

Chapter 5

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Workplace Supports: A View from Employers Who Hired Supported Employees

Chapter Overview

This article describes employers' assessment of the types of workplace supports available in their businesses, the workplace accommodations provided to employees with significant disabilities from supported employment programs, and the role of human service providers in facilitating those accommodations. Employee support needs in the areas of employee training and benefits, career advancement, and work culture were addressed by the 53 employers who participated in the study. The results indicated that employers are capable of providing workplace accommodations for workers with significant disabilities, drawing on existing employer resources. The data indicated that employers are going beyond mere compliance with the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 "reasonable accommodations" provisions; employers reported responding to employee needs in such areas as career advancement, changing something about one's job, and social integration. Often, supervisors and coworkers played instrumental roles in providing support to coworkers with disabilities.

Summary of Findings

The results of the study describe employers' assessment of workplace supports available within their businesses, workplace accommodations provided to employees with disabilities, and the role of human service providers in facilitating those accommodations. Employers indicated that a variety of workplace accommodations were available within their employment environment. This finding is consistent with information reported in professional literature (e.g., Hanley-Maxwell & Millington, 1992; Wehman et al., 1998). Increasingly, employers are being relied on to provide training to employees with disabilities. Because some employees will require accommodations that will extend throughout the course of the individual's employment, employers are beginning to identify and develop formal and informal types of support within the workplace to provide assistance to their employees.

- For people with disabilities employed at participating businesses, workplace accommodations were provided to address a variety of identified support needs in the areas of employee training, career advancement, employee benefits, and workplace culture. This is encouraging since, under the ADA guidelines, employers are only required to provide reasonable accommodations that would enable qualified individuals with disabilities to perform essential job functions. The types of workplace accommodations provided by employers in this study go beyond the legal concept of reasonable accommodations. For example, though almost two-thirds of the employee support needs occurred in the area of employee training, employers also accommodated numerous support needs in other areas.

- The results of this study support the findings of other research showing that the costs of the majority of accommodations are not prohibitive (e.g., Blanck, 1992; Daly & Bond, 1996; Presidents Committee on Employment of Persons with Disabilities, 1994; JAN, 1995). Additionally, employers making accommodations for employees with disabilities often find the accommodations are effective and useful for other workers, thereby enhancing the economic value of the company (Kregel, 1999; Magill, 1997).
- The data resulting from this study also reflect the critical role the employment specialist, an individual from a supported employment agency who provides support to an individual with a significant disability, plays in facilitating workplace accommodations. Just because a support is available does not mean that employees with disabilities can easily access the accommodation. For example, over one-fourth of the employers (28.9%) in this study reported that one of the benefits offered to employees was access to an employee assistance program. However, employee assistance programs were not reported as an accommodation in addressing the variety of support needs for employees with disabilities. The employer may be aware that the program exists but may be less familiar with the services offered through the program, or how employee assistance programs can be used in less typical capacities (e.g., job carving, job restructuring, modifying employee schedules, etc.) to provide workplace accommodations to employees with disabilities.
- In order to maximize existing employer supports, employment specialists and human service personnel must be able to identify, assess, negotiate, and modify accommodations or supports existing in the workplace, while considering the abilities and preferences of the employee with a disability. The extent to which employment specialists can assist employers to recognize accommodations available in the work setting should assist in alleviating employer's concerns and apprehension surrounding the idea of "reasonable accommodation" and the idea that accommodations are costly. By developing partnerships with employers, employment specialists and rehabilitation professionals play a critical role in the identification and development of workplace accommodations for employees with disabilities.
- As demonstrated by the responses to questions on the Employer Support Questionnaire, employers may be knowledgeable about accommodations available within their organizations. However, results also confirm that they are less aware of how to access, modify, and utilize the resources identified within their businesses to provide accommodations to employees with disabilities. The experiences of employment specialists indicate that employers are not unwilling or unable to provide workplace accommodations, but they may not (a) be aware that the accommodation need exists, (b) know how to best assist individuals with disabilities in identifying and developing workplace accommodations, and (c) be able to formulate some type of workplace accommodation that might address the individual's needs.
- The data also confirm the instrumental role of supervisors and co-workers in providing support to coworkers with disabilities. Supervisors and coworkers were the primary providers of support for individuals with disabilities in a number of areas, including learning how to do the job, completing regular job duties, being able to perform infrequent duties associated with the position, learning how to do something new at work, and taking lunch and other breaks. These findings are consistent with the ideas described in the supported employment literature that advance and/or describe the use of workplace personnel to provide support to employees with significant disabilities (e.g., Fabian & Luecking, 1991; Hagner, Butterworth, & Keith, 1995; Unger et al, 1998).

Conclusion

The results of the present study depict employers who have gone above and beyond mere compliance with the Americans with Disabilities Act. By addressing a variety of employee support needs for the duration of the employment relationship, employers have demonstrated the willingness to provide accommodations that assist in retaining valuable employees. Not only are employers providing support for initial job site training, they are also assisting employees with disabilities in pursuing career advancement opportunities, accessing in-house employee workshops and personal development seminars, and assisting in or arranging their transportation.

