

# Stuttering . . .

## What Employers Should Know

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. These individuals can make extremely valuable contributions to an employer's business. Unfortunately, their skills and talents are sometimes overlooked or under-utilized because of misconceptions and negative stereotyping about stuttering. For an individual to be judged solely on the basis of fluency is not only unfair to the person who stutters - it can be a real loss to the employer.

This booklet is intended to provide information about stuttering for business owners, managers, human resource professionals, supervisors, recruiters, and interviewers. It will attempt to answer frequent questions and concerns and to clear up some common misunderstandings.

### What is stuttering?

**Stuttering** is a speech disorder in which the forward flow of speech is involuntarily disrupted. Stuttering generally involves forceful closures of the mouth or larynx (voice box), repetitions or prolongations of sounds and syllables, or hesitations or delays in making voiced sounds. It also may be accompanied by various behaviors 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 stutters 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 **a neurological condition that interferes with the production of speech**. In some people, the tendency to stutter may be inherited. Although the interference with speech is sometimes triggered by emotional or situational factors, stuttering is basically neurological and physiological – *not psychological* - in nature. **In all other respects, persons who stutter are perfectly normal.**

The most common type of stuttering (sometimes called **developmental stuttering**) usually develops of its own accord in childhood, most often between ages two and eight (although in rare cases it may begin much later). Roughly 4 to 5 per cent of people experience stuttering at some time during their childhood. While the majority become fluent by the time they reach adulthood, stuttering may continue to be a chronic, persistent problem for other stutters.

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

## **Stuttering is variable.**

The severity of stuttering varies widely among individuals. It may also vary in the same individual from day to day and 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 tendency to stutter. 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, or confused.

A **job interview** may be the single most difficult speaking situation a stutterer will ever encounter. Stuttering is likely to 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 breakthroughs in our knowledge about stuttering, there is still no reliable "cure" for the person who stutters. Many individuals benefit from various forms of speech therapy and from support groups like the National Stuttering Association. Meanwhile, researchers are experimenting with electronic devices, pharmaceuticals, and other still-unproven techniques.

However, it is unrealistic to expect that any treatment will make stuttering completely disappear. At present, there is no therapy, device, or drug 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. Controlling stuttering is a long-term project that begins with acceptance of one's stuttering and which requires considerable patience and understanding.

## **Common misconceptions.**

Employers often overlook the true potential of individuals who stutter because of **negative stereotypes** about stuttering. These stereotypes include the widely held misconception that stutterers are nervous, shy, quiet, self-conscious, withdrawn, tense, anxious, fearful, reticent, and guarded. Studies indicate that this mistake is due to people's tendency to equate stuttering with their *own* moments of disfluency - which may have been prompted by nervousness, fear, uncertainty, or emotional conflict. They incorrectly assume that the stutterer is experiencing similar feelings - only more so. In actual fact:

- **Stuttering is *not* caused by nervousness or emotional disturbance.** Research shows people who stutter to be as emotionally stable as the general population.
- **Stuttering does *not* indicate any lack of intelligence or competence.** People who stutter are just as intelligent and competent as non-stutterers.

## **Stuttering needn't hold a person back.**

Throughout history, many notable people have stuttered. These include Moses, Aristotle, Virgil, Sir Isaac Newton, Joseph Priestley, Charles Darwin, Lewis Carroll, Charles Lamb, Clara Barton, King George VI of England, and many others.

People who stutter have the same drives and ambitions as their more fluent colleagues. Given a chance, **people who stutter have distinguished themselves in all walks of life - including business, law, medicine, science, literature, 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 true abilities.

The following are just a few well-known examples of successful people who stutter or stuttered:

- **Businessmen:** Walter H. Annenberg (publisher, broadcaster, and diplomat), Henry Luce (founder of *Time* magazine and *Sports Illustrated*), and John F. Welch, Jr. (former Chairman of General Electric).
- **Political leaders:** Former British Prime Minister Sir Winston Churchill, former New Jersey governor Thomas Kean, and Virginia congressman Frank Wolf.
- **Television personalities:** Reporter John Stossel, former television host Garry Moore and Jack Paar.
- **Actors:** James Earl Jones (current spokesman for Verizon), Bruce Willis, Sam Neill, Austin Pendleton, Anthony Quinn, Eric Roberts, Harvey Keitel, Peggy Lipton, and Rowan Atkinson ("Mr. Bean").
- **Writers:** W. Somerset Maugham, Robert Heinlein (science fiction), Richard Condon (*The Manchurian Candidate* and *Prizzi's Honor*), and John Updike.

## **Stuttering need not interfere with a person's communication.**

**Many stutterers perform very effectively in jobs requiring them to deal 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 oral communication involves many things that are more important than fluency.** These include good listening skills, the ability to empathize with people, being thoughtful and diplomatic in one's speech, 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.

**A person who stutters should not be automatically rejected simply because a job description requires "excellent oral communication skills."** The employer should consider what kind of "oral communication" the job actually involves. Often this requirement simply indicates that the employee must occasionally answer the telephone or speak to people. Many people who stutter have successfully performed these tasks and much more.

Disqualifying potential employees because of their stutter will deprive employers of the valuable skills that these individuals could have contributed 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.

## Reasonable accommodations.

In those cases in which stuttering will 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, members of a typing pool 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 speaking.

## Listening to a person who stutters.

Stuttering is nothing to be embarrassed about - either for the person who stutters 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 the person's sentences.
- Focus on what the person is saying about his or her experience, abilities, and skills.
- Speak normally in a relaxed manner.
- Maintain natural eye contact, even when the person is stuttering.
- Don't equate hesitant speech with uncertainty.

## People who stutter make good employees.

People who stutter are eager to excel at their work and to develop their skills and potential. They appreciate employers who give them opportunities to do so, 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 for presentations and meetings;
- Better understanding of communication issues in the workplace;
- Enhancement of your organization's image as one that accepts people on merit without regard to their disabilities.

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.

## For More Information

The **National Stuttering Association** is the largest self-help organization in the US. The NSA provides information, advocacy and support for adults and children who stutter, their families, and the professionals who work with them. Go to [http:// www.WeStutter.org](http://www.WeStutter.org) or call the NSA at (800) 937-8888 for more information.

The NSA is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization supporting people who stutter and their families since 1977. Contributions are welcome and tax deductible.

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