

# Chapter 5

## Workplace Supports: A View from Employers Who Have Hired Employees with Significant Disabilities

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This article describes employers' assessment of the types of workplace supports available in their businesses, the workplace accommodations provided to supported employees, 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.

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**S**upported employment has afforded an increasing number of people with significant disabilities an opportunity to enter and compete in our nation's labor force. Since the inception of supported employment as a federal program with the authorization of the Rehabilitation Act Amendments in 1986, the number of individuals receiving these services grew from 10,000 individuals in 1986 to 139,812 people in 1995 (Wehman, Revell, & Kregel, 1998). As supported employment experienced rapid growth and employers became increasingly aware of the employment potential of people with disabilities, increased efforts were directed toward identifying and

developing supports that in the workplace to assist individuals with disabilities in both learning how to do their jobs and maintaining employment.

The job coach model of supported employment (see, e.g., Rusch, 1986; Wehman & Kregel, 1985) has been the mechanism through which individuals with significant disabilities often obtain competitive employment. In this model, the job coach has typically been the primary provider of support to an individual with a disability for the duration of the individual's employment. However, commencing with the early days of supported employment implementation, the job coach model has always embraced the idea of using coworkers and natural cues in the work environment to provide assistance to individuals with disabilities (Moon, Goodall, Barcus, & Brooke, 1986; Rusch & Hughes, 1989; Wehman, 1981). As supported employment gained acceptance among its customers, the role of the job coach evolved from being the primary provider of support to the role of a facilitator to assist individuals with severe disabilities in obtaining and maintaining competitive employment (Brooke, Inge, Armstrong, & Wehman, 1997; Fabian & Luecking, 1991; Unger, Parent, Gibson, Kane-Johnston, & Kregel, 1998). As the role of the job coach evolved, employers reported favorable perceptions of supported employees (Kregel & Tomiyasu, 1994; Shafer, Kregel, Banks, & Hill, 1988) and supported employment (Kregel & Unger, 1993; Petty & Fussell, 1997). Increasingly, employers were more comfortable in collaborating with job coaches/employment specialists and rehabilitation professionals to identify and develop accommodations in the workplace for their employees with disabilities.

## Workplace Supports

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Regardless of the size of the business, employers offer many types of support to their employees. It is important for supervisors and coworkers to recognize that the support needs of employees with disabilities are similar to the variety of employment-related issues that occur among individuals with no known disabilities (Miano, Nalven, & Hoff, 1996). In addressing the support needs of employees with disabilities, efforts should be directed at identifying and accessing accommodations that may be available within the employment setting. Examples of these business-mediated supports are:

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- (a) workplace accommodations such as assistive technology, job restructuring, and schedule modification;
  - (b) coworker and employer supports; and
  - (c) employer-sponsored programs and policies such as return-to-work policies, disability case management, and company policies regarding family and/or medical leave (Wehman, Bircout, & Kregel, 1999).
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According to Hanley-Maxwell and Millington (1992), accommodations that exist in workplaces include wellness programs, employee assistance programs, basic skills training, coaching, mentoring, and apprenticeships. Often, employers may not be aware of these inexpensive and unobtrusive accommodations or supports that may be readily available within their businesses and can be utilized to provide support to employees with disabilities.

Supports also exist outside of the workplace that can be accessed or utilized to assist people with disabilities in obtaining and maintaining employment. However, there is uncertainty surrounding employers' level of awareness and access to these types of employer or workplace supports. These supports include: (a) government assistance in the form of financial incentives or federally funded job training and employment programs such as supported employment, and (b) training and technical assistance pertaining to employment policies and workplace supports designed to ensure access and/or maintain individuals with disabilities in employment (O'Leary & Dean, 1998). Many employers may be unaware that various types of workplace supports exist or that resources and assistance are available from outside one's place of

employment. For instance, employers may be unaware of resources such as the Job Accommodation Network (JAN), the Business and Disability Technical Assistance Centers (DBTACs), or vocational rehabilitation and supported employment services, which can assist employers or people with disabilities in identifying and/or developing accommodations or providing employment-related support.