Overall, the findings of this study parallel the results of other research describing the types of accommodations in the workplace for people with disabilities. For example, Granger and colleagues (1997) described the types of job accommodations provided to employees with psychiatric disabilities as benign and relatively non-intrusive: often, subtle shifts in workplace procedures are made that employers who wish to keep valued employees might also make for workers without defined disabilities. The present findings are unique because they demonstrate that employers are quite capable of providing workplace accommodations for workers with significant disabilities by drawing on existing employer resources. Additionally, this study shows that the types of workplace accommodations provided by employers in the survey go beyond the legal concept of reasonable accommodation and address employee needs in such areas as career advancement, changing something about one's job, and social integration.



Chapter 5: Chapter Questions

1. True or False: The types of workplace accommodations provided by employers in this study go beyond the legal concept of reasonable accommodation.
2. Almost _____ of the employee support needs occurred in the area of employee training.
 - a. two-thirds
 - b. one-half
 - c. one-fourth
 - d. all
3. The results of this study support the findings of other research showing that the costs of the majority of accommodations are _____.
 - a. over \$500
 - b. prohibitive
 - c. not prohibitive
 - d. over \$1000
4. Employers making accommodations for employees with disabilities often find the accommodations are _____.
 - a. overpriced
 - b. effective
 - c. useful for other workers
 - d. both b and c
5. Employment specialists and human service personnel must be able to identify, assess, negotiate, and modify accommodations or supports existing in the workplace while considering the _____.
 - a. limitations of the employee with a disability.
 - b. abilities and preferences of the employee with a disability.
 - c. cost of the accommodation.
 - d. affect on coworkers.

6. Supervisors and coworkers were the primary providers of support for individuals with disabilities in a number of areas, including:
- a. learning how to do the job.
 - b. completing regular job duties.
 - c. learning how to do something new at work.
 - d. all of the above.
7. True and False: Employment specialists and rehabilitation professionals are not able to play a critical role in the identification of workplace accommodations.
8. In this study, _____ of employers reported that one of the benefits offered to employees was access to an employee assistance program (EAP).
- a. 12%
 - b. 20%
 - c. 28%
 - d. 33%
9. True or False: Employers interviewed in this study exceeded the ADA requirements and provided workplace accommodations to address a variety of workplace support needs required by their employees.
10. The following are instrumental in providing supports to workers with disabilities:
- a. recruiters
 - b. coworkers
 - c. supervisors
 - d. both b and c



Chapter 5: Chapter Answers

1. **TRUE** – The types of workplace accommodations provided by employers in this study go beyond the legal concept of reasonable accommodations.
2. Almost **two-thirds** of the employee support needs occurred in the area of employee training.
3. The results of this study support the findings of other research showing that the costs of the majority of accommodations are **not prohibitive**
4. Employers making accommodations for employees with disabilities often find the accommodations are **effective and useful for other workers**.
5. Employment specialists and human service personnel must be able to identify, assess, negotiate, and modify accommodations or supports existing in the workplace while considering the **abilities and preferences of the employee with a disability**.
6. Supervisors and coworkers were the primary providers of support for individuals with disabilities in a number of areas including:
 - **learning how to do the job,**
 - **completing regular job duties, and**
 - **learning how to do something new at work.**
7. **FALSE** – The correct statement is: Employment specialists and rehabilitation professionals do play a critical role and can assist employers in identification of workplace accommodations.

8. In this study, 28% of employers reported that one of the benefits offered to employees was access to an employee assistance program (EAP).
9. TRUE -- Employers interviewed in this study exceeded the ADA requirements and provided reasonable accommodations to address a variety of workplace support needs required by their employees.
10. The following are instrumental in providing supports to workers with disabilities:
 - coworkers and
 - supervisors

Workplace Supports....

What are They???

Three major categories of business-mediated supports

(Wehman, Bricout, Kregel, 1999)

- Workplace Accommodations (AT, job restructuring & schedule modification);
- Coworker & Employer Supports; and
- Employer-Sponsored Programs and Policies (EAP's, return-to-work policies, DM, & family and medical leave procedures).

Employer Supports to Workers Associated with Supported Employment

**53 employers of workers with
significant disabilities report on
career advancement supports**

- The majority of employers (92.3%) offered assistance to employees in changing job responsibilities through career advancement.
- Fewer (44.2%) offered instructional assistance in learning a new job.

Employer Supports to Workers Associated with Supported Employment

**53 employers of workers with
significant disabilities report on
employer benefits**

- Slightly more than half offered paid vacation; and
- One-third offered paid sick and holiday leave for full-time employees.

Employer Supports to Workers Associated with Supported Employment

Data resulting from this study
reflects.....

Employment Specialists/
Job Coaches play a
critical role in the
facilitation of
workplace supports
for workers with
significant
disabilities.