

# REDEFINE POSSIBILITY

How Hiring Employees  
Who Are Blind or Visually Impaired  
Can Benefit Your Company



The Chicago  
Lighthouse

## WHAT ARE ACCOMMODATIONS?

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Accommodations reduce or eliminate workplace barriers and can be simple and affordable.

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This isn't "special treatment"—it simply levels the playing field, creating opportunities for more qualified candidates. Types of accommodations and assistive technology depend on the individual and the work environment.

The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) guarantees that people aren't discriminated against in work-related situations.

A reasonable accommodation is any modification or adjustment to a job or the work environment that will enable a qualified applicant or employee with a disability to participate in the application process or to perform essential job functions.

In short, a qualified individual with a disability has employment rights and privileges equal to those of employees without disabilities. With the right accommodations, people who are blind or visually impaired can and should be held to the same standards as their co-workers.



## TYPES OF TECHNOLOGY

- Video magnifiers
- Smartphones
- Screen magnification software
- Screen reading software
- Handheld magnifiers
- Monoculars
- Screen reading software
- Portable note-takers
- Refreshable Braille displays
- Electronic eyewear
- Optical character recognition systems

## AFFORDABLE SOLUTIONS

Providing (or modifying) equipment for people who are blind or visually impaired often costs less than you might think. Employers in a study by the Job Accommodation Network reported that 56 percent of accommodations cost absolutely nothing to make, while the rest typically cost only \$500 or less. There are often state or federal government grants available to cover these costs.

## COMPETITIVE, COMMITTED EMPLOYEES

**Hiring a qualified candidate who is blind or visually impaired isn't a risk—it's a sound investment.** Employees who are blind or visually impaired are highly motivated and successful. Studies show that qualified blind/visually impaired people are more productive and stay longer at their jobs than their sighted peers.

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“If given the chance, they are going to knock it out of the ballpark for you every time...it's been an amazing success.”

—**JAMES HAUGEN**,  
Mariano's Human Resources,  
on employees who are blind or visually impaired

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## FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

**Q: What questions can I ask a job applicant who is blind or visually impaired?** **A:** If the applicant told you they have a disability, you can ask what accommodations they will need. Focus on the person's abilities as they relate to essential functions of the job, not the disability itself. You should ask the candidate to demonstrate the same proficiency as other applicants, for example, by using reasonable accommodations to complete a skills test.

**Q: I'm not sure my company offers work that people who are blind or visually impaired can do. Am I supposed to create new jobs for them?** **A:** The ADA does not require you to create new positions or waive essential job functions for a worker with a disability. However, chances are there are plenty of jobs at your company that a person who is blind or visually impaired can do with minimal accommodations. Often, they're able to accomplish the same task, but go about it in a different way than a sighted person. This is called "outcome over process."

**Q: What happens if I have to fire or lay off an employee who is blind?** **A:** Most people who are blind or visually impaired hope to be held to the same standards as their coworkers. The ADA ensures that employees who are blind or visually impaired must perform the essential functions of their jobs. If an employee with a disability is not performing up to par and accommodations have been exhausted, you're within your right to treat that employee as you would any other employee. The same applies to downsizing and layoffs.

**Q: If I hire a person who is blind or visually impaired, will they be safe? Will my insurance rates go up?** **A:** Insurance rates do not increase when you hire a person with a disability, including someone who is blind or visually impaired. Insurance statistics have shown that blind and visually impaired workers actually have fewer on-the-job accidents than their sighted peers. Most have received the appropriate training to travel safely and independently. It's unlikely that they'll be careless when it comes to their vision.

## COMMUNICATING WITH A PERSON WHO IS BLIND OR VISUALLY IMPAIRED

- People who are blind or visually impaired are generally not offended by words like “see,” “look,” and “watch” in everyday conversation. It’s OK to use the words “blind” or “visually impaired.”
- Whenever possible, try to use “people first” language, such as “people who are blind” rather than “blind people” or “the blind.”
- Use descriptive language, making reference to colors, patterns, designs and shapes. Avoid pointing to objects or people; instead, say things like, “It’s on your left.”
- Don’t speak in a loud voice or talk down to a person who is blind or visually impaired. Direct questions or comments directly to them.
- Introduce a blind or visually impaired person to other people in the room. Likewise, if you’re in a group, address a person who is blind or visually impaired by name so they know you’re addressing them.
- Identify yourself when someone who is blind or visually impaired enters a room or when you’re approaching them. For example, say, “Hi, Joe. It’s Emily.”
- Let a blind or visually impaired person know when you’re entering or leaving a room.
- Don’t be afraid to ask if the person needs help; if the answer is no, respect their wishes.
- People who are DeafBlind might communicate via multiple methods, including fingerspelling, American Sign Language (ASL) and Braille. Depending on their level of vision and hearing, they might also use print on paper, email, instant messaging, video phone apps or other assistive technologies. It’s a good idea to generally familiarize yourself with your employee’s preferred communication method, but you’re not expected to be an expert.

# Working with Someone Who Is Blind or Visually Impaired

## QUICK FACTS

- There are over 10 million blind and visually impaired people living in the U.S. 1.3 million of them are considered “legally blind,” with a visual acuity below 20/200 (or a visual field of less than 20 degrees).
- 80 percent of people who are legally blind have some remaining vision.
- Slightly over half of the people who are blind or visually impaired are over the age of 65.
- It is estimated that there are as many as 40,000 people who are DeafBlind in the U.S. Some people who are DeafBlind have some hearing or vision.

## COMMUNICATING

- Approximately 10 percent of people who are blind read Braille. Others read enlarged text or rely on audio to access printed material.
- DeafBlind individuals might use multiple communication methods depending on their level of vision and hearing, including fingerspelling, American Sign Language (ASL), Braille, smartphones or other assistive technology.

## GETTING AROUND

- The majority of people who are visually impaired use no visible mobility aids, but instead have training in orientation and mobility methods.
- About 35 percent of people who are blind or visually impaired use a white cane. This allows them to navigate their environment, identifying steps, doorways, people and furniture.
- Approximately two percent of people who are blind travel with a guide dog that is specially trained to move around things, locate doorways, and stop at curbs and stairs. It’s best to avoid petting or distracting a guide dog when it’s working.



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“Alone we can do so little;  
together we can do so much.”

—HELEN KELLER

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**For more information  
about Employment Services,  
please call (312) 997-3657.**