

Hiring someone with a disability: The Dos and Don'ts

My name is Mei Lin Yap, I'm 30 and I am more "like" than "unlike" everyone else. I am a citizen just like any other, I just happen to have Down Syndrome.

I have been working for over 11 years but many people with disabilities are not as "lucky" as I am. In fact, 66% of people with disabilities are unemployed.

Disability employment Ireland – the struggle to find a job

I am one of just 33% of people in Ireland with a disability who has a career. I struggled to secure a permanent, paid job so as one of the lucky few, I want to change people's perceptions of hiring someone with a disability.

Sadly, many people with a disability will never get a job. People with disabilities tend to take a role that is unpaid, an internship or volunteer to try and get the necessary skills needed for proper employment.

Personally, I applied online for jobs due to a fear of rejection. Imagine not having the courage to come face to face with an employer. This is a reality for people with disabilities. While I was looking for work, I had no sense of purpose and no routine. I felt isolated. Without support, it really is an uphill struggle to get a job as a person with a disability.

After attending an event hosted by Bank of Ireland in May 2015, I eventually overcame my fear of rejection. The event was set up to encourage businesses to be more open-minded about employing someone with a disability. If these kinds of events didn't exist many of the 33% of people in Ireland with a disability who are employed would still be unemployed, including me.

It is really comforting to see initiatives such as Open Doors working to promote more diverse and inclusive work environments.

Hired – What happened next?

My own connections eventually led me to find 3 jobs. I got a job as a Clerical Officer in a Dublin hospital, as a Lecturer in Trinity College Dublin and I'm now very happy to be employed in a permanent job as a HR Assistant in Cpl.

My job in Cpl is very clearly defined. I belong to a team and I work in an environment that allows me to reach my full potential.

Like a lot of others, I've had positive and negative experiences at work. I've felt like I am not properly supported and overwhelmed by being thrown in at the deep end and not knowing what was expected of me. Mostly, I feared that I wasn't treated like other employees.

In the beginning, employers often don't know how to support a person with a disability. They can be unsure of how to set out a programme of work because they just don't know the limitations of the disability, seen/unseen, inherited or acquired.

With this in mind, I've put together the do's and don'ts of hiring someone with a disability, based on my own personal experiences:

The do's and don'ts of hiring someone with a disability

When hiring someone with a disability, do...

Assign a point of contact to the individual to address any questions they may have and set out a clear onboarding schedule, so they know who they are meeting and when.

Ask the individual if they need any physical supports to do their job. For example, Is the chair/desk appropriate, do they have any special requirements for the screen or any requirements for a uniform etc.

Assign a buddy to support the new starter. The buddy should be someone who the individual can confide in and ask any questions about the organisation or role. Sometimes people with disabilities find it hard to socialise, and the buddy can play an important role to ensure they feel included but not smothered or mothered.

Clarify what is expected of the new starter. Both in terms of their role and the expected behaviours. For example, the dress code, timekeeping, phone use etc.

Give honest and timely feedback on performance. This is very important for personal development. Feedback forms are a good idea so that the individual can bring this home and discuss with family members if needed.

When hiring someone with a disability, don't...

Don't leave things to the last minute. When you hire someone with a disability make the onboarding process clear and ask if any extra supports are needed as soon as possible. Those with a disability can be nervous and anxious about starting. They want to be assured all is in place and what the schedule is in case they have extra questions or need any special assistance.

Don't overload the individual with tasks. Instead, break the job into "bite-size" pieces. Some people with an intellectual disability mightn't have good verbal skills and may be reluctant to ask for instructions to be repeated. So, keep sentences short and instructions clear. Put yourself into the shoes of the individual with the disability, how/what would you think might be difficult about the duties? Does the individual need a mentor? Would role play help?

Don't treat a person with a disability differently. Make sure that the duties and the activities do not let the disability define or isolate the individual. Don't avoid giving honest constructive feedback. Ask them for lunch or coffee like you would any other co-worker. Listen to their opinions. For an individual with a disability, equality is extremely important.

People with a disability bring different skills, a unique perspective, passion, positivity and goodwill to an organisation. They know what's it is like to struggle and are willing to work hard but may need some additional support.

Employers should understand that it may take a bit longer for the individual to adjust but should always focus on the ability rather than the disability. Like any hire, planning is key to success – having the right facilities, a buddy system, clear explanation of the job and timely introductions is crucial.

I am aware that when we (people with disabilities) dream big and others dream big for us (providing real opportunities), then we can achieve our full potential. I urge every employer to focus on the ability and not the disability.

Diversity and Inclusion

Diverse talent is essential to creating effective solutions and processes for any business. At Cpl our diversity pillars are Multicultural, Disability, LGBT, Generations, Working Parents & Carers and Gender Balance. If you would like advice on creating a more diverse and inclusive workplace, please get in touch.

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