

Recruitment & Stammering

Stammering affects fluency of speech, not dexterity with words. There is no link between stammering and intellectual capacity or intelligence. Winston Churchill, Alan Turing, Margaret Drabble, Charles Darwin, Arnold Bennett, Isaac Newton, Elvis Presley all stammered. Common work and recruitment processes, such as initial telephone interviews, can present barriers to those who stammer so be careful not to put off great employees. Potential employers can also unconsciously make entirely wrong judgements about people who stammer and their ability to communicate.

1. What roles are best for people who stammer?

People who stammer hold down jobs in air traffic control, teaching, acting, general practice, customer services and communications. The experience of stammering can give people valuable strengths such as resilience, insight, empathy, and not uncommonly, a huge vocabulary and a deftness with words. The experience of swapping words with others that can be easier to pronounce has led many who stammer to develop an awesome vocabulary. There's a reason why many of our greatest writers and poets stammer.

2. What communication skills do people who stammer have?

Many job roles simply ask for excellent communication skills. This blanket requirement may deter great candidates from applying. Good communication skills are not the same as speech fluency. Communication isn't the ability to produce words, but to craft them. To find the right words at the right time. To be genuine, reachable. Communication is also about reading people, listening, body language, and the tone and volume of your voice. Communication is about building relationships and trust. It is the ability to engage with and influence, lead, analyse and present. To write well, and nowadays, use social media, find the right visuals, summarise and re-present. Be specific in your ask about your communication requirements.

**S
T
A
M
M
E
R
I
N
G
A**

3. How to talk about stammering

- If someone is struggling with stammering ask if there's anything they'd like you to do to make things easier. Give people the chance to tell you what might help – more time, a quiet room, some space maybe.
- Stammering can be a sensitive topic so don't force the issue.
- A stammer may be unnoticeable, so if someone seems to lack confidence when speaking consider whether there may be a communication issue.

4. Shortlisting and designing assessments

- People who stammer, regardless of how capable they are, may find job interviews a more difficult prospect than they are for people in general, which can make the stammer more severe. HR might talk to the panel and agree a more informal arrangement.
- Give people who stammer longer time to talk, offer role play scenarios or give greater consideration to their written as well as spoken information.
- If you are interviewing someone who stammers, think through possible barriers – e.g. entry-phones and are reception staff prepared for candidates who stammer?
- Consider offering an informal chat for all candidates before the interview itself.

5. In the interview

- Be patient, listen actively and maintain natural eye contact. Wait for the person to finish. Don't try to finish their sentences unless asked to do so.
- Resist the temptation to offer advice – e.g. "take a deep breath".
- Don't equate hesitant speech with uncertainty, confusion or lack of intelligence.
- Pausing/using phrases like "you know" or "sort of" may be strategies to avoid stammering.
- People who stammer often have most difficulty at the beginning of sentences.

6. Telephone interviews and assessments

- Many people who stammer find using the phone hard, especially in front of others. They might find it easier if they can prepare beforehand and take calls somewhere private.
- Don't hang up if you hear a few moments' silence.
- Avoid negative impressions of a person based on the way they sound on the phone.

- Consider offering a face-to-face interview instead of a phone interview as a reasonable adjustment.

7. Meetings and group assessments

- People who stammer often struggle in situations where a specific response is needed – e.g. saying one's name, address or phone number or having to say particular words.
- This can be particularly difficult in introductions in group meetings. People who stammer will often try to avoid this for fear of stammering on their own name.
- If you chair a group session, ask the person who stammers beforehand what would be helpful.
- Be aware of anyone who may give you a non-verbal cue that they would like to speak. This means thinking carefully about the best layout so everyone can see everyone else.

8. Unconscious Bias

- It can be very stressful to hear someone stammering when you aren't used to it.
- Unconscious bias affects us all. It's easy to read a stammer as hesitation, nervousness, evasion or even lying. Fight against that assumption - the person is simply struggling to get the words out.
- Some people may avoid saying a particular word because they fear they'll stammer on it and instead talk around it.
- People who stammer may feel more negative about the effect of their speech on others than is actually the case. Helping a person to realise this may open up a positive dialogue on stammering.

9. Creating best practice policies

- People who stammer tell us that what affects them most at work is a positive attitude from line managers and recruiters.
- It is a good idea to create/review your diversity and equality policies so that they take into account the needs of people who stammer (ask us if you want help with this).
- Ask yourself whether your policies and reality match up e.g. do you offer face-to-face rather than telephone interviews?

10. Understanding the legal requirements

- Stammering can meet the legal definition of disability under the Equality Act if the stammer has a substantial and long-term negative impact on the ability to do normal daily activities.
- However some people who stammer do not consider themselves disabled, so you may want to offer adjustments without reference to stammering as a disability.

- Offering adjustments may in itself make a person who stammers feel more relaxed; so more time offered may ultimately mean less time is actually needed.

For more information go to www.stamma.org

STAMMA