

Stuttering affects the speech of one out of every 100 adults. Therefore, employers are likely to encounter people who stutter within their workforce or among job applicants. People who stutter can make extremely valuable contributions to the workplace. Unfortunately, skills and talents are sometimes overlooked or under-utilized because of misconceptions and negative stereotyping about stuttering.

WHAT IS STUTTERING?

Stuttering is a speech disorder in which the forward flow of speech is involuntarily disrupted. Stuttering generally involves repetitions or prolongations of sounds and syllables, or hesitations or blocks in making voiced sounds. It also may be accompanied by secondary behaviors, such as closing the eyes or arm movements that are intended to avoid, postpone, or hide the blocks. A person who stutters has no problem in finding the words to say, but rather, in physically saying them.

HOW COMMON IS STUTTERING?

It has been estimated that about one percent of the general population stutters. This would amount to almost three million people in the United States alone. Stuttering is about three or four times more common in males than females.

WHAT CAUSES STUTTERING?

The precise causes of stuttering are still unknown, but most researchers now consider stuttering to be neurologically and genetically based. Although the interference with speech is sometimes triggered by emotional or environmental factors, stuttering is basically neurological and physiological – not psychological – in nature. Intelligence and emotional stability are not affected.

The most common type of stuttering (sometimes called developmental stuttering) usually develops in childhood, most often between ages two and eight (although in rare cases it may begin much later). Roughly 4 to 5 percent of people experience stuttering at some time during their childhood. While the majority of people stop stuttering naturally, stuttering may continue to be a chronic, persistent problem into adolescence and adulthood.

A relatively rare kind of stuttering (sometimes called acquired or neurogenic stuttering) may occur at any age following certain kinds of brain injuries or other trauma.



This brochure is intended to provide information about stuttering for business owners, managers, human resource professionals, supervisors, recruiters, and interviewers. It will address frequently asked questions to clear up some common misunderstandings about stuttering.

Thanks to William Parry, Rachel Resk, and Pamela Mertz for their input on this brochure.



The National Stuttering Association is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization. Since 1977, we have dedicated ourselves to bringing hope and empowerment to children and adults who stutter, their families, and professionals through support, education, advocacy and research.

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NATIONAL STUTTERING ASSOCIATION**

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STUTTERING, WHAT EMPLOYERS SHOULD KNOW

STUTTERING IS VARIABLE

Stuttering severity varies widely among individuals. It may also vary in the same individual from day to day depending on the speaking situation. Saying one's name and speaking to authority figures may be particularly difficult. For some individuals, fatigue, stress, and time pressure can increase their stuttering. When stutterers feel compelled to hide their stuttering, it generally becomes worse.

Patterns of stuttering behavior also vary. Some individuals try to avoid stuttering by pausing before words, substituting words, and interjecting phrases such as "you know," "well actually," "um," etc., whenever they anticipate a block. As a result, the person may create the false impression of being hesitant, uncertain, confused or nervous.

A job interview may be the single most difficult speaking situation a stutterer will encounter. Stuttering could be at its worst. Therefore, the degree of stuttering at the interview should not be used to predict how the person will actually speak on the job.

CAN STUTTERING BE CURED?

Despite scientific research breakthroughs in the field of stuttering, there is still no reliable "cure" for stuttering. Many individuals benefit from various forms of speech therapy and from support groups like the National Stuttering Association.

However, it is unrealistic to expect that any treatment will completely eliminate stuttering. At present, there is no therapy, device, or medication that is effective all the time or for all people who stutter. Methods that appear to benefit some individuals may not work for others, and relapses are common. Managing stuttering is often a life time process that begins with acceptance of one's stuttering and which requires patience and understanding by the individual and listeners.

COMMON MISCONCEPTIONS

Employers often overlook the true potential of individuals who stutter because of negative stereotypes. These stereotypes include the widely held misconception that stutterers are nervous, shy, quiet, self-conscious, withdrawn, tense, anxious, fearful and guarded. In fact, stuttering is not caused by nervousness or emotional disturbance. Research shows people who stutter to be as emotionally stable as the general population. Also, stuttering does not indicate any lack of intelligence or competence.

STUTTERING & SUCCESS

People who stutter have the same drives and ambitions as their more fluent colleagues. People who stutter have distinguished themselves in all walks of life - including business, law, medicine, science, education, entertainment, and politics. Therefore, employers should welcome the opportunity to hire people who stutter, as well as offering them leadership roles and paths for promotion, consistent with their knowledge, skills and abilities.

STUTTERING & COMMUNICATION

Many stutterers perform very effectively in jobs requiring them to interact with the public on a daily basis. Most persons who stutter are capable of adequate - and often excellent - oral communication, regardless of their disfluency.

Good communication involves more than just fluency. It includes good listening skills, the ability to empathize with people, being thoughtful and diplomatic, and having something valuable to say. A person who stutters may have these qualities, including valuable "people skills" gained through past work and life experiences.

Disqualifying potential employees because of their stutter will deprive employers of the valuable skills that these individuals can contribute to the workplace.

The greatest obstacle to communication comes when an individual feels compelled to hide his or her stuttering out of fear of reprisal. For employers to demand fluency as the price of one's job only creates a vicious spiral of stress and anxiety that tends to make stuttering worse. Many people who stutter choose to advertise that they stutter, so it is not "the elephant in the room."

WE STUTTER @ WORK

The NSA is driven to improve the employment opportunities of people who stutter. Our We Stutter @ Work initiative seeks to eliminate the many workplace stigmas to improve employment outcomes for people who stutter. Through a series of programs, the NSA is informing, inspiring and equipping people who stutter to improve their workplace opportunities.

Additionally, the NSA is educating employers about stuttering and encouraging companies to not only hire people who stutter, but also offer them leadership roles and paths for promotion, consistent with their knowledge, skills and abilities.

REASONABLE ACCOMMODATIONS

When stuttering may actually prevent an employee from performing some speaking tasks, there are ways in which the employer can make a "reasonable accommodation" that would allow the employee to perform the essential functions of the job in question.

For example, front office staff may be expected to take turns answering the phone when the receptionist is at lunch. A reasonable accommodation may be to relieve the person who stutters of this non-essential task, and instead have the person help with another task that doesn't require as much speaking.

LISTENING TO A PWS

Stuttering is nothing to be embarrassed about for the person who stutters (PWS) or the listener. The following are some tips that will make it easier for both of you:

- Listen attentively and wait for the person to finish. Don't try to fill in words or complete sentences.
- Focus on what the person is saying, not how they are saying it.
- Speak normally in a relaxed manner.
- Maintain natural eye contact, even when the person is stuttering.

PWS MAKE GOOD EMPLOYEES

People who stutter want to excel at their work and to develop their skills and potential just like anyone else. They appreciate employers who give them opportunities rather than judging them on the basis of fluency. Some of the benefits brought to the workplace by people who stutter may include:

- Patience and perseverance, gained from dealing with their stuttering
- Greater sensitivity to the needs of other people
- Good listening skills
- Appreciation of the value of preparation
- Better understanding of communication issues in the workplace
- Enhancement of your organization's image as one that promotes diversity and inclusion

By refraining from making assumptions about an individual's qualifications based on stuttering, both the employer and employee can achieve a productive and mutually beneficial relationship.