

How to Accommodate Common Disabilities in the Workplace

Boost productivity and avoid expensive lawsuits by keeping these rules in mind.

By Sammy Sotoa & Kendrick Kleiner

People with disabilities have become an integral part of the workforce. If your organization isn't accommodating them, you may be risking lawsuits and multi-million-dollar verdicts.

What the ADA Demands

The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) forbids discrimination against people with disabilities when recruiting, hiring, training, and compensating employees.¹ During the hiring process, for example, you can't ask prospective employees if they have a disability. Nor can you ask someone to undergo a medical exam before an offer of employment unless you require all applicants to take the same exam.

Once people are hired, reasonable accommodations must be made for their disabilities unless doing so would create an undue hardship to the organization.² You can test for undue hardship by comparing the cost of the accommodation to your organization's resources.

Recently, new laws were passed stating that if accommodation would be too burdensome, and no other solution can be found for that job, the disabled person must be given another vacant job. Previously, only "equal consideration" for vacant jobs was required.

Common Disabilities in the Workplace

The most common disabilities in the workforce are lower back disorders, depression, heart or pulmonary diseases, deafness or difficulty hearing, blindness or blurry vision, and arthritis. A disability is any medical condition that substantially limits a person's ability to perform "major life activities." Major life activities are defined as walking, seeing, breathing, hearing, performing manual tasks, caring for oneself, sitting, standing, thinking, and learning.

How to Make "Reasonable Accommodations"

Here are some examples of reasonable accommodations you might make:

- Let people with back problems take extra breaks so they can do exercises to ease their pain.
- Use flashing alarm systems for deaf employees so that lights flash when a phone rings or someone enters the room.
- Provide phones with amplified sound for hard-of-hearing workers.
- Connect desktop magnifiers to computer screens to help visually impaired employees see images on the screen.

- Let people with kidney failure work flexible hours so they can go to dialysis.
- Furnish interactive screen readers that communicate what's on the computer screen through a speech synthesizer or Braille display for people who are blind.
- Offer adjustable chairs to reduce back pain and telephone headsets to avoid neck pain.
- Buy computers with the latest in ergonomic keyboard and mouse technology.
- Make forklifts, dollies, or other equipment available so that those with back problems can avoid heavy lifting.

Savvy organizations are providing many of these accommodations not only to disabled people but also to healthy employees as a way of staving off injury and future disability. Doing so improves morale and leads to a positive, highly productive organizational culture. 

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¹The ADA prohibits discrimination against disabled employees in organizations with 15 or more staff. State and local governments and any organization that receives federal funds cannot discriminate regardless of the number of employees.

²Reasonable accommodations are changes to a work environment or work policy to allow someone to perform the job's essential functions. Even if reasonable accommodation can be made without undue hardship, you can refuse to hire a disabled person if the disability has a high likelihood of hurting others. For example, one court ruled that an HIV-positive surgeon posed a significant health risk and wasn't protected under the ADA. See "Reasonable Accommodation of Employees" (brightlinecompliance.com), "The ADA: Your Responsibilities as an Employer" (eeoc.gov), and "A Guide to Disability Rights Laws" (ada.gov).

More Workplace Tips

For more on avoiding lawsuits and improving workplace productivity, see these articles at NonprofitWorld.org/members:

Do Your Job Descriptions Comply with ADA? (Vol. 11, No. 3)

Nonprofits and the Americans with Disabilities Act (Vol. 11, No. 2)

Hire the Best But Hire with Care (Vol. 20, No. 6)

How to Accommodate Disabilities under ADA (Vol. 18, No. 5)