

## **Tips for Interacting with People with Disabilities**

Appropriate etiquette when interacting with people with disabilities is based primarily on respect and courtesy. Below are a few tips to help you communicate effectively.

- When speaking with a person with a disability, talk directly to the person, not his or her companion. This applies whether the person has a mobility impairment, a speech impairment, a cognitive impairment, is blind, or is deaf and uses an interpreter.
- Extend common courtesies to people with disabilities. Extend your hand to shake hands or hand over business cards. If the individual cannot shake your hand or grasp the card, he or she will tell you, and direct where you may place the card.
- If the person has a speech impairment and you are having difficulty understanding what he or she is saying, ask the individual to repeat, rather than pretending to understand. Listen carefully, and repeat back what you think you heard to ensure effective communication.
- If you believe that an individual with a disability needs assistance, go ahead and offer the assistance – but wait for your offer to be accepted before you try to help.
- If you are interviewing a job candidate with a disability, listen to what the individual has to offer. Do not make assumptions about what that person can or cannot do.
- If you are speaking to a person who is blind, be sure to identify yourself at the beginning of the conversation and announce when you are leaving. Don't be afraid to use common expressions that refer to sight, such as "See you later."
- If you wish to get the attention of a person who is deaf, tap the person gently on the shoulder or arm. Look directly at the person, and speak clearly in a normal tone of voice. Keep your hands away from your face, and use short, simple sentences. If the person uses a sign language interpreter, speak directly to the person, not to the interpreter.
- If you encounter an individual with a service animal, such as a dog, please do not touch or distract the animal. Service animals are working, and it breaks their training to interact with others when they are on duty. When the animal is not working, some owners may allow interaction.
- If you are having a conversation with a person who uses a wheelchair, if at all possible put yourself at the person's eye level. Never lean on or touch a person's wheelchair or

any other assistive device. A person's assistive device is part of the person's personal space, and it is jarring or disturbing for anyone to have his or personal space invaded.

- If you are speaking with an individual with a cognitive disability, you may need to repeat or rephrase what you say. If you are giving instructions on how to perform a task, you may also need to give the instructions in writing.

Relax. Whether conducting an interview or day-to-day workplace communications, focus on the subject matter and not on disability related issues. Treat the individual with the same respect and courtesy that you extend to all job candidates and employees. Any initial concerns will quickly disappear as you focus on effective communications.

## References

"Guidelines for Reporting and Writing About People with Disabilities," produced by the Media Project, Research and Training Center on Independent Living, University of Kansas.

"Ten Commandments of Etiquette for Communicating with People with Disabilities," October 1995, National Center for Access Unlimited, Chicago, IL.

*The above list of resources is not meant to be exhaustive. Any listing of non-governmental resources in this fact sheet should not be construed as an endorsement of the entities, their services or products by the Office of Disability Employment Policy or the U.S. Department of Labor.*