eLearning course: Disability Equality Training for Public Service Staff

Dublin: National Disability Authority, 2011. Cost: Free.
http://elearning.nda.ie/

Disability Equality Training for Public Service Staff is an eLearning course made available by the National Disability Authority (NDA), for staff working in the public service in Ireland.

Eight Library staff at the National University of Ireland Maynooth (NUIM) piloted the course on behalf of the Staff Development Office at NUIM. The course is web based, self-directed and available free of charge. It is accessible anywhere, anytime. Interested organisations should contact the National Disability Authority via their organisations' Access Office or Human Resources Office.

The first part of the course provides background information about disability, the legal issues around disability and introduces the concept of 'reasonable accommodation'. The second part follows the story of a young man who wants to renew his passport. It shows how the Passport Office and its staff ensure that he can do this. Perspectives and opinions from people with disabilities on their experiences of using service providers are included. The perspective of the staff providing services to people with a disability is also illustrated.

In addition to the online version, there is a hard-copy version of the course. There is also an accompanying instruction booklet which explains what the course is about and how to use it. The instructions are comprehensive and it is important and helpful to learners to read them thoroughly in advance of commencing the course.

Course content is divided into modules and sub-modules. These are accessed using the menu button on the screen. Subtitles and transcripts are available throughout the course. Learners may stop at any point and recommence from that point when they next login.

Upon completion of each section, the learner is assessed by using a question based on the material covered in the previous module. To get full marks the learner selects as many of the options as are correct. A certificate of completion is available at the end of the course.

Using the menu, learners can navigate between modules by selecting the module/sub-modules they wish to access. This is useful if a learner wishes to repeat a particular module and or view it out of sequence. The course knows where the learner finished, so they can start from that point when they return. The menu button allows the learner to access any section directly.

Within modules, next and back buttons are provided to navigate from page to page and to move through the course from module to module. Within each module, concepts and scenarios are illustrated using video and images. Each page has a tab for preferences, glossary and help which can be accessed at any point during the course.

Audio, video, text and images are used throughout. The learner has the option to view videos online or to download them. Transcripts and subtitles are available for every video. At the bottom of each page, there is a progress bar. All of these options for navigation are well explained in the introduction and help for the course. While initially it is a little confusing for the learner, as they become familiar with the navigation features, the course is clear and easy to navigate with the progress bar at the bottom of each page proving very useful in keeping track of how far they have advanced through the course.

According to the NDA, it has designed the course with accessibility for people with disabilities in mind. Among the features it highlights are clear, simple text, no jargon, full keyboard accessibility, navigation with or without a mouse; subtitles on videos and transcripts; colour contrast between the text and the background. This effort to make the course as accessible as possible has been worthwhile as the course is easy to view and provides alternatives for engaging with the content. All of these features will benefit all learners with or without disabilities. Overall the course offers a variety of methods for learning.

Those who undertake this course will learn useful and practical information about engaging with a person with a disability. This will be helpful in work situations and with family or friends. The course encourages participants to think about the meaning of disability and the many forms it takes. It clearly defines the meaning of disability as outlined in the relevant legislation. Key facts on the scale and types of disability found in Ireland are also included.

There is a wealth of practical and useful information. Four of the most useful and interesting parts of the course are the modules which look at the concept of 'reasonable accommodation', 'types of disability', 'barriers' and 'the four principles'.

According to the NDA, the *Equal Status Act*, 2000 describes 'reasonable accommodation' for customers with disabilities. It says that providers of goods and services must accommodate the needs of people with disabilities through:

> "making reasonable changes in what they do and how they do it where it would be very difficult or impossible for people with disabilities to obtain those goods or services without these changes unless those changes cost more than a nominal cost."

One of the scenarios illustrating reasonable accommodation is set in a library. It features Brian who is doing some research at his local library. "Brian uses crutches, but some of the archive materials are held on an upper level, without a lift. He spoke to the librarian, who arranged for the archive materials to be moved to the ground floor reference room for a few days. Brian can then finish his research with ease."

In the module on 'What is disability?' the learner discovers that disability can come in different forms, such as physical disabilities, sensory disabilities (sight and hearing), intel-lectual disabilities, and mental health diffi-culties. This is valuable in encouraging learners to think of disability as more than they can observe by looking at someone and to realise that a person's disability may not be obvious.

Understanding the concept of 'reasonable accommodation' and the different forms of disability are two of the key things which learners will take away from completing this course. It will also help them to understand their responsibilities and the implica-tions for service provision within their organisation.

In the context of the case study set in the Passport Office, a discussion takes place between Kerry (supervisor) and Claire (customer service) about the barriers, i.e. "anything that stops people getting what they need". This discussion highlights that barriers are not just physical. Barriers are not always obvious: they can be attitudinal and unintended. The presentation of this discussion using video and various scenarios provides the learner, not just with background information, but real life scenarios where barriers are encountered by customers and have to be recognised and overcome to provide the customer with the best possible service.

The four principles are general principles which, if implemented, can help to deliver good customer service. They are 'take your time', 'be flexible', don't assume', 'and 'just ask'

Examples of how Claire applies these principles are illustrated using a video demonstrating a scenario. Images from the video are used to discuss the scenarios from the point of view of the staff member, the supervisor and the customer. Other useful information includes the importance of health and safety, the role of the access officer in organisations and how they can help.

The course includes ten assessment questions and there is assessment at the end of each module. This helps to reinforce the learning from each module. It also provides the learner with the opportunity to revisit the module if they are having difficulty completing the assessment successfully.

If the learner answers a question incorrectly they can select 'Retry' and then answer the question again. After five incorrect attempts, it is possible to reveal the correct answer. At the end of the course a summary of all questions answered correctly is given. A score of eight out of ten is required to pass the assessment. During the course pilot in Maynooth, the instructions for the assessments did not make it clear that, if there was more than one correct answer to a question, the user must select all correct answers. This issue has been resolved based on feedback to the NDA.

One of the strengths of the course is that as various principles and concepts are presented, the learner is given a real life example of what they mean or how they might be applied.

For example, videos of specific ways to help customers and colleagues with physical disabilities, hearing impairments, visual impairment, memory and concentration disabilities are included.

The discussion between Kerry and Claire illustrates the impor-tance of support for staff and the need for opportunities to discuss issues as they arise to reassure and support staff as they learn and develop their skills and knowledge. The course illus-trates the ideal and this may not always be feasible or available in workplaces.

Much of the guidance will improve customer service for all. The course emphasises that people with disabilities are individuals, each with their own unique needs and abilities. There is no single 'right way' to work with each person with a disability. Those of us providing services need to engage with each indi-vidual and use common sense to find the best way forward. Even for those not dealing directly with customers the course offers good advice for engaging with employees, colleagues, customers and family.

The course provides a lot of information and this may prove to be an issue with a self-directed course. The course would be best introduced in the context of customer service training, with access to mentoring and support while allowing the learner to progress through the course. It is possible to complete the course in one sitting but this is not the best use of the course. Guidance from the NDA on the pace at which the course should be completed would be helpful in making the optimum use of the course. It would certainly be worth the learner's time to consider repeating the course at some point, as a refresher as the course provides so much information.

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