

Returning to Work with Aphasia:

What options and resources are available?

Finding a job for Stroke or Brain Injury Survivors with Aphasia can be a challenging and unique experience. Each person with Aphasia has a different recovery pathway. Some are able to return to work in the same role as before their stroke or brain injury, whereas others may need to find adaptations or return to work with a modified role, or find a new position all together. We spoke with 3 young persons with Aphasia who are at varying stages of returning to work. Each story reveals the array of challenges a person with Aphasia faces as they try to return to or enter the workforce. We will also discuss the laws and resources available that supported them in their journey.

Job modifications and accommodations

Under the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), employers are required to provide reasonable accommodations for persons with a disability. It can be a modification to the job, the environment, or the hiring process. It is important to note that while an employer can adjust marginal functions of the position, they are NOT required to reallocate essential functions as a reasonable accommodation. So, what might a reasonable accommodation look like?

- Ensuring computer software is available for dictation to assist with writing, or text-to-speech to assist with reading
- Have an interviewer write down their questions during the interview to improve comprehension
- Use a video phone to facilitate communication so that you can use gestures or writing on a phone call
- Use of an AAC device

These accommodations can also be recommended by the employee. You can advocate for what helps you best communicate, whether that's written communication, gestures, or other modifications.



John's Story:

John has Aphasia and is working full time with modifications to his previous job. His main role is completing insurance settlements.

Modifications: Prior to his stroke, John handled the entire process of an insurance settlement, which required frequent communication with clients. Given his difficulty communicating with Aphasia, his role was modified for him so that he was able to be more independent. He is now responsible for the paperwork and filing related to the settlement. This small modification has allowed John to continue working and be successful at his job. He continues to meet the same deadlines as his coworkers, and carries a similar workload.

Unexpected Challenges: John discussed the frustration he occasionally feels about returning to a job that he is unable to complete at the same level he once did, despite still having the knowledge to complete the job. Although he has the same knowledge of the job as before, he is now somewhat restricted by his communication difficulties. *"It's weird because I know my stuff... but now I can't even.. like someone is Korean and I know Korean, but I can't...It's really hard."* Prior to his stroke, John spoke multiple languages. Now, when a client speaks one of the languages he knows, he would like to communicate with them in their native language, but is unable to. He said it is most frustrating when he is trying to help train a new employee. He knows the answer to their question, but rather than being able to communicate the often-complicated response, he has to show them, *"I have everything, but I can't talk to people. I can do it."* John has all of the same knowledge and skills he had before his stroke, but it's challenging to communicate HOW to do these things and teach someone else the process due to his Aphasia.

Although John has been able to return to work in a modified position, he still faces the challenge of *knowing* that the role has changed. Aphasia does not affect your intelligence. He can complete the job with the same accuracy, but he has trouble putting his ideas and solutions into words and expressed thoughts.



Small Steps at a Time

Short-term goals are not only important in therapy, but in life. As you consider starting back to work, know that options exist outside of jumping into a full-time job. Volunteering or taking on a part time job can be a stepping stone to a full-time job, and can help aid in your recovery as well. Communicating with others is the best practice to improve your communication. Additionally, volunteering can often be a way to get your foot in the door for a paid position in the future.

Cam's Story:

For many years after his brain injury, Cam's focus was on both therapy and college level courses. Recently, Cam shifted his focus to finding employment. He decided to pick up a part time job this past summer. He works as a deck concierge for boat tours.

Modifications: Cam selected a job that fit his current communication abilities, so his required modifications were minimal. However, he has found ways to ease the communication load during his job. For example, he explained, "*last name is so fast..It's so hard so...can I please the last name on the phone.*" When customers come up to Cam and SAY their last names, Cam asks if they can SHOW their last name on their phone so he can SEE it and make sure he has the correct name. Matching auditory words to written words can be extremely challenging with Aphasia, especially when dealing with last names of people that may not be familiar to you. This small modification allows him to match the last name to his list of passengers more accurately.

Unexpected Challenges: Although Cam has not experienced any unexpected challenges related to communication, he has faced some challenges related to physical disabilities from his brain injury. He explained that often it can be challenging to complete the task one-handed. He explained that his co-workers have been more than accommodating to help him or allow him to take on the daily roles that do not have those same physical requirements, when possible.

Cam encourages others with Aphasia to find a job where they can talk with others and practice their conversation, "It's good to talk ...conversation is good to talk to people, enjoy the world." He highlighted how communicating with the passengers and his co-workers created a social aspect to his job which only furthers his recovery journey.



Exploring Job Possibilities

Finding a job that you feel comfortable applying to may be the biggest roadblock that a person with Aphasia will face. We encourage you to step out of your comfort zone when you're looking for jobs that may be a "good fit." No job will ever be a perfect fit and you should expect that some modifications will need to be made. It's important to have an open mind and explore multiple possibilities and possibly a new career path. To take a piece of John's advice, "Normally I like wood working, ... once you find a "wood working", find that and do it now." Following your passion can lead to a career that you never imagined.

Bryn's Story:

Bryn's journey navigating the workforce with Aphasia is just beginning. Bryn used to work as an ICU nurse, but Aphasia has put a slight bend in her career path. Bryn requires extra time to communicate, which means nursing, which requires quick and efficient communication, would be a hard career path to return to. Bryn is currently focusing on her therapy and recovery but would like to enter the workforce soon. Similar to Cam, Bryn also faces mobility challenges in addition to her Aphasia. When I asked her what career path she might be interested in pursuing she said, *"I have no idea...what would work because I have on the right side, I can walk but I can't pull or anything I can a little bit but ...maybe like something that I don't have to say it fast. I don't know, I'm not sure."*

Expected Challenges: Bryn talked about what challenges she expects to face. She said, "A lot of times people don't know aphasia, so it's hard like I know but I can't say it and they are like wait what?... like they know If you don't have an arm, ok they know that, but they don't know Aphasia."

Aphasia is an invisible disability, which many clients report as a frustration when interacting with strangers. We encourage you to advocate for Aphasia in these moments. Many people do not know what Aphasia is and therefore, a little education can go a long way. Try using a wallet card to show a person what Aphasia is if you have a hard time communicating.



Resources:

The American Stroke Association has compiled and created several wonderful resources for returning to work after a stroke. You can access the entire list here:

<https://www.stroke.org/en/life-after-stroke/recovery/return-to-work>

Their resources include:

- **A decision tree and an employment readiness checklist** to help you think through in the decision making process of returning to work.
- **A goal-setting worksheet:** This will help you think through your goals that you would like to meet in order to return to work (e.g. Driving). Additionally, it can be useful to identify modifications you may need from your employer in the future.
- **Employment Resources:** Provides an extensive list of websites which have searchable databases for people with disabilities looking for employment.
- **State Vocational Rehab Agencies:** They have provided a complete list of each state's vocational Rehabilitation services. Your local vocational rehabilitation office will have additional resources which are specific to your area.
- **Ticket to work:** The Ticket to Work Program's goal is to help you reduce dependence on disability benefits and earn more income than benefits alone can provide. To learn more about the program and to see if you are eligible, download their [Ticket to Work Program PDF](#).

Finally, your Speech Language Pathologist can be another great resource to discuss your strengths and challenges, and assist you with navigating job openings or volunteer options available in your area.

