

Face Blindness & Employment



FACE BLIND UK
Living with Prosopagnosia

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Prosopagnosia, commonly known as face blindness, is a neurological disorder that affects a person's ability to recognise familiar faces – acquaintances, colleagues, friends, well known people and even close family.



Most people don't realise that their difficulties recognising others are due to a specific condition until later life, so it's not something they will have considered when choosing a job or career. This means that people may be in jobs where they struggle with some aspects of their role on a daily basis without understanding the reason for their difficulties.

The situation is made more difficult by the fact that employers are unlikely to be aware of face blindness, and so may have difficulty in understanding its impact and finding effective ways to support such employees in their work.

If face blind people blank colleagues or are slow to engage with others, they can be seen as rude or unsociable, but to greet someone or join a discussion you first need to establish who you're speaking to. With face blindness this takes far more time than automatic recognition and by then the moment may have passed or the conversation moved on.

About face blindness

It is estimated that face blindness affects over 2% of the population. It can be acquired through brain injury or illness, but is more usually 'developmental' (i.e. present from birth). People are affected to different degrees, and most people with developmental prosopagnosia are only diagnosed in later life, having developed strategies which mask their difficulties.

Face blind people tend to use a mix of identifiers other than faces, such as voice, mannerisms, clothing or hairstyle. Using these, in combination with the context and clues within a conversation can be very effective, but it requires conscious effort (and a good memory) and is quite unlike the automatic recognition that others rely on without thinking.

The strategies people use to cope with social situations may range from greeting everyone to avoiding eye contact. However, many people with face blindness experience anxiety in social and work situations; fast moving situations, may be particularly difficult. It's not easy living in a world full of strangers.

Face blind people may be seen as shy, disengaged or distracted, while in fact they may be busy thinking around the situation. They may actually be very attentive and observant - of everything except faces!

What Can Help

Practical Help – Smaller teams or groups of people will usually be easier for someone with face blindness. An entry-phone system, or appointments diary can identify who's arriving. At larger meetings clear name badges can help, along with a list of attendees and the practice of introducing people in a discussion group.



If colleagues are aware of the difficulties, then they can begin to gain an understanding of the situation rather than feeling slighted if their colleague does not greet them or recognise them, particularly out of context. Colleagues may also be happy to offer help in everyday situations or at meetings.

Coping Strategies - Individuals with prosopagnosia are likely to be best placed to tell employers what is most helpful for them. They are likely to have developed their own strategies for identifying others, and may be quite adept at managing social and work situations.

Conversely, some people with face blindness may have avoided social contact, and may need to be supported in things that come naturally to others, such as greeting people and maintaining good eye contact.

Rights, Advice and Information

Face blindness is a neurological condition which has been the subject of research, initially in the USA, and in past two decades also in the UK. Information about prosopagnosia is gradually being incorporated into training programmes for professionals, and the media are helping to raise public awareness.

Employers have a duty to make reasonable adjustments to the workplace and offer support to individuals with impairments which have a substantial and long-term effect on an individual's daily life. While this reflects the definition of disability used by the 2010 Equality Act, it has yet to be established through case law for face blindness.

As managers and HR staff become more aware of face blindness, they can identify those who may be affected by the condition and start to work together with employees to find positive solutions to some of the challenges that face blindness may present for a particular job or role.

For more information on prosopagnosia please email info@faceblind.org.uk

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