Employers may be aware of resources but because dissemination of disability-related information may be fragmented and uncoordinated, employers may be confused by the abundance of information (O'Leary & Dean, 1998). This confusion is especially alarming given that Butterworth and Pitt-Catsoupes (1997) found that human resource administrators, supervisors, and coworkers who had worked with employees with disabilities expressed concerns about not having the resources (e.g., time, money, experience, and expertise) to adequately support their employment. Employers may express a willingness to hire people with disabilities, but they may have concerns and reservations on how to identify and develop supports to assist with integrating them into the workforce, especially applicants with significant disabilities.

## Employers and the Employment Regulations of the Americans with Disabilities Act

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Employers expressed concern surrounding the implementation of Title I of the ADA (Pati & Bailey, 1995). Employers' fears regarding the ADA may have been derived, in part, from the lack of specificity regarding their responsibilities for providing "reasonable accommodations." Under the ADA, employers are required to provide reasonable accommodations that will enable individuals with disabilities to successfully perform their jobs when accommodations can be provided without an employer sustaining an "undue hardship." Some professionals contend that the ADA's reasonable accommodation requirement is unlikely to maximize the employment of people with disabilities because it provides incentives to resist accommodations (e.g., Rosen, 1991; Williams, 1993). For instance, the cost of a reasonable accommodation is linked to economic analysis: employers weigh the accommodation cost against the resources the employer has and the benefit received from employment (Blanck, 1997). An employer whose only goal is to maximize profit might not hire an applicant with a disability who requires an accommodation unless the cost is minimal.

It is a well-documented fact that one of the greatest concerns expressed by employers regarding reasonable accommodations is the perceived cost they might incur. (Moore & Crimando, 1995; United Cerebral Palsy Association [UCPA], 1993). With the majority of the accommodations costing little or nothing, employers still expressed concerns about the cost or the difficulty in providing accommodations (UCPA, 1993). However, Granger, Baron, and Robinson (1997), reporting on the types of accommodations costs for employees with psychiatric disabilities, described job accommodations as being nonintrusive, not too costly, and often causing only subtle shifts in workplace procedures that employers might make for valued employees without defined disabilities. Even businesses that may be limited in personnel or funds should be able to find innovative ways to effectively accommodate applicants with disabilities (Magill, 1997).

Despite employers' concerns pertaining to the ADA and reasonable accommodations, the percentage of employers who claimed to have made an accommodation for an employee with a disability increased from 51% in 1993 to 81% in 1995, according to a recent study (Harris et al., 1995). Additionally, a study by the Job Accommodation Network (JAN, 1994) revealed that 69% of employees with disabilities required no special assistance and that half of the accommodations made cost less than \$500 to implement (52%), with the typical cost being about \$200.

Since the implementation of the employment regulations of the ADA, much research has emerged that explores employers' attitudes toward the ADA and the costs incurred in accommodating workers with disabilities. However, descriptions of the types of accommodations available in the workplace and the potential of employers to meet the needs of employees with disabilities are limited. Further, with increased employer initiatives directed toward improving the work environment to retain valuable human resources in this period of a shrinking labor market, a variety of resources are available in the workplace to assist all employees learn how to do their job, maintain their employment status, and advance in their careers.

Increasingly, employers are called on to deliver a number of supports to enhance the quality and productivity of their workforce, as well as to retain valuable employees. The purpose of this article is to describe the types of workplace accommodations provided to employees with

significant disabilities that help them learn and maintain their jobs and enable them to pursue career advancement opportunities. Additionally, the role of the human service provider in assisting and identifying workplace accommodations for employees with disabilities is explored.

