

INVESTING IN PEOPLE: JOB ACCOMMODATION SITUATIONS AND SOLUTIONS



All employees need the right tools and work environment to effectively perform their jobs. Similarly, individuals with disabilities may need workplace adjustments—or accommodations—to maximize the value they can add to their employer.

An accommodation can be simple, such as putting blocks under a table's legs so that a person who uses a wheelchair can roll up to it. It might involve advanced technology, such as installing a screen reader on a computer so that a person who is blind can manage documents. It may be procedural, such as altering a work schedule or job assignments.

When thinking about accommodations, the focus should not be on the person's disability but rather on essential job tasks and the physical functions necessary to complete them. Consider a receptionist who cannot answer the phone because he or she cannot grasp the receiver. A handle could be attached to the receiver to enable him or her to balance it on the hand. Or, the receptionist could use a headset, eliminating the need for grasping altogether. The reason the person can't grasp the receiver is immaterial. With a simple accommodation, the employee can answer the phone.

Because accommodations are for individuals, they are individual in nature. But by requiring employers and employees to think creatively about how tasks are accomplished, an accommodation can benefit more than a single employee—it can benefit business. Devising accommodations can uncover strategies that help others, regardless of whether they have disabilities. For instance, headsets may help other receptionists better perform their duties and reduce neck strain. Similarly, magnifying glasses at work stations help people with visual disabilities read documents and may reduce eye strain for others. When an accommodation has widespread benefit, it is referred to as universal design. Perhaps the most ubiquitous example of universal design is curb cuts. These were designed to enable people who use wheelchairs to get on and off sidewalks, but they are routinely used by people for other purposes, such as pushing strollers or carts.

Thus, an accommodation is an investment that promises an immediate return—an investment in a qualified worker who happens to have a disability and is, or could become, a valuable asset to a business. Moreover, accommodations usually are not expensive. According to the Job Accommodation Network (JAN), a free and confidential service from the U.S. Department of Labor's Office of Disability Employment Policy that provides individualized accommodation solutions, two-thirds of accommodations cost less than \$500, with nearly a quarter costing nothing at all. Yet, more than half of the employers surveyed said that each accommodation benefited their organization an average of \$5,000.

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Below are real-life examples of successful accommodations that were implemented by employers after consulting JAN.

Situation: A woman with a severe developmental disability worked in an envelope manufacturing facility operating a machine that stacked boxes. She needed to stack 20 boxes at a time, but could not keep a mental count past 10.

Solution: The employer installed a punch counter and trained the woman to include punching in her routine—tape, stack, punch; tape, stack, punch. As the woman's productivity soared, the employer realized that keeping count is difficult for many people and decided to install counters at other machines. **Cost: \$10.**

Situation: A person who is blind was a switchboard operator for a large building. As such, she needed to know which telephone lines were on hold, in use or ringing.

Solution: The employer installed a light probe that emitted a noise signaling which console buttons were blinking and which ones were steadily lit. The console was also modified to audibly differentiate incoming calls from internal calls. **Cost of light probe: \$45.** Console modifications were made at no cost to the employer.

Situation: A student with cerebral palsy obtained a work-study position with the landscape crew of his university. His supervisor was concerned that he could not safely operate a push mower because of his motor impairment. The individual agreed that his gait and balance were a concern in safely operating a push mower.

Solution: His supervisor assigned him other tasks, such as mulching, weeding and picking up litter. **Cost: None.**

Situation: A college chemistry teacher who used a wheelchair needed to work in a lab designed to accommodate students at a standing height.

Solution: The college provided the teacher with an elevating wheelchair. **Cost: \$7,000.**

Situation: A warehouse worker whose job involved maintaining and delivering supplies had difficulty with the job's physical demands due to fatigue from cancer treatment.

Solution: The individual was provided a three-wheeled scooter at work to reduce the amount of walking required, and the warehouse was rearranged to reduce the amount of climbing and reaching. **Cost: \$1,500.**

Situation: A secretary had a back impairment and experienced pain when reaching for things such as documents, files and the phone receiver.

Solution: To reduce the need for reaching, she was provided an adjustable work station, a telephone headset, a copy holder and a horizontal filing cabinet. **Cost: adjustable work station, \$900; headset, \$50; copy holder, \$35; horizontal filing cabinet, \$300.**

Situation: A clerical worker who stamped paperwork for several hours each day had difficulty pinching and gripping due to carpal tunnel syndrome.

Solution: The stamp handles were wrapped in anti-vibration wrap and cut tennis balls were placed on the top to eliminate the need for fine motor pinching and gripping to operate them. **Cost: anti-vibration wrap, \$15; tennis balls, \$3.**

Situation: A teacher with multiple sclerosis was not able to effectively communicate with students because his speech became soft and slurred when he was fatigued.

Solution: He was provided with a personal speech amplifier so that he would not have to strain to project his voice and was allowed to schedule his classes to allow periodic rest breaks. **Cost: \$210.**

Situation: A saw operator with a learning disability had trouble measuring to the fraction of an inch.

Solution: His employer gave him a small pocket-sized card that listed the fractions on an enlarged picture of an inch. The employee used the card to determine correct fractions by visually comparing it with the ruler when measuring wood cuts. **Cost: None.**

Situation: An office manager who had been treated for stress and depression had difficulty concentrating when trying to complete assignments.

Solution: She was allowed to schedule blocks of time each week during which she could focus on tasks without interruption and modify her hours to allow more time for counseling and exercise. Her supervisor also arranged stress-management training for all employees and informed them about the company's employee assistance program. **Cost: None.**

Situation: A meter reader with hearing loss needed to be alerted to the sound of barking dogs and other sudden noises that might present dangers while working in city neighborhoods.

Solution: His employer provided him a device that vibrates in response to sudden noises. **Cost: \$300.**



For More Information

Employers seeking accommodation assistance can contact JAN at 1-800-526-7234 (V/TTY) or www.jan.wvu.edu.



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