



10 Ways to Welcome Workers with Disabilities: Toward an inclusive work environment | BY BONITA SUMMERS

Some people are born with disabilities; others encounter them later in life. In Canada, the employment rate for workers with disabilities has grown from 49.3% in 2001 to 53.5% in 2006. According to Statistics Canada, for the 16.6% of the Canadian population with disabilities, those with the most severe issues are the least likely to have technical aids or assistive devices that would allow them to work independently.

Workers with less visible conditions, such as dyslexia, rarely have access to assistive aids and may feel compelled to justify their need for help. Since there is little jurisprudence in regard to accommodation, it falls to employers to create policy that protects affected workers and encourages staff co-operation. What follows are suggestions for ensuring that workers with disabilities feel valued and understood in the workplace.

As an employer, you can:

1. Discuss accommodations.

After initial arrangements are made, schedule follow-ups with the employee. Certain health conditions deteriorate over time or during periods of high stress, and some workers are reluctant to ask for additional help. Speak to your staff member in private and offer to keep the dialogue open, so that he or she feels welcome to approach you if an adjustment to accommodation is required.

2. Ensure that all new employees are aware of policies.

The trust-building process with a new coworker can be compromised if a staff member feels compelled to ask for compliance on policy the new worker was unaware of violating. The new recruit may also require accommodation for a condition of which the employer was unaware during the recruiting process.

3. Do an annual ergonomic assessment.

Examine workstations for problems, and present workers with an opportunity to indicate any dissatisfaction. Assessments allow workers to notify the employer of issues with compliance while maintaining anonymity.

4. Hold information sessions.

Staff wellness education can address any misconceptions employees may have about conditions prevalent in today's diverse workplaces. A supervisor made aware of the challenges of dyslexia may be willing to help a worker finish his reports on time. Staff might be more compliant with scent-free policies if they understand that employees with such sensitivities may take ill when exposed to the

chemical base of the product, possibly involving time away due to the severity of their reaction.

5. Establish an accommodations committee.

Your organization will benefit from regular input by staff members, including those with disabilities. You'll also be empowering these workers by recognizing them as endowed with experience that can improve workplace health conditions. Sensitive employees can be the canary in the coal mine, spotting air quality and ergonomic problems before more resilient workers are aware.

As a co-worker, you can:

6. Follow through on policies.

It's not easy complying with policy that may require you to change your laundry detergent, go without perfume, and think before you grab for the static spray. It's that much more difficult for your co-worker to have to take action for self-protection. Scent-sensitive employees would rather fit in quietly and focus on their duties than go to supervisors to ask to work elsewhere or risk creating friction with you by discussing the matter directly.

7. Recognize that we're all differently able.

We all have limitations. For many of us, these manifest as insecurity, fear, and undesirable character traits that hinder us in realizing our full potential. It's possible to admire the patience and fortitude your colleagues with disabilities have had to develop as a result of health conditions. Good dialogue can begin from a place of respect and appreciation for the qualities we each possess, which help us to face the challenges life puts before us.

8. Get educated on less visible disabilities.

Comprehension of the nature of an illness or disability may make us more apt to comply willingly with disability policy. We may eliminate our use of scented products in the workplace if we know that failure to do so will irritate the airways of a colleague to the point that he or she can't breathe and requires medical attention.

9. Realize that disability policies may benefit you.

Your co-worker who needs everyone to refrain from using scented products or who requires that the office be organized for greater mobility is contributing to a safer workplace in terms of air quality and a better work environment for all staff.

10. Consider that you are not immune to disability.

It doesn't take much to tip the scales. The bombardment of chemicals on your immune system after many years can result in



sensitivity to all products containing those chemicals. It's not long before your decisions on outings are determined by the scent policy of the venue. An accident or sudden illness can render you disabled and requiring mobility assistance.

Welcoming persons with disabilities into our work environments comes down to not seeing them as "other," but recognizing that we are all in the process of overcoming our limitations. **D!**

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