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## METHOD

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### Sample

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Data were collected from employers for individuals with disabilities hired from October 1993 through September 1998. The purpose of the Natural Supports Demonstration Project was to develop and implement a natural supports approach for achieving competitive employment outcomes for transition-age youth with significant disabilities. Natural supports were defined as any type of support that assists individuals in participating in the community and work environment of their choice. The seven-step community and workplace model (Parent et al., 1994), which incorporates the use of natural supports, individual choice, and self-determination into the existing supported employment service delivery system, was implemented with all individuals placed into supported competitive employment by project employment specialists. Individuals were referred to the project by parents, rehabilitation counselors, and special educators. Participants represented a variety of disability labels and resided in rural, suburban, and urban areas in a southeastern metropolitan city. The mean age reported for individuals was 23 years with a range of 20 to 38 years. Table 1 on the following page contains a description of demographic characteristics of the 37 individuals employed by the employers who participated in this study.

A total of 53 businesses participated in the study, with 16 individuals having worked at one or more businesses during the time frame for the study. A majority of the employers (62.3%) represented small businesses, employing less than 100 employees (see Table 2 on the following page). Prior to the individual's first day of work, the the business representative responsible for hiring the individual was asked to complete the Employer Support Questionnaire (developed by VCU-RRTC Natural Supports Project staff).

**Table 1: Employee Demographic Characteristics**

Characteristics	Frequency	Percentage
Gender: Men	24	64.9%
Women	13	35.1%
Race: Aisian	1	2.7%
Black	9	24.3%
Hispanic	1	2.7%
White	26	70.3%
Primary Disability Label		
Mental Retardation	19	51.3%
Traumatic Brain Injury	6	16.2%
Mental Illness	11	29.7%
Other	1	2.7%

**Table 2: Employer Demographic Characteristics**

Characteristics	Frequency	Percentage
Size of Business:		
small (99 or less employees)	33	62.3%
medium (100-999 employees)	18	34.0%
large (1000+ employees)	2	3.8%
Type of Business:		
restaurants and cafeterias	17	32.1%
industrial	3	5.7%
service provider	3	5.7%
commercial/retail	18	34.0%
education	6	11.3%
health	3	5.7%
lodging	3	5.7%

The generation and selection of questions included on the instruments involved recommendations from the project's advisory committee, which consisted of individuals with disabilities, parents, rehabilitation counselors, educators, employers, and community representatives. Input collected from the advisory committee was used to develop initial drafts of the survey instruments.

### **Instrumentation**

Data were collected with two different instruments, the Employer Support Questionnaire and the Community and

Workplace Support Form, developed by the VCU-RRTC. The instruments have been previously validated and found to be highly reliable and correlated with positive employment outcomes for individuals with disabilities (Unger et al., 1998). The development of the instruments consisted of a three-step process:

- (a) generation and selection of survey items,
- (b) review by expert panels, and
- (c) a pilot test of the instruments.

## **Employer Support Questionnaire**

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The initial draft of the Employer Support Questionnaire was field-tested with employers in the pilot study of the VCU-RRTC to ensure clarity and potential for capturing the necessary information. The instrument was completed by a business manager or supervisor who hired a person with a disability through a supported employment program, prior to their first day of employment. During the pilot study, feedback on the clarity of the instrument was obtained from employers and community representatives. From their input and the results of the pilot study, the instrument was modified and reviewed by a panel of employers and rehabilitation professionals.

### **Content of the Employer Support Questionnaire**

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The final version of the seven-page Employer Support Questionnaire consisted of 32 forced-choice questions, 9 of which requested additional information regarding the employer's response. The purpose of the form is to identify potential supports available from the employer or within the employment setting that might assist an employee with learning and/or completing his or her assigned job duties. Additionally, the form addresses the type of assistance available to employees in the area of training, advancement, and social or recreational activities, as well as examining the typical work routines of employees. Once an employer representative completes the form, the employment specialist and employee with a disability reviews the form to identify potential sources of support for to address anticipated or future support needs.

