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How Employers Can Better Serve Disabled Employees

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As the population ages, a significant shift is occurring in the workforce. The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics projects that by 2030, the number of workers aged 75 and older will increase by 96.5%, making this age group the fastest-growing segment of the workforce.

With this demographic shift, employers must prepare for a rising number of employees with disabilities. More than 30% of Americans over the age of 65 have some disability, a figure that rises to over 50% for those over 75.

As these individuals consider extending their working years, the likelihood of disabilities increases. Employers need to recognize this reality and adjust their practices accordingly. But why should companies embrace this challenge, and what can they do to support older workers with disabilities?

The Business Case for Supporting Disabled Employees

One of the most common misconceptions is that accommodations disrupt the workflow of a team or organization," explained Pam Shlemon, the Executive Director of the Commission on Rehabilitation Counselor Certification. "We recommend minimizing disruption while ensuring disabled employees are provided an environment in which to succeed.

Another common misconception is that accommodation is a financial burden. In a recent study, the Department of Labor found that nearly half of the accommodations made for people with disabilities can be implemented at no cost to employers. Of those that do incur a one-time fee, the median expenditure is only \$300. A great example here is that for some folks with mobility issues, standing for long periods is difficult. Adding a stool to a workstation where most employees stand can be a quick yet transformative way to ensure that disabled employees can complete the same tasks."

"There can also be a misconception that accommodations for disabilities are a one-size-fits-all solution when that is very often not the case," adds Joseph M. Pancari, CEO at CP Unlimited. "These accommodations can vary based on ability. While this may imply that the employer will have to incur a lot of extra expense in hiring people with disabilities, we find this to be a myth. Once someone with a disability has a job, they will keep it for as long as they can. And, when we work alongside someone with different abilities, it actually enhances our view of what is possible."

Employers may initially view accommodations for disabled employees as an inconvenience or a costly necessity. However, research and experience show that these adjustments add value and improve efficiency. Companies that foster inclusive environments benefit from the diverse perspectives and experiences that these employees bring leading to innovation, enhanced problem-solving abilities, and stronger team dynamics.



Moreover, older workers possess a wealth of knowledge and experience that can be invaluable to organizations. By supporting these employees through appropriate accommodations, companies not only retain valuable talent but also enhance their reputation as inclusive and forward-thinking employers.

"When we think of people with disabilities, physical challenges immediately come to mind—the inability to walk, stand, or use one's body," advises Loren Margolis, Executive Coach & CEO of TLS Leaders. "However, we must expand our view. Many disabilities are hidden. Employees with ADHD, epilepsy, diabetes, chronic pain, neurodivergence, and other invisible challenges should be included as part of your organization's inclusivity strategy. True inclusivity requires organizations to go beyond adapting only to the disabilities that can be seen."

Understanding the Rights and Accommodations for Older Workers

As older workers face the dual challenges of aging and potential disabilities, they must be aware of their rights under the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). This legislation requires employers to provide reasonable accommodations to qualified individuals with disabilities to perform the essential functions of their jobs.

However, Ed Hones, Attorney, Hones Law Employment Lawyers PLLC, advises that one-way employers can better serve disabled employees is by fostering a genuinely inclusive workplace culture that goes beyond mere compliance with the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). "While providing reasonable accommodations is a legal requirement, employers should aim to proactively identify and remove barriers that might hinder disabled employees' full participation. This not only benefits disabled employees but also contributes to a more adaptable and resilient workplace overall. In doing so, employers not only comply with the law but also demonstrate a commitment to equity and inclusion that resonates across the entire workforce."

Employers must be proactive in educating their workforce about these rights and the types of accommodation that can be requested. This includes providing accessible workspaces, flexible schedules, assistive technology, and ensuring that company policies are inclusive and supportive of disabled employees.

Addressing Employment Barriers for Disabled Americans

"The Office of Disability Employment Policy notes in their research that disabilities related to mobility and the degeneration of things like sight and hearing are most often found in older workers," shared Shlemon. "Another related challenge is the navigation of a new sector or role that may not match their prior work experience and the process of learning new job tasks."

Despite the legal protections and accommodations available, disabled Americans, particularly those from marginalized communities, continue to face significant employment barriers. The jobless rate for Black disabled Americans, for instance, stands at 12.3%, nearly double that of their white counterparts. For those unable to find employment, the situation can be particularly challenging, as proving eligibility for disability benefits often requires proof of previous jobs.

In New York City, last year, for example, Mayor Eric Adams announced an initiative to find 2,500 of our neighbors with disabilities career-track employment over the next two years," said Pancari. "Employers can create, identify, and expand positions specifically for persons with disabilities and work hand-in-glove with Agencies or faith-based institutions to fill them, especially in areas where there are high populations from which to source talent. These initiatives are also critically necessary: it is reported that two-thirds of adult New Yorkers with disabilities are jobless — being either unemployed or not in the labor market—disproportionately impacting persons who are Black and disabled."

Shlemon also stresses advocating for increased awareness and support for these individuals, educating employers to recognize the systemic barriers that exist and to take proactive steps to create more inclusive hiring practices. By doing so, companies can contribute to a more equitable workforce where all individuals, regardless of their abilities, have the opportunity to succeed.