business-to-business relationships.

Your training must include:

- the purpose of the *Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act* (<http://www.ontario.ca/laws/statute/05a11>)
- an overview of the *requirements of the customer service standard* (<http://www.ontario.ca/page/how-make-customer-service-accessible>)
- your organization's policy on providing accessible customer service

- tips on how to interact with people with various types of disabilities
- tips on how to interact with people who use an assistive device or require the assistance of a service animal or support person
- information on how to use any equipment or devices available in your organization to help provide goods, services or facilities to people with disabilities (e.g., screen readers, lifts, TTY phone line)
- tips on what to do if a person with a disability is having difficulty accessing your organization's goods, services or facilities

You must also train your staff when there are any changes to your accessible customer service policies.

Work related accessibility training

You must train all staff on:

- areas of the accessibility standards (<http://www.ontario.ca/page/about-accessibility-laws>) that are relevant to their work responsibilities
 - employment
 - information and communications
 - transportation
 - design of public spaces
- the *Ontario Human Rights Code* (<http://www.ohrc.on.ca/en/learning/working-together-code-and-aoda>) (where it relates to people with disabilities)
- when you make any changes to your accessibility policies

A human resources manager may need different training than a cashier. If you use job descriptions, they may help you determine training needs. For example, Paolo is a human resources manager in a large accounting firm. His training includes how to make the firm's hiring, performance management and other workplace practices accessible to people with disabilities.

Training tips

Here are a few tips for interacting with people who have various disabilities.

People with physical/mobility disabilities

Only some people with physical disabilities use a wheelchair. Someone with a spinal cord injury may use crutches while someone with severe arthritis or a heart condition may have difficulty walking longer distances.

Tips:

- ask before you help; people with disabilities often have their own way of doing things
- if you need to have a lengthy conversation with someone who uses a wheelchair or scooter, consider sitting so you can make eye contact at the same level
- don't touch items or equipment (e.g., canes, wheelchairs) without permission
- if you have permission to move a person's wheelchair, don't leave them in an awkward, dangerous or undignified position, such as facing a wall or in the path of opening doors

- think ahead and remove any items that may cause a physical barrier, such as boxes left in an aisle

People with vision loss

Vision loss can restrict someone's ability to read, locate landmarks or see hazards. Some customers may use a guide dog or a white cane, while others may not.

Not everyone with vision loss is totally blind. Many have some vision.

Tips:

- when you know someone has vision loss, don't assume the individual can't see you; many people who have low vision still have some sight
- identify yourself when you approach and speak directly to the customer
- ask if they would like you to read any printed material out loud to them (e.g., a menu or schedule of fees)
- when providing directions or instructions, be precise and descriptive
- offer your elbow to guide them if needed. If they accept, lead – don't pull
- if you need to leave the customer, let them know by telling them you'll be back, or saying goodbye
- don't leave the customer in the middle of the room – guide them to a comfortable location

People with hearing loss

People who have hearing loss may be deaf, deafened or hard of hearing. They may also be oral deaf – unable to hear, but prefer to talk instead of using sign language. These terms are used to describe different levels of hearing and/or the way a person's hearing was diminished or lost.

Tips:

- once a customer has identified themselves as having hearing loss, make sure you are in a well-lit area where they can see your face and read your lips
- as needed, attract the customer's attention before speaking; try a gentle touch on the shoulder or wave of your hand
- if your customer uses a hearing aid, reduce background noise or if possible, move to a quieter area
- if necessary, ask if another method of communicating would be easier (e.g., using a pen and paper)
- speak directly to your customer – not to their sign language interpreter – if they are accompanied by one

People who are deafblind

A person who is deafblind has some degree of both hearing and vision loss. People who are deafblind are often accompanied by an intervenor, a professional support person who helps with communication.

Tips:

- a customer who is deafblind is likely to explain to you how to communicate with them, perhaps with an assistance card or a note
- speak directly to your customer, not to the intervenor

People with speech or language disabilities

Cerebral palsy, stroke, hearing loss or other conditions may make it difficult for a person to pronounce words or express themselves. Some people who have severe difficulties may use a communication board or other assistive devices.

Tips:

- don't assume that a person who has difficulty speaking doesn't understand you
- whenever possible, ask questions that can be answered with "yes" or a "no"
- read visible instructions for communication devices, if the person uses one
- be patient; don't interrupt or finish your customer's sentences
- confirm what the person has said by summarizing or repeating – don't pretend if you're not sure
- speak directly to the customer and not to their companion or support person

People who have learning disabilities

The term "learning disabilities" refers to a range of disorders. One example is dyslexia, which affects how a person takes in or retains information. This disability may become apparent when a person has difficulty reading material or understanding the information you are providing.

