

# Facts Sheets and Scenarios for Employers: Job Accommodations for Employees with Mental Health Conditions

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## FACTS FOR EMPLOYERS ABOUT JOB ACCOMMODATIONS FOR EMPLOYEES WITH MENTAL HEALTH CONDITIONS



- Under the Americans with Disabilities Act, most employers are required to provide *'reasonable accommodations'* to *qualified* individuals with disabilities unless doing so would create an *undue hardship* such as unreasonably high costs or significant disruption to the nature of the business. Employers are generally familiar with the ADA as it applies to employment.
- Typically **modifications** are made to: the hiring process; work environment or job duties; benefits and privileges of employment.
- There is some evidence from the research that accommodations for persons with psychiatric disabilities **help them to stay employed, have greater job satisfaction**, have better sense of mastery and well-being and have greater opportunity for promotions.
- There is a greater tendency for those **with** accommodations to end jobs for positive reasons; those without accommodations had more of a tendency to leave jobs for negative reasons.
- Length of **job tenure was positively associated** with the number of accommodations.
- Job accommodations **cost the employer little** to nothing to implement.

- Disclosure of psychiatric disabilities to employers is a **complex process** for which individuals need guidance to make decisions about what to say, when, and to whom (those referred by a psychiatric rehabilitation program bypass this problem in most cases as they employer is aware of the program's members/clients).



- The majority of employers are **satisfied with the employees** with psychiatric disabilities who have accommodations.
- **Coworkers were generally supportive** of job accommodations for people with psychiatric disabilities (flexible work hours, banking overtime for use as sick leave, and access to counseling) except for accommodations they viewed as 'less appropriate' - longer or more frequent breaks.
- Using clear, **assertive communication** (about job duties, standards and expectations) is associated with successful accommodation outcomes.
- **"Relationship accommodations"** are associated with successful accommodation outcomes (e.g. extra supervision, education for coworkers or specific support by coworkers.)

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## ***STORIES THAT ILLUSTRATE JOB ACCOMMODATIONS FOR EMPLOYEES WITH PSYCHIATRIC DISABILITIES***

### **1. From an individual perspective – accommodations that work.**

Vasco N. is a young adult who is dealing with his depression, anxiety and also the adjustments of moving to a new city where he has no friends. He has begun a job in a museum where he is expected to gather data about the new acquisitions catalog them and communicate information in different formats to different departments. He also has a number of other related tasks. He is doing well as far as relating to others in the museum but is feeling overwhelmed by the complexity of the job and feels that the learning curve is too high for him. He is also feeling very lonely and does not know what to do at breaks and lunch when others are socializing. He confides in his employment counselor that he wants to quit because he is too “stressed out” and does not feel like he is doing a good job. At the same time he has some excellent ideas about how to make some changes that would help him to reduce his anxiety and do a better job. A final issue to be addressed is that Vasco is very tired, both from his medications and his schedule. He had to get up at 6:00 a.m. in order to get the bus that would get him to work by 8:30. If he took a bus half an hour later, he would be able to sleep an additional 1.5 hours.



With the support of the employment counselor, he went to meet with his supervisor and this is the plan that resulted:

1. The communication and delivery systems were modified and reorganized in a way that helped Vasco to be more focused and more efficient. Incidentally, the changes turned out to benefit the whole museum and to make the procedures more streamlined and efficient.
2. Vasco and his supervisor agreed to meet every week for 20 minutes to go over any job related issues that need to be addressed.
3. Vasco was given permission to take two short afternoon breaks instead of one break, because his anxiety was the greatest in the afternoons.
4. Vasco was allowed to work 9:00 to 5:00 instead of 8:30 to 4:30.
5. His supervisor informally asked another employee to help Vasco to ease into the socializing which sometimes took place at breaks and lunch.

This plan made Vasco feel more confident, reduced his anxiety, increased his sense of belonging and in effect had a benefit to everyone in the museum’s workforce. He not only was able to stay on at the museum, but eventually received recognition and a promotion.

**Evaluation:** In this case all three types of accommodations that are typically important to persons with psychiatric disabilities were addressed: *task*, *routine*, and *relationship*. We can compare to handles installed in the shower. They benefit everyone, not just a person with a disability. In this case the accommodations improved the entire work environment. There is some evidence that those with 5 or more accommodations stay in their employment much longer, so this was also a good example of looking more comprehensively at the needs of the employee. We also note that none of these accommodations cost the museum any additional funds. The reorganization did take time and planning, but no added costs.



