

Chapter 4

by: *Darlene D. Unger &
John Kregel*

Employers' Knowledge and Utilization of Accommodations

Chapter Overview

Despite the recognition among employers that providing accommodations to applicants or employees with disabilities is a wise business decision, little is known about the resources that employers access to identify and develop effective accommodations in the recruitment, hiring and retention of employees with disabilities. Human resource professionals and supervisors were studied to determine the extent to which businesses were aware of the vast array of workplace supports available to assist people with disabilities to participate in the workforce. The results of these findings indicate that these business professionals were confident in their ability to meet and support the needs of employees with disabilities. Yet despite this confidence, a large majority of supervisors indicated that they did not have the authority to secure accommodations for workers with disabilities.

Summary of Findings

- Initial fears expressed by many representatives from business and industry regarding the costs of implementing the ADA, and specifically costs associated with providing reasonable accommodations, have not been substantiated. The consistent finding from multiple surveys of employers has been that expensive job modification or accommodations are rarely needed by workers with disabilities (Blanck, 1994; Collignon, 1986; Granger et al., 1997; Olson et al., 2000; Pitt-Catsouphes & Butterworth, 1995). For many employers, the costs of making accommodations have proven to be extremely reasonable. According to the Job Accommodation Network (JAN), about one-half (52%) of the accommodations made by employers cost less than \$500 to implement (JAN, 1995). The data were collected between July of 1994 and June of 1995, a period in which JAN received a total of 79,860 calls, with the vast majority of calls originating from private employers (61%).
- Interestingly, many reports indicated that employer's efforts at providing accommodations exceed mere compliance with the reasonable accommodation provisions of the ADA (e.g., Blanck, 1994, 1998; Granger et al., 1997). Some employers are increasingly recognizing that providing accommodations for workers with disabilities often brings other unintended benefits to organizations (Blanck, 1994; Collignon, 1986; Johnson & Baldwin, 1993; Magill, 1997; Montvale, 1988; Weaver, 1991). For instance, providing accommodations for employees with disabilities contributes to an increasingly diverse workforce whose composition mirrors the American population. When an employee is injured on the job or needs some type of additional support to perform the job, accommodations assist in retraining productive and qualified employees.

- Many representatives from business and industry have expressed concerns about the ability of their organizations to meet the potential support needs of applicants or employees with disabilities (Callahan, 1994; Casper, 1993; Gilbride, Stensrud, & Connolly, 1992; Pitt-Catsoupes & Butterworth, 1995; SHRM/Cornell, 1999). Human resource professionals have indicated that they have limited knowledge or experience in supporting employees with disabilities in their workforce (Casper, 1993; Curry, 1996; Lewis, 1997; Pitt-Catsoupes & Butterworth, 1995). Yet, human resource professionals are often the primary recipients of ADA and disability related training within organizations (Lewis, 1997; SHRM/Cornell, 1999) and are often viewed as a source of information or assistance by other workplace personnel in identifying and securing accommodations (Bruyere, 2000). Also, there is uncertainty regarding first-line supervisors' ability to identify and develop accommodations for employees with disabilities (Gates, 1993; Harlan & Robert, 1998; Pitt-Catsoupes & Butterworth, 1995; SHRM/Cornell, 1999).
- Organizational representatives are confident in their ability to meet the support needs of employees with disabilities. Both groups of respondents, human resource professionals and supervisors, indicated that they believe their organizations had the capacity to address the support needs of employees with disabilities. For instance, human resource professionals identified several resources within their organizations that could assist with identifying and developing accommodations for workers with disabilities. Likewise, supervisors acknowledged the fact that workplace personnel, such as representatives from the disability management program, safety or ergonomics department or legal counsel, were available to assist in the accommodation process. It is believed that the presence of disability management programs helps to address the lack of supervisor knowledge regarding disability (SHRM/Cornell, 1999). It is also encouraging that the majority of human resource professionals (82.6%) rated the performance of their organizations quite favorable in relation to providing accommodations to employees with disabilities.
- Human resource professionals play a pivotal role in integrating and retaining people with disabilities in the workforce. The results indicated that many of the organizations relied heavily on human resource professionals as the primary source of information and assistance in identifying and developing accommodations for employees. For instance, even though supervisors expressed confidence in their ability to identify and develop accommodations, the majority of supervisors (78.43%) also identified human resource professionals as the organizational contact person from whom they sought assistance when accommodations were needed for workers with disabilities. In many organizations, human resource professionals are often the critical contact for other workplace personnel in an effort to secure accommodations (Bruyere, 2000; Unger, Wehman, Yasuda, Campbell & Green, 2001).
- More than three-fourths of the human resource professionals (78.26%) indicated that supervisors should contact the organization's human resource professionals in instances when accommodations are needed for workers with disabilities, despite the availability of other organizational resources. Interestingly, many of the participating businesses have well-established disability management programs that may contain components related to workplace safety and ergonomics. Yet, disability management programs or safety and ergonomic staff were not widely viewed as a source of assistance in identifying and developing accommodations for workers with disabilities.
- Supervisors in this study identified a limited number of workplace supports external to their organization that are available to assist people with disabilities in the workplace. For example, supervisors rarely identified representatives from the State Department of Rehabilitation Services or employment agencies as a source of information or assistance in the accommodation process. Very few supervisors identified government tax credits, such as the Work Opportunity Tax Credit, the Disabled Access Credit, and the Tax Deduction to Remove Transportation and Architectural Barriers, or ADA and disability focused websites as a source of information or assistance in identifying and developing

