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Disability Etiquette in the Workplace

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JAN'S ACCOMMODATION FACT SHEET SERIES

DISABILITY ETIQUETTE IN THE WORKPLACE

More than one out of every ten working age Americans (21-64) has a disability (Weathers, 2005). As the baby-boomer population ages and continues employment, the prevalence of disability management in the workplace continues to be a significant issue for employers. Disability management should include etiquette strategies that foster inclusion of people with disabilities in employment settings. Appropriate disability etiquette allows all employees to be more comfortable and productive. For employers wanting to successfully integrate people with disabilities into their organizations, the following etiquette strategies may be useful.

Recruitment Etiquette

People with disabilities continue to be the most unemployed and underemployed population in the United States. They represent an untapped labor pool offering valuable skills, qualifications, and assets for employers. Several recruitment strategies can increase an organization's access to potential applicants.

- Post job openings with local disability organizations and college and university career centers. Advertise vacancies within disability-related publications, websites, and job fairs.
- Include details about the job location in all postings and highlight accessible features of the location, if appropriate.
- Indicate the availability of flexible working conditions, including telecommuting or flexible scheduling.
- Only include qualifications in job postings that are actually required for the available position. Require equal qualifications of all job applicants, regardless of disability.
- Advertise the organization as an equal opportunity employer.
- Establish internship and mentoring programs targeted towards youth with disabilities.

Interview Etiquette

Scheduling the Interview

- Let applicants know accommodations can be provided upon request and who to contact for more information.
- Schedule interviews at an accessible location. If the workplace is inaccessible, be prepared to conduct the interview at an alternate accessible location.
- Be familiar with travel directions to the interview location, including the path of travel into the building.
- Notify applicants in advance with the names of all interview participants.
- Be aware that an applicant with a disability may need to arrange for transportation following the interview. Provide the applicant with an estimate of interview duration and expected end time, if requested.

Greeting the Interviewee

- Be aware of the interview location's accessible features including restrooms, drinking fountains, and telephones.
- Use a normal tone of voice when welcoming the interviewee. Only raise your voice upon request.
- Call the person by his first name only when extending similar familiarity to other interviewees.
- Always introduce yourself and other interview participants. Offer to shake hands, if appropriate.
- Speak directly to the interviewee instead of any companion, personal attendant, or interpreter, when greeting the person for the interview.

Interviewing

- Always ask similar questions of all interviewees, regardless of disability. Conduct the interview emphasizing abilities, achievements, and interviewee qualities.
- Treat all interviewees with respect.
- Select an interview location with adequate lighting.
- Speak directly to the interviewee instead of any companion, personal attendant, or interpreter throughout the meeting.

New Employee Etiquette

- Review physical features of the work environment. If any create potential barriers for new employees with disabilities, make adjustments as necessary.
- Identify assistive technologies available to increase workplace accessibility.
- Provide alternate formats (e.g., large print, Braille) of all necessary work-related documents including benefits information, employee manuals and policies, and professional development materials, as needed.
- Prepare co-workers and supervisors for the arrival of a new employee with a disability, when appropriate. This preparation can include training and orientation to disability-specific issues. Such training should not be used to single-out the person with the disability. An overall disability awareness initiative is best.
- Remember to include employees with disabilities in emergency evacuation planning and procedures.

Workplace Etiquette: Mobility, Sensory, Cognitive, and Psychiatric Impairments

The following etiquette tips address a wide range of workplace situations involving employees with motor or mobility impairments, sensory impairments, and cognitive or psychiatric impairments. This publication is not a comprehensive guide to disability etiquette in the workplace. For more information about disability etiquette, see the resources listed at the end of this document.

Individuals with Mobility Impairments

- Do not make assumptions about limitations based on appearance or the use of assistive devices. For example, individuals who use mobility aids such as canes, walkers, or wheelchairs have different limitations and may use a mobility aid regularly or only as required by their limitations on a daily basis. Also, people

who appear to be mobile may require accommodations such as accessible parking because they are unable to walk long distances due to a medical impairment (e.g., a person with asthma or a heart condition).

- Do not touch or lean on a wheelchair, move a person's walker or cane without being asked, or pet or distract a service animal without first asking the individual with the disability if it is okay. A wheelchair, mobility aid, or service animal is part of an individual's personal space; an extension of that individual.
- Be aware of the worksite and its accessible and inaccessible elements. Upon hiring a person who has an obvious mobility impairment, offer to provide a tour and evaluate the worksite for accessibility.
- Make workplace accessibility changes according to the specific work-related needs of the employee (e.g., making workspace modifications, keeping paths clear, and positioning items at appropriate reach heights, etc.).
- Keep disability etiquette in mind when planning work-related social events or training opportunities. Host events at accessible locations and design activities that include all employees.
- Ask whether a person needs assistance before you help. Extend the same courtesies to individuals with disabilities as you would others. Do not be afraid to ask how you can help.
- Sit down when speaking for more than a few minutes with a person who uses a wheelchair so you are at eye level.
- Be careful about the language you use. For example, people who use wheelchairs or scooters are not confined or bound to them. The wheelchair enables the person to get where he/she needs to go. It does not confine the person.

