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Office of Disability Employment Policy

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Maximizing Productivity: Accommodations for Employees with Psychiatric Disablities

Abstract
[Excerpt] Reasonable accommodations are adjustments to a work setting that make it possible for qualified employees with disabilities to perform the essential functions of their jobs. The majority of accommodations can be made for minimal (if any) cost and a small investment of time and planning. Moreover, effective accommodations can be good for business. They help employees return to work more quickly after disability or medical leave, eliminate costs due to lost productivity and can be key to recruiting and retaining qualified employees. Not all employees with psychiatric disabilities need accommodations to perform their jobs. For those who do, it is important to remember that the process of developing and implementing accommodations is individualized and should begin with input from the employee. Accommodations vary, just as people's strengths, work environments and job duties vary.

Keywords
disability, accommodation, workplace adjustment, mental health impairment, psychiatric disabilities

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MAXIMIZING PRODUCTIVITY: ACCOMMODATIONS FOR EMPLOYEES WITH PSYCHIATRIC DISABILITIES

ODEP
Office of Disability Employment Policy

A psychiatric disability can impact various aspects of an individual's life, including the ability to achieve maximum productivity in the workplace. The National Institute of Mental Health estimates that one in five people will experience a psychiatric disability in their lifetime, and one in four Americans currently knows someone who has a psychiatric disability. It is likely that most employers have at least one employee with a psychiatric disability.

Under the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) and other nondiscrimination laws, most employers must provide "reasonable accommodations" to qualified employees with disabilities. Many employers are aware of different types of accommodations for people with physical and communication disabilities, but they may be less familiar with accommodations for employees with disabilities that are not visible, such as psychiatric disabilities. Over the last few years, increasing numbers of employers have expressed a desire and need for information and ideas on accommodations for employees with psychiatric disabilities.

Reasonable accommodations are adjustments to a work setting that make it possible for qualified employees with disabilities to perform the essential functions of their jobs. The majority of accommodations can be made for minimal (if any) cost and a small investment of time and planning. Moreover, effective accommodations can be good for business. They help employees return to work more quickly after disability or medical leave, eliminate costs due to lost productivity and can be key to recruiting and retaining qualified employees.

Not all employees with psychiatric disabilities need accommodations to perform their jobs. For those who do, it is important to remember that the process of developing and implementing accommodations is individualized and should begin with input from the employee. Accommodations vary, just as people's strengths, work environments and job duties vary.

Below are examples of accommodations that have helped employees with psychiatric disabilities to more effectively perform their jobs. The list below does not include all possible accommodations, but it is a good starting point and provides some of the most effective and frequently used workplace accommodations. For example:

- **Flexible Workplace**—Telecommuting and/or working from home.
- **Scheduling**—Part-time work hours, job sharing, adjustments in the start or end of work hours, compensation time and/or "make up" of missed time.
- **Leave**—Sick leave for reasons related to mental health, flexible use of vacation time, additional unpaid or administrative leave for treatment or recovery, leaves of absence and/or use of occasional leave (a few hours at a time) for therapy and other related appointments.
- **Breaks**—Breaks according to individual needs rather than a fixed schedule, more frequent breaks and/or greater flexibility in scheduling breaks, provision of backup coverage during breaks, and telephone breaks during work hours to call professionals and others needed for support.

- **Other Policies**—Beverages and/or food permitted at workstations, if necessary, to mitigate the side effects of medications, on-site job coaches.

MODIFICATIONS

- Reduction and/or removal of distractions in the work area.
- Addition of room dividers, partitions or other soundproofing or visual barriers between workspaces to reduce noise or visual distractions.
- Private offices or private space enclosures.
- Office/work space location away from noisy machinery.
- Reduction of workplace noise that can be adjusted (such as telephone volume).
- Increased natural lighting or full spectrum lighting.
- Music (with headset) to block out distractions.

EQUIPMENT/TECHNOLOGY

- Tape recorders for recording/reviewing meetings and training sessions.
- "White noise" or environmental sound machines.
- Handheld electronic organizers, software calendars and organizer programs.
- Remote job coaching, laptop computers, personal digital assistants and office computer access via remote locations.
- Software that minimizes computerized distractions such as pop-up screens.

JOB DUTIES

- Modification or removal of non-essential job duties or restructuring of the job to include only the essential job functions.
- Division of large assignments into smaller tasks and goals.
- Additional assistance and/or time for orientation activities, training and learning job tasks and new responsibilities.
- Additional training or modified training materials.

MANAGEMENT/SUPERVISION

- Implementation of flexible and supportive supervision style; positive reinforcement and feedback; adjustments in level of supervision or structure, such as more frequent meetings to help prioritize tasks; and open communication with supervisors regarding performance and work expectations.

- Additional forms of communication and/or written and visual tools, including communication of assignments and instructions in the employee's preferred learning style (written, verbal, e-mail, demonstration); creation and implementation of written tools such as daily "to-do" lists, step-by-step checklists, written (in addition to verbal) instructions and typed minutes of meetings.

- Regularly scheduled meetings (weekly or monthly) with employees to discuss workplace issues and productivity, including annual discussions as part of performance appraisals to assess abilities and discuss promotional opportunities.

- Development of strategies to deal with problems before they arise.

- Written work agreements that include any agreed upon accommodations, long-term and short-term goals, expectations of responsibilities and consequences of not meeting performance standards.

- Education of all employees about their right to accommodations.

- Relevant training for all employees, including co-workers and supervisory staff.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- The **Job Accommodation Network (JAN)** is a free consulting service from the U.S. Department of Labor's Office of Disability Employment Policy that provides individualized accommodation solutions and information on the ADA and services related to employment for people with disabilities. JAN can be accessed at ***www.jan.wvu.edu*** or 1-800-526-7234 (V/TTY).

- The Center for Psychiatric Rehabilitation's ***Reasonable Accommodations for People with Psychiatric Disabilities: An On-line Resource for Employers and Educators*** includes specific tips for employers on developing and implementing accommodations. It can be accessed at ***www.bu.edu/cpr/reasaccom.html***.

- Ten regional **ADA & IT Technical Assistance Centers**, sponsored by the U.S. Department of Education's National Institute on Disability and Rehabilitation Research, provide ADA information, training, and technical assistance across the nation. They can be contacted at 1-800-949-4232 (V/TTY) or ***www.adata.org/centers.htm***.

- The Equal Employment Opportunity Commission's ***Enforcement Guidance on the ADA and Psychiatric Disabilities*** answers some of the most common questions about the ADA and persons with psychiatric disabilities. It is available at ***www.eeoc.gov/policy/docs/psych.html***.

- **The President's New Freedom Commission on Mental Health's Final Report Executive Summary** includes information on a variety of topics relating to children and adults with psychiatric disabilities. It can be accessed at ***www.mentalhealthcommission.gov/reports/reports.htm***.

The above list of resources is not meant to be exhaustive. Any listing of non-governmental resources in this fact sheet should not be construed as an endorsement of the entities, their services or products by the Office of Disability Employment Policy or the U.S. Department of Labor.

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