# Work assistance: an important element for the participation of blind and partially sighted persons in the labor market

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## Introduction

Blind and partially-sighted persons face many obstacles in participating inthe labour market. Good qualifications, the necessary soft skills, adequate equipment with assistive technology, a working environment that is as accessible as possible, and an employer's awareness of the special needs of people with disabilities are important. However, all this is sometimes not sufficient to find or permanently retain employment. What is needed in some cases is personnel support.

In Germany, therefore, there is a legal entitlement to the covering of costs for a necessary work assistant.

## What is work assistance?

Work assistance is personal assistance in the performance of work.

However, the employees with disabilities must be able to perform the activities covered by the employment contract themselves. The assistance takes over continuous, regular and temporally not only a few minutes daily supportive activities. Examples:

- Reading aloud a text

- Converting text into an accessible format

- Help with the layout of presentations

- Accompaniment on journeys during business trips

- Assistance in making contacts at events

Who can receive work assistance?

Disabled people are entitled to receive assistance. It does not matter whether you are an employee, a civil servant or self-employed.

People who work less than 15 hours per week are not entitled.

It is currently being clarified in court whether people who have already reached the statutory retirement age can also receive work assistance.

How much assistance can one receive?

The number of hours depends on the needs of the individual case. This is determined on an individual basis.

Through representation of interests, we have achieved that all costs incurred are to be borne, i.e. wages, absence due to illness, travel expenses if necessary.

How is assistance provided?

Assistance is provided in the form of cash benefits. With this money you can

- employ an assistant yourself

- commission a service provider to provide assistance or

- hire the employer as a service provider.

## Who pays for the work assistance?

German social policy provisions for people with disabilities or at risk of becoming disabled is codified in Book IX of the Social Code (SGB IX). SGB IX covers a broad range of integration assistance for which different providers are responsible in line with the division of responsibilities in the German system of social services. One of those is Occupational integration assistance. Occupational integration assistance is provided by the Federal Employment Agency and the funds providing basic income support for job seekers, the pension funds and the occupational accident insurance funds.

Severely disabled persons may also receive special assistance and other support under Part 3 of SGB IX by the integration offices. This assistance is financed from the compensatory levy that employers have to pay if they fail to meet their obligation to employ severely disabled persons. (Employers are required to employ severely disabled people in 5 per cent of their jobs. If they do not meet this requirement, they must pay an equalisation charge.)

Occupational integration assistance is required to take in all forms of assistance needed to sustain, enhance, generate or restore the earning capacity of persons with disabilities or persons at risk of becoming disabled while taking account of their abilities. The ultimate aim is to ensure their uninterrupted participation in working life wherever possible.

Possible services also include the financing of work assistance (Article 49 Section 8 Paragraph 3 SGB IX and Article 185 Section 5 SGB IX).

## What are the practical problems in Germany?

A lot has already been achieved. We have a legal right to assistance. We have achieved that the law stipulates that all costs of necessary assistance must be paid, including compensation during vacation, illness or additional travel costs.

However, assistance is not yet available for people who are only in marginal employment.

There are often legal disputes with the Integration Office about the amount of remuneration for assistance. It is not yet recognized everywhere that assistants for blind and visually impaired people need certain qualifications to perform the tasks involved, such as producing accessible documents.

Often, bureaucratic hurdles are high when it comes to making applications and settling accounts. It also often takes too long for applications to be processed.

## Conclusion:

Despite the difficulties that still exist, work assistance is an important component for enabling blind and visually impaired people to find equal opportunity employment in the general labor market.

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