### **Content of the Employer Support Questionnaire**

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The initial draft of the Community and Workplace Support form was developed by the VCU-RRTC with assistance from an advisory committee, consisting of individuals with disabilities, parents, rehabilitation counselors, educators, employment specialists, advocates, employers, and community representatives. It was then field-tested with the participants to ensure clarity and the potential for capturing the necessary information. During the field testing portion, feedback was obtained from employment specialists administering the form, individuals with disabilities, and family members regarding the clarity of the instrument. On the basis of their input, the instru-

ment was modified and reviewed by the project's advisory committee and rehabilitation professionals familiar with strategies being studied.

The Community and Workplace Support Form consists of approximately 14 forced-choice questions. The questions address:

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- (a) the type of support needed or desired,
  - (b) support resources that have been identified,
  - (c) support option selected,
  - (d) individuals primarily responsibility for arranging or accessing the support,
  - (e) individuals primarily responsible for providing support,
  - (f) the role of the employment specialist in addressing the support need,
  - (g) the costs of providing the support, and
  - (h) the person primarily responsible for over-seeing the monitoring of the support.
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The purpose of this form is to identify the supports needed and used in meeting the individual's needs and the type of assistance the employment specialist provided to address these needs.

### **Workplace Accommodation**

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For the purpose of this study, workplace support is defined as any type of assistance or support provided to employees in or outside the work environment that assists them in the employment process, pre-employment interviews, job training, career advancement or job changing, and employment retention. A workplace support can be internal (e.g., coworkers, company checklists, wellness programs, etc.) or external (e.g., tax credits, supported employment, etc.) to the work environment, with the common feature being the support assists individuals in obtaining and maintaining employment and career advancement. Internal supports are available in the work setting or from existing programs offered by the employer. External supports are identified or developed from sources outside the employment setting.

### **Support Need**

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Support needs are defined assistance required or desired by an individual that, aids or facilitates participation in community and employment environments. Learning how to do the job, obtaining transportation to and from work, remembering how to complete required job duties,

socializing with coworkers, and picking up and cashing a paycheck are examples of support needs. A support need is identified anytime assistance might be needed or obstacles encountered that impede or limit participation in community or work environments. Support needs may be identified by the employment specialist or communicated by the individual or anyone involved in his or her life, such as family members, friends, employer, or coworkers.

## Data Analysis

The Employer Support Questionnaire was completed prior to the individual's first day of employment by a representative from the business who was primarily responsible for hiring the new employee with a disability. The Community and Workplace Support Form was completed by an employment specialist when a support need was identified for an individual during the supported employment process.

Data were collected for 37 individuals who were employed in 53 different businesses. During the period of the study, 31 different support needs were identified for individuals that required some form of employer or workplace support. Support could be provided by the individual, employment specialist, or other workplace personnel. When an individual provided his or her own support, it meant that he or she had the primary responsibility for implementing or accessing a needed accommodation.

# RESULTS

## Employer Characteristics

Overall, 53 employers hiring individuals with significant disabilities participated in the study. These 53 employers consisted of businesses from the food and hospitality industry, grocery and department stores, human services (e.g., hospital, day care, nursing home), and industrial and manufacturing. The majority of businesses employed fewer than 100 employees at the location where the individual worked. A number of businesses reported previously employing people with disabilities.

## Identified Employer or Workplace Support Needs

During the study, the participating employers and consumers identified 31 different types of support needs. The identified needs were categorized into four areas:

- **Employee training** needs focused on an individual's ability to learn and perform the job and encompassed activities such as skill acquisition, completing regular job duties, performing independently, and other activities.
- **Career advancement** needs addressed an individual's ability to advance in or between jobs and included activities such as learning additional duties, pursuing opportunities for promotion, and other related needs.
- **Employee benefit** needs focused on enabling the individual to take advantage of benefits provided by the employer, such as sick leave, pay raises, and employee assistance programs.
- **Workplace Culture** focused on the ability of the employee to assimilate into the culture, social structure, and routines of a specific work setting.