Tips:

- be patient – people with some learning disabilities may take a little longer to process information, to understand and to respond
- try to provide information in a way that works for your customer (e.g. some people with learning disabilities find written words difficult to understand, while others may have problems with numbers and math)
- be willing to rephrase or explain something again in another way

People who have developmental disabilities

Developmental disabilities (e.g. Down syndrome) or intellectual disabilities, can mildly or profoundly limit a person's ability to learn, communicate, do every day physical activities and live independently. You may not know that someone has this disability unless you are told.

Tips:

- don't make assumptions about what a person can or cannot do
- use plain language
- provide one piece of information at a time
- ask the customer if they need help reading your material or completing a form

People who have mental health disabilities

Mental health disability is a broad term for many disorders that can range in severity. It can affect a person's ability to think clearly, concentrate or remember things. A person with a mental health disability may experience depression or acute mood swings, anxiety due to phobias or panic disorder, or hallucinations.

You may not know someone has a mental health disability unless you are told. Stigma and lack of understanding are major barriers for people with mental health disabilities.

Tips:

- if you sense or know that a customer has a mental health disability, treat them with the same respect and consideration you have for everyone else
- be confident, calm and reassuring

- respect your customer's personal space
- limit distractions that could affect your customer's ability to focus or concentrate – loud noise, crowded areas and interruptions could cause stress

People who use assistive devices

An assistive device is a piece of equipment a person with a disability uses to help them with daily living (e.g., a wheelchair, screen reader, hearing aid, cane or walker, an oxygen tank).

Tips:

- don't touch or handle any assistive device without permission
- don't move assistive devices or equipment (e.g., canes, walkers) out of your customer's reach
- let your customers know about accessible features in the immediate environment that are appropriate to their needs (e.g. public phones with TTY service, accessible washrooms, elevator)

If your organization offers any equipment or devices that can help customers with disabilities access your services, make sure you and your staff know how to use them. It could be helpful to have instruction manuals handy or an instruction sheet posted where the device is located or stored.

Some examples of assistive devices that your organization might offer include:

- mobility device, such as a manual wheelchair or motorized scooter
- lift, which raises or lowers people who use mobility devices
- technology that makes it easier for people with disabilities to communicate or access information, such as certain computer software, an amplification system or a TTY phone line
- accessible interactive kiosk, which might offer information or services in braille or through audio headsets

People who use service animals

There are various types of service animals who support people with various types of disabilities. People with vision loss may use a guide dog. Hearing alert animals help people with hearing loss. Other service animals are trained to alert a person to an oncoming seizure or to help people with autism, mental health disabilities, physical disabilities and other disabilities.

The law requires you to allow service animals on the parts of your premises that are open to the public. In cases where another law prohibits a service animal from entering certain areas (e.g. a service animal would not be allowed in the kitchen of a cooking school), provide another way for the person to access your goods, services or facilities.

While service animals may be prohibited from certain areas, service dogs are allowed in areas where food is sold, served or offered for sale. This includes a restaurant's public dining room.

Tips:

- don't touch or distract a service animal, it is not a pet, it is a working animal and has to pay attention at all times
- if you're not sure if the animal is a pet or a service animal, ask your customer
- you can provide water for the service animal if your customer requests it, but the customer is responsible for the care and supervision of the animal
- if the service animal is prohibited by another law, explain why to your customer and discuss other ways to serve them, e.g. leaving the dog in a safe area or serving your customer in another area where the animal is allowed

People with a support person

A support person may accompany some people with disabilities. A support person can be a paid personal support worker, an intervenor, a volunteer, a family member or a friend. A support person might help your customer with communication, mobility, personal care or with accessing your services.

Welcome support people to your workplace or business. They are permitted in any part of your premises that is open to the public. If your organization is one that charges admission, such as a movie theatre, provide advance notice about what admission fee or fare will be charged for a support person.

Tips:

- if you're not sure which person is the customer, take your lead from the person using or requesting your goods, services or facilities, or simply ask
- speak directly to your customer, not to their support person
- if your organization charges an admission fee or fare, be familiar with its policy on fees or fares for support persons

When it may be necessary to require a support person

There are certain cases when it might be necessary for a person with a disability to be accompanied by a support person on your premises. You must first discuss the situation with the person and consider available evidence before you determine that:

- a support person is necessary to protect the health or safety of the person with a disability or the health or safety of others on the premises; and
- there is no other reasonable way to protect the health or safety of the person with a disability and that of others on the premises

In such a situation, you must waive the admission fee or fare for the support person, if one exists.

People accessing goods, services or facilities

If you notice that your customer is having difficulty accessing your goods, services or facilities, a good starting point is to simply ask "How can I help you?"

Your customers are your best source for information about their needs. Being flexible and open to suggestions will help create a good customer experience. A solution can be simple and they will likely appreciate your attention and consideration.

Additional accessibility laws

Your organization has to meet all applicable accessibility requirements (<http://www.ontario.ca/page/accessibility-laws>).

Keep track of the past and future deadlines to comply with accessibility laws, and find out if and when you have to file accessibility compliance reports.

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