

Tips for Interacting Effectively with People with Mobility Impairments

There are many types of injuries, diseases, and conditions that can cause mobility impairments that affect an individual's ability to find and keep a job. Some disabilities are acquired at birth. Others stem from accidents or illnesses later in life. These disabilities might affect basic mobility, coordination and balance, strength and endurance, and other aspects of body function.

Many people who have mobility impairments use adaptive equipment of one kind or another. Mobility aids such as canes, crutches, walkers, and wheelchairs are especially common. Prosthetic devices (such as artificial arms or legs), and body braces might also be used. Some people with mobility impairments use service animals to assist them with carrying or retrieving items and opening doors in order to achieve greater independence.

Consider the following suggestions when interacting with individuals who have mobility impairments:

- When scheduling a job interview or meeting, make sure the location is accessible and those potential barriers such as a step at the threshold or parking will not preclude access.
- Do not touch someone's wheelchair. When talking to a person in a wheelchair sit down to be at eye level whenever possible.
- Do not hold the person's wheelchair or assume the individual wants to be pushed; always ask first. A wheelchair should be considered part of the person's personal space.
- Offer assistance but do not insist. If the person needs help, he or she will accept the offer and explain exactly what will be helpful.
- For prolonged conversations with someone who uses a wheelchair, sit down so as to be at the eye level of the wheelchair user.
- Do not be surprised if the person transfers from a wheelchair to a piece of furniture or gets out of the wheelchair to move about. Not all wheelchair users have paralysis; many can walk with or without the aid of canes, braces, or crutches.
- Enable those who use crutches, canes or wheelchairs to keep them within reach.
- If a person uses crutches, a walker, or some other assistive equipment, offer assistance with coats, bags, or other belongings.
- Ensure extra maneuvering space and non-slip floor coverings for the safety of a person who uses crutches or a walker.
- Do not be sensitive about using words like "walking" or "running." People who use wheelchairs often use the same words.
- Consider offering a flexible schedule to allow the person to attend medical appointments and therapy sessions and to deal with medication issues, insomnia, fatigue, or other conditions that often accompany mobility impairments.