The relative percentages of reported needs in each of four categories are shown in Table 3 below. Almost two-thirds of the identified employer or workplace support needs identified were in the area of employee training (63.1%). Identified employer or workplace support needs under employee benefits (14.3%), career advancement (6.0%), and workplace culture (22.0%) were much less prevalent than needs identified under employee training.

**Table 3: Employer Reported Support Need Categories**

Category	Percentage
Employee Training	63.1%
Employee Benefits	14.3%
Career Advancement	6.0%
Workplace Culture	22.0%

## Employee Training

As indicated in Table 4 on the following page, the most frequently identified employee training needs for individuals were learning how to do the job (32.8%),

remembering how to do the job (16.1%), completing job duties (14.6%), and signing in and out of work (13.1%). Others identified employer or workplace support needs addressed by employers included recording and monitoring work schedule and hours, getting along with coworkers, addressing communication issues, requesting time off, taking lunch and breaks, and pursuing career advancement opportunities.

**Table 4: Employee Training Needs**  
(n = 198)

Category	Percentage
Learning how to do the job	32.8%
Remembering how to do the job	16.1%
Completing all regular job duties	14.6%
Signing in and out of work	13.1%
Orienting around the workplace	8.6%
Being able to perform infrequent duties	5.6%
Arranging follow-along	5.1%
Addressing fatigue or stamina	2.6%
Distractability management	.5%
Handling a crisis at work	.5%
Advocacy	.5%

**Employer Training Strategies.** To identify ways in which employers responded to these employee training needs, information was obtained on the strategies used to address training and performance issues. Data collected from the Employer Support Questionnaire indicate that the majority (90.6%) of employers paired new employees with seasoned coworkers to do the training. Employers also provided supervisor instruction (54.7%), orientation

meetings (34.0%), and company videos (30.2%) to train new employees.

In addition to the employers, the employment specialists also identified a variety of employer or workplace supports available for employee training in the participating businesses, in addition to what employers had recognized. Table 5 on the following page summarizes all employer or workplace supports that were identified by employment specialists, employers, and workplace personnel to address individual support needs in learning the job. The most frequently cited employer or workplace support available was the use of a coworker mentor (40.9%), followed by the employment specialist providing initial training (31.3%). To a much lesser extent, other employer or workplace supports were also available to provide training to new employees, including supervisors, retired persons, college students, and volunteers.

**Role of the Employment Specialist in Addressing Training Needs.** Supervisors (40.0%) and coworkers and other workplace personnel (36.9%) were reported as the primary providers of support to individuals with disabilities in learning how to do the job. Employers reported that the employment specialists were the primary providers of support to the individual with a disability in only 13.8% of the cases. Though the employment specialist was not providing training to the employee, he or she was still instrumental in assisting workplace personnel in training the new employee. For instance, the employment specialists would advise or demonstrate the best way to provide training to the employee based on their knowledge of the skills and abilities of the individual with a disability.

**Duration of Training.** A majority of the employers typically allocated almost 3 weeks to initial training of new hires (53.8%), with slightly more than one fourth of the employers (28.8%) devoting as much time as needed to new employee training. However, an overwhelming majority of the employers (92.3%) reported offering ongoing training for all employees in the form of coworker mentoring, company videos, and supervisor instruction. The idea that ongoing training or coworker mentoring is available at a majority of the businesses is encouraging in light of the fact that remembering how to do the job and learning how to do the job were frequently identified support needs by supported employment participants.

**Table 5: Accommodations Available in the Workplace Employee Training** (n=198)

Supports for Learning How to do the Job	Frequency	Percentage
Coworker mentor or coworker training	81	40.9%
Employment Specialist	72	31.3%
Supervisor Instruction	33	16.7%
Company Orientation - videos	33	16.7%
Standard company training procedures expanded/ modified/extended	24	12.1%
Restructuring job duties, making accommodations, developing compensatory strategies	20	10.1%
Training provided by a retired person	3	1.5%
College student/volunteer	3	1.5%
Classroom training	3	1.5%

### Career Advancement

A majority of the employers (92.3%) offered assistance to employees in changing job responsibilities through career advancement or lateral job changes. However, fewer employers (44.2%) offered assistance such as instructional classes or departmental training to afford individuals the opportunity to advance in the company.