## **2. From the employer perspective – a positive approach.**

Louise Manos is the manager of a branch office of Verity Insurance Company in a small city in Wyoming. She is having a difficult time recruiting and maintaining qualified employees and is searching for ways to improve the work environment as well as improve recruitment and retention. Initially she met with a vocational rehabilitation professional who described the benefits of hiring and supporting individuals with disabilities. He described ways in which the work environment, policies and practices could be shaped to make it successful for persons with disabilities. Ms. Manos agreed to work on making a more welcoming and supportive environment and also was able to get Verity to improve the physical accommodations to the branch office. She then began to work with the state vocational rehabilitation office on how to recruit individuals.

All went smoothly until there was a referral of an individual who was identified through a supported employment provider and who had a non physical disability. The person disclosed her psychiatric disability during the interview process and requested that, if hired, she be allowed time to see her mental health providers during work time. She also said that in the past her job worked out well when she had regular supervision with someone who understood her. Ms. Manos had not dealt with this open disclosure in the past but had supervised someone who appeared to have mental health problems that were not disclosed. She was apprehensive so she consulted with the VR counselor and also with the Supported Employment Specialist and was

reassured by both that this individual was qualified for the position and with support could be a very good employee.

Ms. Manos explored the possibility of joining the Wyoming Business Leadership Network in order to continue her education about the hiring persons with disabilities. She also made an appointment to visit a local clubhouse to learn about how people with psychiatric disabilities can move to different levels of employment and education with peer and employer support. She consulted the Job Accommodation Network (JAN) website for guidance and then began to look a company policies and training for supervisors. She hired the individual with a psychiatric disability through the supported employment program and ensured that her supervisor was aware of the employee's needs. The supervisor and the employee developed a plan which included:

1. A once-per-week session with her mental health clinician would be authorized; time once every two months to meet with her psychiatrist would be authorized;
2. Meeting with her supervisor would occur twice a week at the beginning and then once a week when she was ready;
3. Clear instructions for her job as a claims processor would be written and laminated so that the employee could keep them nearby. The employer decided this was a good idea for everyone, so provided the same type of instructions to all the employees in that department;
4. Employee could initially work a 30 hour week and then move to a 35 hour week after she adjusted to her routine.

**Evaluation:** This employer sought out a new source/s of job candidates for the right reasons: good employees were needed. She made a point of investigating best practices. Although she may have had apprehensions about hiring a person with a psychiatric disability, she was able to focus on the functional abilities and functional needs of the individual and not be concerned about diagnosis. Her challenge now will be to continue to monitor the new employee's performance and needs so that the job will be successful and to continue to make the work environment one that is mentally healthy for everyone.



### 3. The wrong match.

Joshua C. is a man in his mid-40's who has had a large gap in his employment history. He worked in the past as a fork lift driver until he had an industrial accident that caused a hip injury and long term pain problems. In his late twenties, he became severely depressed and over the next 20 years he had multiple hospitalizations, crisis services and day programs to help stabilize him. He was convinced that his depression and his chronic pain would prevent him from working and had been told this by numerous healthcare providers over the years.

He finally learned about and joined a local rehabilitation clubhouse program which helps individuals with psychiatric disabilities to various levels of temporary and permanent positions in the workplace. Although he joined for the social aspects of the program, he soon decided he would like to work again. The program totally supported this and helped him into a part time position at the front desk of a small hotel. The job required him to multitask – greeting and registering new guests, checking people out, entering data on the computer, dealing with crises and problems, offering information about the community and other tasks. He was managing the job with the support of clubhouse for the first month or so and then the busy summer season arrived and he felt completely overwhelmed with the job.

The employer offered to let Joshua take more breaks and had other employees fill in for him during those times. This actually created some resentment on the part of the other coworkers because the staff was so small, it meant they felt it was an imposition. Joshua and the staff agreed that it was not the right job for him and helped him to move on.

**Evaluation:** Even though an accommodation was offered to help reduce the anxiety that Joshua felt especially during busy times, it was not enough. The basic problem was that this was the wrong match. Joshua does better when he is doing fewer tasks at the same time – he is not a multi-tasker. He also did not like being in a busy environment and subsequently moved into another position where he was “behind the scenes” and could work at a good pace but on a more focused job.