accommodations. Supervisors had limited knowledge of the availability of tax credits as a source of assistance in employing and supporting people with disabilities in their workforce.

- In addressing disability in the workplace, organizations provided a number of accommodations to employees with disabilities to address limitations in several employment-related areas, such as employee training, work assignments, work areas and schedules. Overall, these accommodations were relatively inexpensive (e.g., less than \$100) and most often involved changes in job duties, functions, work processes, and/or purchasing materials or equipment.
- Supervisors may be comfortable in addressing the support of employees with disabilities when they are able to readily address employees' need for accommodations or have direct interaction or control in arranging and implementing the accommodations. In contrast, supervisors may be less sure of their ability to address functional limitations of employees with disabilities when it necessitates structural changes to the work environment, providing non-job function related assistance, and altering aspect of jobs or positions resulting in deviations from typical organizational descriptions, standards, or norms. Adding further credibility to this finding is the fact that only a very small percentage of supervisors believed they had the authority to grant necessary accommodations to employees with disabilities, despite the majority of supervisors believed they had the authority to grant necessary accommodations to employees with disabilities, despite the majority of supervisors indicating confidence in their ability to provide accommodations.

Conclusion

The fact that employers are addressing the needs of employees with disabilities in the workplace and believe they have the capabilities and resources to address the support needs of workers with disabilities is especially encouraging. Yet, employers have very limited knowledge of the variety of workplace supports available that could potentially assist them in employing people with disabilities and assisting employees who become injured or disabled in returning to work. The ability of organizations to expand their knowledge of workplace supports and address disability in the workplace will assist them in attracting and retaining valuable human resources in an increasingly competitive global marketplace.



Chapter 4: Chapter Questions

1. According to the Job Accommodation Network, about one-half of the accommodations made by employers cost less than _____ to implement.
 - a. \$500
 - b. \$200
 - c. \$100
 - d. \$1,000

2. Providing _____ for employees with disabilities contributes to an increasingly diverse workforce whose composition mirrors the American population.
 - a. training
 - b. counseling
 - c. accommodations
 - d. supplemental benefits

3. When an employee is injured on the job or needs some type of additional support to perform the job, accommodations assist in _____.
 - a. helping the employee feel valued.
 - b. retaining productive and qualified employees.
 - c. helping companies reduce expenses.
 - d. hiring suitable replacements.

4. _____ have indicated that they have limited knowledge or experience in supporting employees in their workforce.
 - a. President's of companies
 - b. CEO's
 - c. Front-line managers
 - d. Human resource professionals

5. **True or False:** Human resource professionals are usually the primary recipients of ADA and disability related trainings.