For the individuals participating in the study, pursuing career advancement opportunities, changing something about their job or changing jobs, and learning to do something new at work were rarely identified as key support needs as shown in Table 6. This could be attributed to the short period of time captured by the study.

### Employer Benefits

Reported support needs in the area of employee benefits are summarized in Table 7 on the following page. Slightly more than half of the employers offered paid vacation and one-third offered paid sick and holiday leave for full-time employees. However, when employees identified support needs such as requesting time off, calling in sick or late to work, and arranging work schedule or hours, employers accommodated individual requests if it did not disrupt the operation of the business. For example, less than one-fourth of the employers (17.0%) indicated that employee schedules are permanently set and more than two-thirds (67.9%) indicated that employee schedules are determined on a weekly or monthly basis.

**Table 6: Career Advancement Support Needs** (n = 19)

Category	Percentage
Pursuing career advancement opportunities	42.1%
Learning how to do something new at work	31.6%
Finding a different or second job	15.7%
Resigning from work	5.3%
Changing something about the job	5.3%
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>100%</b>

Transportation is one most frequently cited barriers to employment for persons with disabilities (Unger et al., 1998; West et al., 1998). Employers in this study revealed a small percentage of employers (15.4%) provided or arranged transportation for their employees. The employers who provided or arranged transportation frequently indicated that they assisted employees in identifying coworkers who carpool or assist in transporting coworkers who need a ride to and/or from work.



**Table 7: Employee Benefits Support Needs** (n = 54)

Category	Percentage
Calling in sick of late	48.1%
Purchasing / selecting / maintaining uniforms	14.8%
Picking up and cashing a paycheck	14.8%
Requesting time off from work	13.0%
Receiving a raise or increased benefits	5.6%
Addressing sexual issues	3.7%
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>100%</b>

### Workplace Culture

Employers reported a small number of different support needs in the area of workplace culture. These support needs are identified in Table 8. The employer's ability to deal with disruptive or problem behaviors by the employee was identified most frequently in this area. Other needs addressed social interaction issues such as getting along with coworkers and addressing communication problems, as well as scheduling the employee's time (arranging work schedules and taking lunch or breaks).

Certainly the arrangement of the workplace and the contact among employees throughout the workday may enhance or prohibit the ability of coworkers or other personnel to provide any type of support. Several questions on the Employer Support Questionnaire addressed the typical routines of coworkers and their physical proximity in the work environment for identifying potential sources of support for individuals with disabilities. Almost three-fourths (71.2%) of the employers reported that coworkers were in a close proximity to each other throughout their workday. Furthermore, the majority of employers (61.5%) reported that assistance was available for employees throughout the day from other coworkers. In almost three fourths of the businesses, employers also claimed that supervisors were readily available to provide assistance to employees.

**Table 8: Work Culture Support Needs** (n = 622)

Employee Need	Percentage
Dealing with aggressive, disruptive, or problem behaviors	24.2%
Arranging work schedules / hours	22.6%
Taking lunch and/or breaks	19.3%
Getting along with co-workers	11.3%
Recording and monitoring schedule / hours	9.7%
Addressing communication issues	9.7%
Participating in social activities during work hours	1.6%
Developing friendships	1.6%
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>100%</b>

## DISCUSSION

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 accommodation. 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.

These findings are promising given the fact that businesses represented in this study are relatively small; almost two-thirds of the businesses where employees with disabilities were working employed fewer than 100 employees. Typically, smaller businesses do not have extensive human resource staff, disability management programs, employee benefit services, or the resources that might be available at larger companies. The small employers' ability to provide workplace accommodations to address the diverse needs of their workforce contradicts the belief that workplace accommodations represent overwhelming challenges to small businesses and that they are less flexible in providing accommodations (Mills, 1997).

