

What Supervisors Need to Know About Accommodating Disabilities

Successful companies understand that employing people with disabilities is good business and that an aging workforce may be a workforce with more accommodation issues. The best way to address those needs is by maintaining a company culture that is welcoming and makes everyone—including those with disabilities—feel comfortable and potentially successful in their jobs. Supervisors are the interface between management and workers. It is critical that they "walk the talk" of the inclusive company culture. It is equally critical that they are trained in the requirements of the ADA and state disability law and know how to recognize and respond to the need for an accommodation.

Communication and problem solving are critical supervisory skills. Supervisors who are proficient in these skills will make the accommodation process comfortable and more effective for everyone involved. Additional specific training for supervisors on handling disabilities should include an overview of the ADA, as amended, and state disability laws. These elements should be covered:

- What constitutes a disability under the law? Supervisors should know it is broadly defined and that the "major life activities" that must be affected now include malfunctions of bodily systems as well as more traditional activities, such as walking, hearing, speaking.
- When talking to an employee with a disability, do not ask questions about the condition itself. Instead, ask job-related questions about the effect of the condition on the employee's ability to do the job.
- Don't get hung up on whether a disability exists. Rather, assume a disability exists and focus on finding a suitable accommodation.
- Supervisors should be clear about the process the company wants them to follow once they become aware of disability issues. Usually, the supervisor contacts human resources, safety, or another designated person who then manages the process of obtaining medical information and finding an accommodation. The "handoff" to HR may be the weakest link in the process. Make it clear how this will be accomplished and the roles of those involved. The supervisor may continue to have an active role because of his or her familiarity with the job and possible accommodations. □
- Think outside the box when trying to find an accommodation. Just because it has never been done that way doesn't mean it won't work. Be flexible. The impaired worker can be a good source of suggestions and soliciting those suggestions is part of the interactive process required by the ADA.
- The company is not required to provide the accommodation the worker prefers as long as it provides an accommodation that allows the worker to do the job.
- Supervisors need to remember that employees' medical information is confidential and only shared with those who need to know. This does not include co-workers who question why changes are being made. □

Your company's culture and its attitude toward inclusion is probably the biggest influence on how disabled employees are treated in your workplace. As the interface between management and employees, supervisors reflect that view. As you build your culture that values everyone's contributions, make sure your supervisors know how to handle employees with impairments and know whom they should work with to resolve the problem. This will reduce the risk of disability discrimination claims and may result in some loyal and productive employees.