

Five Practical Tips: Job Accommodations

Why Provide Job Accommodations?

There are many reasons for employers to provide job accommodations for all employees. In times of labor shortages, employers can attract good employees by offering accommodations such as flexible scheduling, job sharing, and ergonomic workstations. Also, providing such accommodations can help employers retain an experienced workforce by improving the overall morale of the workplace. And finally, providing job accommodations allows employers to meet their legal obligations under Title I of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) and similar state laws.

A recent study conducted by the Job Accommodation Network (JAN) not only confirms the benefits of providing accommodations, but also shows that providing accommodations is not costly. More than half the employers surveyed reported that there was no cost for providing an accommodation and the rest of the employers surveyed reported a typical cost of \$500.

Although there are many benefits that result from providing job accommodations, some employers are not sure how to do so. The following information provides some helpful tips for employers who want to improve their ability to provide and maintain effective job accommodations.

Tip 1: Develop Written Policies and Procedures

Employers should consider developing written accommodation policies and procedures. Written policies and procedures can help make sure that all employees are aware of the policies and procedures, help insure consistency when processing accommodation requests, and help document employers' efforts to provide effective accommodations.

Some things to consider when developing written policies and procedures include:

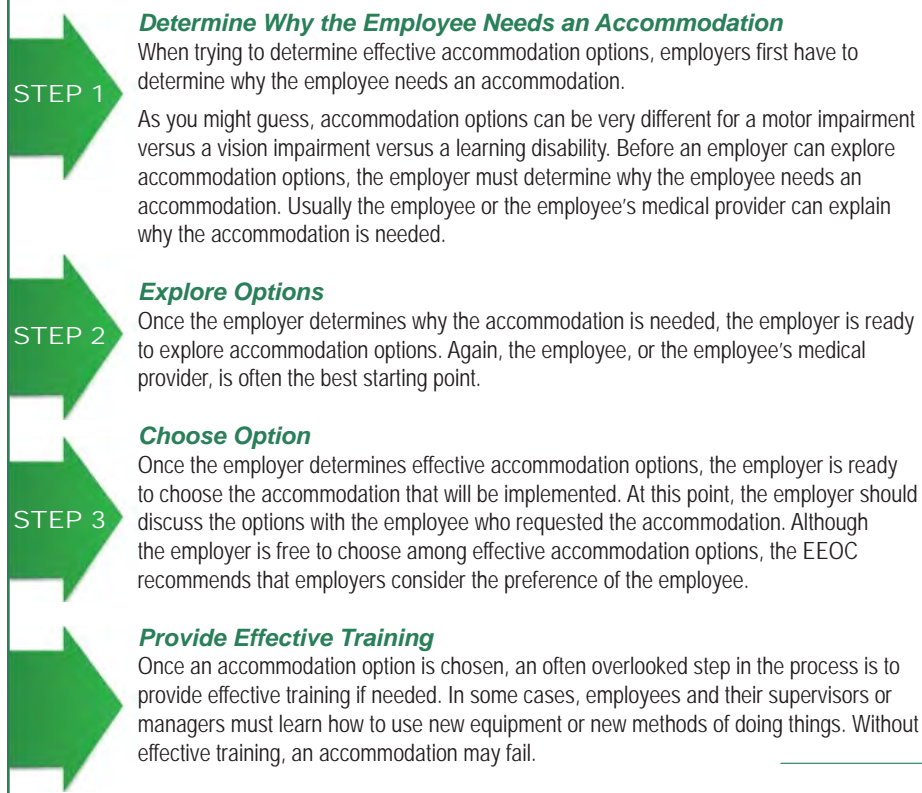
▲ Try to Keep Them Flexible and Simple

If the goal is to make it easier to provide effective job accommodations, policies and procedures that are overly rigid, technical, or complicated are not very useful. Employers should try to develop flexible policies and simple procedures when possible.

▲ Be Sure to Appoint a Responsible Person or Persons

Often times employees request accommodations but no one acts on the request – it gets passed around from one person to another with no one taking responsibility. Employers should decide who will be responsible for implementing and overseeing accommodation policies and procedures. It can be one responsible person, a team, or even individual supervisors or managers – the right approach may vary from workplace to workplace, but the important thing is to make someone responsible.

A SAMPLE PROCESS FOR DETERMINING EFFECTIVE ACCOMMODATION OPTIONS



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Tip 2: Train All Managers and Supervisors How to Recognize and Respond to an Accommodation Request

No matter who will actually be responsible for processing accommodation requests, all managers and supervisors need to know how to recognize a request, especially from an employee who might be protected by the ADA. One of the main reasons employees file complaints under the ADA is that the employer did not respond to an accommodation request. The problem is often that a supervisor or manager did not recognize the request. Employers also need to let managers and supervisors know what to do once a request is received to make sure the request is processed.

So, how can supervisors or managers be trained to recognize and respond to accommodation requests? When requesting an accommodation, employees only need to use plain English and do not have to mention the ADA or use legal terminology such as the phrase “reasonable accommodation.” In general, all an employee needs to say is that she needs “an adjustment or change at work for a reason related to a medical condition.” So, any time an employee indicates that a medical condition is causing a problem, a supervisor or manager should treat it as an accommodation request until a definite determination is made. If there is any doubt about whether a request was made, managers and supervisors should consult with the person or persons responsible for accommodations.

In addition to recognizing a request for accommodation, employers should make sure that all managers and supervisors know the policies and procedures for how accommodation requests will be processed. If the employer appointed a responsible person, that person should be notified immediately. If managers and supervisors are responsible for processing accommodation requests, they should be trained how.

Employers should also remember that if some accommodations are available to all employees as a matter of policy, employees with disabilities should not have to jump through unnecessary hoops to get those accommodations, even if needed because of a disability.

Tip 3: Have a Process for Determining Effective Accommodations

Employers may have difficulty figuring out how to determine effective accommodation options for employees with disabilities. One of the best places to start the process is with the employee who requested the accommodation. Often the employee knows what is needed and can suggest effective options.

If the employee does not know what accommodation is needed or if the employer wants to explore other options, another good resource is the employee’s medical provider. With the employee’s permission, the medical provider may be able to provide useful information about the employee’s limitations and effective accommodation options.

Tip 4: Monitor and Update Accommodations

Once you have successfully determined and implemented an accommodation, some accommodations may need to be monitored and periodically updated. For example, if the accommodation involved equipment, the equipment may need periodic maintenance. If the accommodation involved software that interfaces with an existing system, the software may need to be updated as the overall system is updated. If the accommodation involved a new method of doing things, the method may need to be modified as the workplace changes.

One of the best ways to monitor accommodations is to keep the lines of communication open with employees. Communication is important throughout the accommodation process, including the monitoring stage. Employees need to know that they can revisit an accommodation if needed before performance problems result.

Finally, employers may want to document their accommodation efforts. Documentation can be useful for new supervisors or managers or in case a dispute arises between the employer and an employee. Keep in mind that all documentation that contains medical information must be maintained in a confidential manner.

Tip 5: Train New Employees

Remember To:

- ▲ Train New Managers and Supervisors
- ▲ Train New Employees

Sometimes a new manager or supervisor decides to change the way things are done. If they do not know about accommodations that are in place, they may make changes that negatively affect these accommodations. While it is okay for a new manager or supervisor to make changes, if an accommodation for an employee with a disability is affected, a new accommodation may be necessary. New managers and supervisors need to be trained on the policies and procedures for job accommodations before a problem occurs.

In addition, employers need to remember to train new staff. Training new employees helps insure that accommodation policies and procedures will continue to be effective.

Reprinted From the Job Accommodation Network