One might infer that if businesses employing 100 or fewer employees have a variety of workplace accommodations available within their workplaces, then businesses employing larger numbers should, at the minimum, be able to provide similar accommodations. Many large corporations have well-developed and effective human resource and/or disability management programs (Akabas & Gates, 1993; Hunt, Habeck, Owens, & Vandergoot, 1996) to assist supervisors and other personnel in identifying and developing accommodations and resources that, arguably, smaller, independently-owned employers might not have access to and/or the financial or human resources to support. Consistent with the findings reported by Granger et al. (1997) and Miano and colleagues (1996), the majority of accommodations provided to employees with significant disabilities in this study were readily available in the employment environment and/or facilitated by employment specialists.

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## Costs of Workplace Accommodations

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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).

A number of accommodations for employees in this study relied on either modifications of pre-existing resources (e.g., training materials, equipment), work routines, or assistance provided by co-workers or other work personnel. In situations where accommodations involved the actual purchase of items, equipment, or services, the costs were nominal. For instance, an individual employed at a restaurant received a "carry-all" to enable her to retrieve all of the necessary condiments from the back in one trip so she could more expediently restock the lobby area. Another employee benefited from the use of a watch with numerous alarms to prompt him to the next task or to take a break and return from break.

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## Employment Specialist's Role in Facilitating Workplace Supports

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The data resulting from this study also reflect the critical role the employment specialist 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 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 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. Supervisors may also dismiss the em-

ployee assistance program as a potential source of accommodations because they believe the services offered through the program cannot meet the support needs of the employee with a disability.

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, 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.

Employers may also overlook workplace accommodations readily available within or through their businesses. The ability of employment specialists to collaborate with employers and other workplace personnel is critical in identifying and developing existing employer supports. In most instances when a support need was identified, such as assisting employees in remembering how to do their jobs, or punching in and out of work and taking breaks, the employer had both the capacity and the resources available to provide accommodations to workers with disabilities. However, their limited experience in the areas of employing people with significant disabilities and

identifying and developing workplace accommodations may prohibit their ability to identify and develop needed accommodations already available.

For instance, a large national department store chain developed a formal training program designed to address the problem of illiteracy in its workforce and training new employees. Prior to implementing the training program, in which they desired to retrain entry-level workers such as cashiers, snackbar attendants, and others, they revised the employees' training manuals by removing almost all the words and replaced them with photos, diagrams, and icons. The training manual, with photos, diagrams, and icons, could be modified to aid an employee with a disability in remembering how to complete all necessary job tasks. It is vital that supervisors and co-workers understand that the support needs of employees with disabilities are analogous to the variety of employment-related issues that occur among individuals with no apparent disabilities (Miano, et al., 1996). Further, employment specialists can assist employers with matching or modifying existing workplace accommodations to address support needs of employees with disabilities.

### **Role of Supervisors and Co-workers in Providing Workplace Supports**

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The data also confirm the instrumental role of supervisors and coworkers 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).

The employment of people with disabilities is evolving, due in part to more favorable employer attitudes toward individuals with disabilities in the workforce, workplace cultures that embrace workforce diversity, assistive technology, progressive laws designed to ease the entry of people with disabilities into the workforce, and

the perseverance of individuals with disabilities. In the mid-1980s, supported employment and human service professionals were uncertain whether people with severe disabilities could perform to the expectations of employers or whether employers would embrace the idea of individuals with disabilities in their workforce. In an effort to get people with significant disabilities into the workforce, employment specialists and human service professionals convinced skeptical, but willing, employers of their ability to identify appropriate jobs and then to provide the necessary training and support to ensure that the individual would be successful in performing his or her job. Now, after the success of thousands of Americans with disabilities, supported employment providers find themselves collaborating with potential employers who feel confident and are willing and able to provide training and support to individuals with disabilities in the workforce.

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## **S**UMMARY

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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 inhouse 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 nonintrusive; often subtle shifts in workplace procedures are made that employers, who wish to keep valued employees, might also make for those 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 has shown 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.

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