#### **4. The wrong accommodation.**

Mihoko N. is in her early 50's and has had a sporadic work history due to her psychiatric disability and other life events. She began a new job with the help of her Supported Employment program. The job involved providing quality reviews in a glass manufacturing company in upstate N.Y. Her program guided her to this job because she is especially good at detail work. When she interviewed for the job the employer knew that she came from a psychiatric

rehabilitation program but not much else about her. She told the employer that she thought she was qualified for the job but that she had been out of the workforce for a long time and she was worried about the social demands of the work environment e.g. lunch time, break time and everyday interactions with others. The employer, assuming that she was very shy and anxious about socialization, told her that she could go to another part of the building where it is quiet during breaks and did not have to go into the cafeteria or other more socially oriented places. He removed two of the tasks from her job that involved interacting with another department.

As it turned out, the main challenge that Mihoko had in her work was trying to remember all of the procedures and processes that were her responsibility. She had a short job description but in reality there were at least 15 different tasks and even more sub-tasks that she had to remember. She was not so uncomfortable in the social interactions and began to eat with one or two other employees who welcomed her. Over the first several weeks she acted as if everything was going fine and did not reveal to her Employment Specialist how much difficulty she was having. She did not want ANYONE to think she was “stupid”. She began to have physical symptoms such as stomach pain and headaches and finally told her Employment Specialist what was happening. This led to discussion with the employer and the following plan:

1. Mihoko will have clearly written instructions for each aspect of the job with checklists for several of the tasks and color coded schemes for priority projects.
2. Her supervisor will meet with her for a few minutes at the end of each day to see how things are going and if she needed any help.
3. She will receive written minutes of all meetings.
4. Her Employment Specialist will meet with her at lunch time once a week until she is comfortable and will provide praise and positive reinforcement.
5. Her Employment Specialist will help her to use some web-based memory exercises to increase her cognitive functioning.

**Evaluation:** Sometimes the exact accommodations that someone may need do not become evident until after they have been employed for a while. In this case the anticipated problem was not the one that surfaced. Mihoko, the Employment Specialist and the employer together were able to develop a new plan that should help the employee to function better and feel less overwhelmed by her job. People with psychiatric disabilities sometimes require accommodations that are related to emotional or physical functioning, but most often it is the cognitive and social-interpersonal functioning that needs attention and support. The important factor in this scenario was that Mihoko had a good relationship with her Employment Specialist that enabled her to tell the truth before it was too late. Many jobs are lost because either the employer or the employee wait too long to address the problem. This time, it was not too late and the accommodations were put into place.





## **5. The right accommodations.**

Cecile is a single woman in her 30's originally from Haiti. She has proven to be hard working and is highly motivated to work in order to support her children. English is her second language and her English speaking is fair but she does not write well. She has worked in two supermarkets bagging groceries, and in a hospital cafeteria. She has cared for her aging grandmother for the past few years. She has struggled with her psychiatric illness for the past 8 years and her exact diagnoses have been unclear. Clinicians have disagreed. Several functional limitations, however, have been identified:

- She has trouble sustaining energy level through the day.
- She is easily distracted.
- She is hyperverbal – tends to talk too much both on and off the job.
- She is very sensitive to change especially change of people in the work environment.
- She has trouble meeting deadlines.

Through her psychiatric rehabilitation program, she is offered a position in a nursing home where she works 25 hours per week in the laundry. This also requires that she go into the patients' rooms to get the dirty laundry and bring it to be cleaned. Cecile and her employer have developed this plan in order to meet her needs:

1. Tailored work day.
2. One extra breaks per day (Employment Specialist recommends she use this for meditation and practices meditation with her).
3. Develop a written description of the tasks and procedures along with a check list. Have these typed up in Haitian Creole (and English.)
4. Allow employee to use a headset to listen to soothing music during a portion of her day (reduce anxiety and likelihood of talking too much)
5. Remind employee of deadlines that might be important until she has integrated the information and no longer needs the reminders. Use whatever human, written or electronic format works best for her.
6. Make sure she is given positive praise and reinforcement for jobs that are well done.
7. Remind her to keep non work related conversations out of work areas.
8. Provide extra supports through times of change especially if Supervisor or Employment Specialist leaves.

**Evaluation:** In this case, the multiple needs of the employee have been anticipated based on the knowledge of her Employment Specialist. The plan developed seems broad enough to help Cecile to sustain her employment. Other issues may surface as time passes, but if the important relationships develop with the supervisor and the Employment Specialist, she should do very well. Use of the headset is something that has to be adjusted according to her duties and put away when she has to interact with others. Thinking about potential changes is also worthwhile since it often happens that the entire work environment is contingent on one person and if that person leaves, the employee can have great anxiety.

