Someone tells you they're disabled. What now?

Four things to keep from session one. For managers, HR teams and anyone about to have the conversation from the other side.

1. The first five minutes. Four things to say, in order.
2. Hand this to your manager. A card for the person doing the telling.
3. What to write down, in one line. The decision record, with an example.
4. Offer it before anyone asks. Five things to make standard, three to start on Monday.

Hugh O'Keeffe, Disability, Access and Inclusion Consultant.
hughokeeffe.com. Session one ran on 15 October 2026. Session two, on what to do when someone asks for a change at work, is on 12 November.



Someone tells you they're disabled. What now?

Most people get this wrong by saying too much, or by saying nothing. Four things, in order, for the first five minutes.

1 **Thank them.**
It took something to say it. "Thanks for telling me" is the whole first line. Skip "I'm so sorry" and "my cousin has that".

2 **Ask about the barrier and leave the diagnosis alone.**
"What would make this work better for you?" You don't need a label, a letter or a diagnosis to start.

3 **Agree who needs to know.**
Ask who they want told, and who they don't. Then keep to it. This is the bit people remember you by.

4 **Say what happens next, and when.**
Even if the answer is "I'll find out by Friday". A date beats a promise.

Then, the same week

- Mention Access to Work. It can pay for equipment, support and travel, and the person applies. A manager who mentions it early makes the difference.
- Write down what was agreed, in one line, the same day. The decision record on resource three.
- Start the easy things now. Occupational health is a way to get advice, not a gate.

Things to avoid

- Asking for evidence before you'll discuss anything.
- Telling anyone who doesn't need to know.
- Treating this as the first time it has ever happened.
- Going quiet for a fortnight while you work out what you're allowed to do.

> **The rule of thumb.** You can ask what someone needs in order to do the job. What you can't do is make a diagnosis the price of getting it.

From The Small Print, a free monthly session for managers and HR on what to do when disability comes up at work. Hugh O'Keeffe, Disability, Access and Inclusion Consultant. hughokeeffe.com. I'm not a lawyer and this isn't legal advice. Use it as a way in, and get advice on anything already in dispute.

✱ THE SMALL PRINT, RESOURCE TWO

Hand this to your manager

A card for the person doing the telling. Give it to your manager before the conversation, or send it with the message. It says what helps, so neither of you has to guess.

CUT OR FORWARD FROM HERE

✱ BEFORE WE TALK

I'm about to tell you something about my health or a disability.

You don't need to know the right words, and you don't need to fix anything today. These four things help most.

1 **Thank me.**
That's the whole first line. It took something to say it.

2 **Ask what gets in the way, and leave the diagnosis to me.**
"What would make this work better for you?" is the right question. I'll share what's useful.

3 **Agree with me who else needs to know.**
Then keep to it.

4 **Tell me what happens next, and when.**
"I'll find out by Friday" is fine. A date beats a promise.

This card comes from The Small Print, a free monthly session for managers and HR on what to do when disability comes up at work. There's more for managers at hughokeeffe.com. Hugh O'Keeffe, Disability, Access and Inclusion Consultant. Not legal advice.

What to write down, in one line

A decision you can explain afterwards. Fill it in on the day, in the person's own words where you can. Two minutes.

WHAT YOU KNEW AT THE TIME

WHAT THE PERSON ASKED FOR, IN THEIR WORDS

WHAT YOU OFFERED

WHAT WAS REFUSED, AND BY WHOM

WHAT YOU DID INSTEAD

THE DATE, AND WHO ELSE KNOWS

An example, filled in

Details changed. The situation came in with a registration for session one.

WHAT YOU KNEW AT THE TIME
Candidate told us on Tuesday they have a developmental language disorder. Interview is Monday.

WHAT THE PERSON ASKED FOR
"Could I have the questions three days before, rather than the day before?"

WHAT YOU OFFERED
Questions on Thursday, three days ahead, as asked.

WHAT WAS REFUSED, AND BY WHOM
Nothing refused. The panel chair raised fairness to other candidates.

WHAT YOU DID INSTEAD
Offered all candidates the questions on Thursday, so the adjustment became the standard. Panel agreed to score on examples and follow-ups, not recall.

THE DATE, AND WHO ELSE KNOWS
Tue 14 Oct. Panel chair and HR adviser. Candidate told the same day.

> **Why one line.** Nobody reads a long record, and nobody writes one on a busy day. Six short answers, written the same day, are what you'd want in front of you if the decision is questioned a year later.

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Offer it before anyone asks

Most people never ask. They work around it quietly, or they stop turning up. Five things to make standard, and three to start on Monday.

Make these standard, for everyone

- Captions on by default, in every meeting
- The agenda and the materials sent in advance
- Interview questions offered ahead of time, to every candidate
- The quiet room, the written follow-up and the flexible start in the handbook, not on request
- Access to Work mentioned to every new starter in week one, before they need it

Watch for these

- Adjustments available only on request
- Every request routed through one person who is often away
- Asking someone to justify the need before you'll discuss it
- Treating each request as the first time it has ever happened
- Waiting for a diagnosis before you change anything

Pick one to start on Monday. One, not three.

1 **Find where your policy says "ask", and then stops.**
Whoever owns the policy. An afternoon. The gap is usually what happens when the first answer is no.

2 **Pick one thing you do on request, and make it standard.**
Whoever runs the meeting, the rota or the service. This week.

3 **Write your next access decision down, in one line.**
You, on the day you make it. Two minutes. Resource three has the six boxes.

What you can ask, and what you can't

OFTEN SAID	ACTUALLY
I'm not allowed to ask anything about someone's disability.	You can ask what someone needs in order to do the job. What you can't do is make a diagnosis the price of getting it.
If they haven't asked, they must be fine.	Silence isn't consent. The duty can start when you could reasonably have known.
I need evidence before I can do anything.	Occupational health is a way to get advice, not a gate. Start the easy things now.

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