

Common Accommodations - Aging Employees

Currently, 55 million Americans are 65 or older. They represent 14.1% of the U.S. population, about one in every seven Americans. By 2060, there will be about 98 million older persons. Older workers remain a vital segment of today's workforce. Some individuals have retired from one form of work and chosen to switch careers or work part-time to earn extra money and maintain insurance benefits, keep active, learn new skills, or socialize. With the aging of the baby boom generation, the average age for workers will increase, and the likelihood a disability increases and will need to be managed.

Age-related limitations can involve a wide range of conditions, including depression and anxiety, addiction, repetitive strain, and other cognitive, sensory, and physical limitations. Due to these limitations, older workers may need accommodations related to activities of daily living, and job performance skills. Limitations may be from aging, returning to work after an injury, the occurrence of a primary disability, the exacerbation of a long-term impairment, and/or prevention of a secondary impairment. Many older workers, however, will continue to work at full production with no limitations and no need for accommodations.

Keep in mind that aging, by itself, is not an impairment, but a person who has a medical condition (such as hearing loss, osteoporosis, or arthritis) often associated with age has an impairment on the basis of the medical condition. If that impairment substantially limits a major life activity, the person may be entitled to accommodations under the ADA.

The following are examples of some of the accommodations that might be useful for age-related limitations.

COGNITIVE IMPAIRMENTS

For aging employees with cognitive-related impairments, limitations may affect the ability to remember, concentrate, stay organized, manage time, complete tasks, and manage stress and emotions.

- ▲ Deficits in memory impact the ability to recall information that is seen and/or heard. This may result in the inability to recall facts, names, passwords, procedures, and telephone numbers. To accommodate memory deficits, an employer

might: allow the use of auditory or written cues and reminders as needed; allow additional training time; provide written checklists; or use a color-coding scheme to prioritize tasks. The use of notebooks, planners, sticky notes, and apps to record information can be effective reminders also. Employers can also provide labels and use bulletin boards to assist in locating items. Providing minutes of meetings and trainings is an accommodation that can assist all employees.

- ▲ Decreased ability to concentrate may be common in aging workers. To accommodate concentration deficits, an employer might: reduce distractions in the work area by providing space enclosures, sound absorption panels, a private office, white noise machines, music players, environmental sound machines, or even a fan. Employers can also divide large assignments into smaller tasks and goals, use auditory or written cues as appropriate, and restructure the job to include only essential functions to allow for more time and energy for the completion of those.
- ▲ Difficulties with organization can be the result of an inability to retain information, and/or the inability to transfer or apply skills in different work environments. To accommodate deficits in organization, an employer might: allow the use of daily, weekly, and monthly task lists, as well as calendars with automated reminders to highlight meetings and deadlines; divide large assignments into smaller more manageable tasks and goals; or use a color-coding scheme to prioritize tasks.
- ▲ Limitations in managing time and completing tasks can be caused by difficulty with self-initiating, marking time as it passes incrementally by minutes and hours, as well as the inability to gauge the proper amount of time to set aside for certain tasks. To accommodate deficits in managing time and completing tasks, an employer might: arrange materials in the order of use, with a numerical or color-coded task list; allow a workplace mentor to guide the employee; provide additional training or retraining as needed; provide verbal and written prompts and reminders as needed; or use a watch that can be set multiple times where the face will show what task needs to be performed at each given time.

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- ▲ Difficulties managing stress and emotions may be result of the psychological effects of aging that can cause depression and anxiety. To accommodate deficits in managing stress and emotions, an employer might: modify environmental triggers such as sounds and smells; allow a flexible work environment, which may include flexible scheduling such as adjusting the beginning and ending times of the employee's work day and / or modifying a break schedule; allow leave for counseling; or work from home or Flexi-place, on a part-time or even on a temporary basis. Referring the employee to counseling and/ or an Employee Assistance Programs can be helpful and appropriate, as can allowing telephone calls during work hours to doctors and others for needed support.

MOTOR IMPAIRMENTS

When considering accommodations for aging employees with motor related impairments, limitations may have an impact on gross motor functions, fine motor functions, or a combination of both. For a worker with a limitation that impacts a gross motor function, there are a variety of accommodations that could be implemented. Compact material handling devices can assist someone who has difficulty lifting or transporting items of various sizes.

Carrying heavy items is another type of job task that an employee with gross motor limitations may have difficulty performing. This could be a problem with carrying heavy items either on the ground or upstairs. One common accommodation is to have the use of a dolly or hand truck or a cart.

Accommodations related to workplace accessibility may need to be considered for an employees with gross motor limitations. For example, climbing up a set of stairs could be difficult for someone with a hip impairment. Some employers express concerns that accessibility-related accommodations require them to remodel a whole building. However, there are some lower-cost accommodations, such as relocating a work station, which could be implemented as alternatives to a remodel.

Individuals that have a sitting restriction or have a sitting and standing restriction could use an adjustable work station, modifying their existing workstation, or have an ergonomic evaluation completed. For those working in manufacturing environments or in a retail environment and have trouble standing, a stand/lean stool could be an option. These stools allow a person to alternate between a leaning position and a sitting position and can be adjusted so that the employee can access an assembly station or retail counter.

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Some aging employees experience fine motor limitations resulting from conditions such as carpal tunnel disorder or arthritis, and have difficulty performing tasks like keyboarding or using a mouse. Alternative input devices could be used to enable an employee to access information on a computer. Speech recognition software could also be a possible accommodation solution for those who are unable to use a keyboard or mouse. Writing aids, grip aids, typing/keyboard aids, or hands-free telephones are other options to explore. Employees working in manufacturing environments who have fine motor limitations might benefit from using vacuum pickup tools, extra grip gloves, anti-vibration gloves, or anti-vibration tool wraps.

SENSORY IMPAIRMENTS

Sensory impairments are very common among aging employees. In fact, the names of two common conditions — presbyopia, a type of vision loss in which one gradually develops difficulty focusing on nearby objects, and presbycusis, a type of hearing impairment in which one gradually develops a reduced sense of hearing in both ears.

Many workers seek out assistive technology such as hearing aids and computer glasses on their own and never come to the attention of their employer.

The word “mobility” is often associated with conditions that impair movement, such as spinal cord injury, stroke, and arthritis. However, it can also be used in connection with conditions that impair vision. Some simple steps that employers can take to make it easier for all workers to get around include providing small-group or individual tours of a facility at the time of employee orientation. Providing adequate lighting in entryways, parking areas, hallways, restrooms and common areas; and providing orientation tools such as maps and printed directions may be useful.

Employees who are hard of hearing may benefit from accommodations to enhance communication, for example over the telephone or during meetings and trainings. Two of the most common strategies for improving telephone-related communication are amplification and captioned calls.

There are many potential accommodation solutions that aging employees with impairments could benefit from in the workplace. Each situation should be evaluated on a case-by-case basis to determine options that work for both the employer and employee, and there may be some trial and error before an effective solution is found. For further information and resources, please check out Job Accommodation Network at www.askjan.org.