6. The purpose of the study discussed in this chapter was to determine:
- the extent to which businesses were aware of the vast array of workplace supports available to assist people with disabilities with participating in the workforce.
 - the extent to which businesses hire individuals with disabilities.
 - the knowledge level of employers and human resource professionals related to the ADA.
 - the variables associated with hiring an individual with a disability.
7. The study indicated that almost two-thirds of employers who had supervised employees with disabilities had:
- limited experience previously with people with disabilities
 - personal experiences with disability outside of the workplace.
 - a disability themselves.
 - extensive knowledge related to hiring individuals with disabilities.
8. The human resource professionals in the study indicated that their organizations were successful in:
- negotiating reasonable accommodations
 - assigning individuals to jobs that match their abilities.
 - training employees with disabilities.
 - all of the above are correct.
9. **True or False:** A minority of the human resource staff were available to assist supervisors in providing accommodations for workers with disabilities.
10. _____ of the organizations indicated that supervisors should contact the organization's human resource staff in instances when accommodations are needed for workers with disabilities.
- Three-fourths
 - All
 - One-Third
 - One-half
11. **True or False:** Almost two-thirds of the supervisors were confident in their abilities to identify and provide accommodations for employees with disabilities.
12. Supervisors most often cited _____ as their main resource for assistance in providing accommodations to employees with disabilities.
- their state Vocational Rehabilitation department
 - their human resource department
 - websites
 - federal technical assistance centers

13. The greatest number of accommodations were made to employees' _____.
- a. work schedules
 - b. job duties
 - c. work areas
 - d. none of the above
14. In a majority of the instances of providing accommodations, supervisors reported the costs of accommodations to be _____.
- a. less than \$100
 - b. approximately \$150 to \$200
 - c. more than \$500
 - d. free



Chapter 4: Chapter Answers

1. According to the Job Accommodation Network, about one-half of the accommodations made by employers' cost less than **\$500** to implement.
2. Providing **accommodations** for employees with disabilities contributes to an increasingly diverse workforce whose composition mirrors the American population.
3. When an employee is injured on the job or needs some type of additional support to perform the job, accommodations assist in **retaining productive and qualified employees**.
4. **Human resource professionals** have indicated that they have limited knowledge or experience in supporting employees in their workforce.
5. **TRUE** – Human resource professionals are usually the primary recipients ADA and disability related trainings.
6. The purpose of the study discussed in this chapter was to determine **the extent to which businesses were aware of the vast array of workplace supports available to assist people with disabilities with participating in the workforce**.
7. The study indicated that most employers who had supervised employees with disabilities had **personal experiences with disability outside of the workplace**.
8. The human resource professionals in the study indicated that their organizations were successful in **negotiating reasonable accommodations, assigning individuals to jobs that match their abilities, and training employees with disabilities**.

9. **FALSE** – The correct statement is: A **MAJORITY** of the human resource staff was available to assist supervisors in providing accommodations for workers with disabilities.
10. **Three-fourths** of the organizations indicated that supervisors should contact the organization’s human resource staff in instances when accommodations are needed for workers with disabilities.
11. **TRUE** – Almost two-thirds of the supervisors were confident in their abilities to identify and provide accommodations for employees with disabilities.
12. Supervisors most often cited **their human resource department** as their main resource for assistance in providing accommodations to employees with disabilities.
13. The greatest number of accommodations were made to employees **job duties**.
14. In a majority of the instances of providing accommodations, supervisors reported the costs of accommodations to be **less than \$100**.

Employers' Knowledge and Utilization of Accommodations

HR professionals give their organizations favorable ratings on:

- Negotiating reasonable accommodations;
- Implementing return-to-work procedures; and
- Training employees with disabilities.

Employers' Perception of Their Organizations' Ability to Provide Accommodations

**Organizational sources of
assistance in the
accommodation process:**

- HR staff and
- Safety and Ergonomic staff.

**Disability Management
and Occupational
Health staff remain
an underutilized
internal resource.**

Role of HR Professionals in the Accommodation Process

HR professionals described their role to include:

- Working with supervisors identify accommodations;
- Working with employees with disabilities to identify accommodations;
- Making referrals to internal and external resources; and
- Providing counseling.

Supervisors of Employees with Disabilities

**Majority of supervisors
expressed confidence in
identifying and developing
accommodations.**

YET,

**few supervisors had
the authority to
secure
accommodations
to employees
with disabilities.**