

Accommodations for the Modern Workforce

The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) requires covered employers (businesses with 15 or more employees) to provide effective, reasonable accommodations for employees with disabilities. To help determine effective accommodations, the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC), recommends that employers use an “interactive process,” which simply means that employers and employees with disabilities who request accommodations work together to come up with accommodations.

According to the EEOC, the interactive process is not always required under the ADA. In many instances, the appropriate accommodation is obvious and therefore it is not necessary to go through a step-by-step process. For example, if an employee who uses a wheelchair requests that his desk be placed on blocks to elevate the desktop above the arms of the wheelchair and the employer complies, an appropriate accommodation has been requested, identified, and provided without the need for a formal process.

However, when an accommodation is not obvious, an appropriate accommodation is best determined through a flexible, interactive process. As part of this process, employers should consider the following steps:

Analyze the particular job involved and determine its purpose and essential functions;

1. Consult with the individual with a disability to ascertain the precise job-related limitations imposed by the individual’s disability and how those limitations could be overcome with a reasonable accommodation;
2. In consultation with the individual to be accommodated, identify potential accommodations and assess the effectiveness each would have in enabling the individual to perform the essential functions of the position; and
3. Consider the preference of the individual to be accommodated and select and implement the accommodation that is most appropriate for both the employee and the employer.

Step 1: Recognizing an Accommodation Request

The interactive process starts with an accommodation request from an employee with a disability. Employers must be able to recognize a request. According to the EEOC, an individual may use “plain English” and need not mention the ADA or use the phrase “reasonable accommodation” when requesting an accommodation. Therefore, any time an employee indicates that he/she is having a problem and the problem is related to a medical condition, the employer should consider whether the employee is making a request for accommodation under the ADA.



The EEOC provides the following examples:

Example A: An employee tells her supervisor, “I’m having trouble getting to work at my scheduled starting time because of medical treatments I’m undergoing.” This is a request for a reasonable accommodation.

Example B: An employee tells his supervisor, “I need six weeks off to get treatment for a back problem.” This is a request for a reasonable accommodation.

Example C: An employee tells his supervisor that he would like a new chair because his present one is uncomfortable. Although this is a request for a change at work, his statement is insufficient to put the employer on notice that he is requesting reasonable accommodation. He does not link his need for the new chair with a medical condition.

Tips:

- ▲ Err on the side of caution: If an employer is not sure whether an employee has requested an accommodation, the employer should ask the employee to clarify what is being requested and why.
- ▲ Act quickly: Once an accommodation request is identified, the employer should respond immediately – unnecessary delays in processing an accommodation request can violate the ADA.
- ▲ Conduct training: Employers should train all managers and supervisors to recognize accommodation requests and what to do with a request once it is received.

Step 2: Gathering Information

Once an accommodation request has been received, the employer should gather whatever information is necessary to process the request. Necessary information may include documentation of the disability and need for accommodation. In some cases, the employee’s disability

and need for accommodation are obvious and no additional information is needed.

In some cases, the individual may know that he/she is having difficulty, but may be uncertain about the exact cause or possible solution. For example, if an employee with a non-visible disability indicates she is having trouble completing her work tasks because of her disability, the employer does not have enough information to provide effective accommodations. The employer needs to know what limitations are interfering with job performance and what specific work tasks are at issue.

The employee who requested the accommodation is often the best source of information about the disability and possible accommodations. If the employee cannot provide the necessary information, then medical documentation can be useful. The important thing for employers to remember is not to ask for too much information.

Tips:

- ▲ Find out the limitation and problem. In most cases, to find effective accommodations, employers need to know what limitation is causing what problem so this is usually a good place to start.
- ▲ Get information from the employee when possible. Employees with disabilities are familiar with their limitations and often know what accommodations will work best for them.
- ▲ Remember ADA rules for medical inquiries. A good policy for employers is to only ask for what is absolutely necessary. Asking for all medical records will rarely, if ever, meet this test.

Step 3: Exploring Accommodation Options

Once the employer has identified the employee's limitation that is causing a problem and has identified what that problem is, then the employer is ready to explore accommodation options. At this step, employers should be open to new ideas and new ways of doing things. This is the time to brainstorm and consider what might work.

Again, the employee who requested the accommodation is a good place to start, so employers should always invite the employee to suggest accommodations. If more accommodation ideas are needed, the employer can ask the employee's medical provider for ideas – in some cases medical professionals are able to suggest effective accommodations. In other cases, they may not be able to suggest ideas, but may be able to say whether ideas under consideration will help overcome the employee's limitations.

Tips:

- ▲ Keep an open mind. Accommodations are about doing things differently to help overcome disability-related limitations, so keep an open mind when exploring accommodation options.
- ▲ Invite the employee to suggest accommodations. The employee who requested the accommodation may

have some good accommodation ideas, but may be hesitant to bring them up without being asked to do so.

Step 4: Choosing an Accommodation

Once accommodation options have been explored, the employer must choose what accommodation to implement. If there is more than one option, the employer should consider the preference of the employee. However, the employer gets to choose among effective options and can choose, for example, the lowest cost accommodation.

Sometimes employers are not sure whether an accommodation will work and are afraid if they try it out they will be locked in forever. This is not the case – employers are free to try accommodations and stop them if they do not work.

Tips:

- ▲ Consider the employee's preference. Although not required by the ADA, when possible employers should choose the accommodation the employee prefers.
- ▲ Consider a trial period. When it is not clear whether an accommodation will work, it might be possible to try out the accommodation.

Step 5: Implementing the Accommodation

This step is very important to the success of an accommodation. If equipment is involved, then it needs to be properly installed and the employee needs to be trained in its proper use. If the accommodation involves a schedule change or policy modification, then certain managers or supervisors may need to know of the change to effectively implement it. If the accommodation involves an outside service, someone needs to make sure the service is provided promptly and effectively. If the accommodation is a reassignment, then the employee may need time to acclimate to the new job.

Tips:

- ▲ Make sure all necessary steps are taken to implement the accommodation. A good way to do this is to check to see if the accommodation is actually working.
- ▲ Communicate with essential personnel about the accommodation. Remember ADA confidentiality rules and only let managers and supervisors know about the accommodation if necessary.

Step 6: Monitoring the Accommodation

An important but often forgotten part of the interactive process is monitoring accommodations after they are in place. In some cases, an accommodation stops being effective for various reasons such as: the employee's limitations change, workplace equipment changes, the job changes, the workplace itself changes, or the accommodation becomes an undue hardship for the employer.

Tips:

- ▲ Check on effectiveness. As things change in the workplace, accommodations may need to also change so employers should periodically check the effectiveness of accommodations.