Individuals with Vision Impairments

- Be familiar with the route of travel to the interview location. Provide descriptive directions that do not require the person to rely on visual references. When appropriate, note if Braille signage is posted on walls and doors.
- Verbally greet and identify yourself before extending your hand to greet a person who is blind. Use the same courtesy when entering or leaving a room, or saying good bye when ending a conversation. Do not just walk away when talking with a person who is blind or visually impaired.
- Offer your arm instead of taking the arm of a person who is blind or visually impaired when guiding the person. As you walk, tell the person where you are going, make note of steps or slopes, and point-out opening doors or other obstacles.
- Offer new employees a guided tour of the workplace.
- Do not pet or distract a guide dog. When walking along-side someone who is using a guide dog, walk on the side opposite the animal.
- Offer to read written information, when appropriate, during an interview or on the job.
- Inform an employee who is blind or visually impaired of structural changes or hazards he may need to be aware of in the event of new construction or workplace modifications.

- Provide work-related materials, such as employee handbooks or benefits information, in an accessible format (e.g., large print, Braille, or accessible web page accessed with a screen reader).

Individuals who are Deaf or Hard of Hearing

- Be aware that individuals who are deaf or hard of hearing communicate in various ways. Pay attention to cues such as whether the person uses sign language, is reading lips, writing, or gesturing. Do not be afraid say that you do not understand if you have trouble understanding the person's speech. It is better to find another way to communicate, such as through writing notes, than to pretend to understand.
- Do not put hands in front of your face, or food or other items in your mouth when communicating with someone who is reading lips. Also, do not turn your head or walk away while talking. When possible, speak in a well-lit room that is free from background noises.
- Maintain eye contact and direct your communication to the person who is deaf when using a sign-language interpreter.
- Speak using a normal tone of voice unless asked to raise your voice, and rephrase rather than repeat the same words if you are not understood.
- Take turns when talking during a meeting so the person who is deaf or hard of hearing can read lips if they are able to.
- Get the attention of a person who is deaf or hard of hearing before you start speaking by waving your hand, tapping her on the shoulder, or through some other appropriate gesture.
- Talk with the individual about his preferred method of communication for job training or complex work-related situations. When appropriate, provide a qualified sign-language interpreter, CART service, or training videos that are captioned.
- Remember to include employees who are deaf or hard of hearing in casual conversation and social events. Provide a sign-language interpreter for employer-sponsored social events, when appropriate.

Individuals with Speech Impairments

- Be patient and listen. Do not complete words or sentences for the individual. Do not be afraid to say you do not understand. Ask him to repeat and then listen carefully. Repeat what you heard to verify. Or, ask him to write it down.
- Be attentive in your mannerisms by maintaining conversational eye contact and focusing on the content of communication rather than the delivery of the communication.
- Relax and communicate as you would normally.
- Provide interview questions in advance, if possible, to allow the individual time to prepare and deliver responses effectively.
- Consider offering a personal interview as an alternative to a phone interview for people who stutter.

Individuals with Respiratory Impairments or Chemical Sensitivities

- Be aware that products that are commonly used in the workplace (e.g., air fresheners, cleaning products, markers) can trigger a reaction for someone who has a respiratory or chemical sensitivity. Use less toxic products when possible.
- Encourage employees to use fragrance-free products, and discontinue wearing fragrances and colognes in the workplace. Do not wear fragrances and colognes when interviewing new employees. Fragrances, colognes, and fragranced personal products can make some people very ill.
- Make a commitment to maintaining good ventilation and indoor air quality. This can benefit all employees.
- Do not make assumptions based upon appearance. For example, a person with asthma may not appear to be limited, but may need accessible parking because she is not able to walk long distances or be in the cold or humidity for long periods of time.

Individuals with Psychiatric Impairments

- Avoid stereotypes and assumptions about the individual and how she may interact with others. In most cases, it will not be obvious that someone has a psychiatric impairment.
- Recognize and respect the differences in people. People with psychiatric impairments may behave differently than other individuals, may have trouble interpreting social cues, or may have different ways of coping with their impairment.
- Respect personal space and do not touch the individual or his personal belongings.
- Provide support and assistance, as appropriate.
- Be patient. Allow the individual time to think and answer questions independently.

Individuals with Cognitive Impairments

- Do not assume that because someone has a cognitive impairment, such as a learning disability, that she has below-average intelligence. The individual may have above-average intelligence, but may have difficulty receiving, expressing, or processing information.
- Ask the person if he prefers verbal, written, or hands-on instruction, or a combination of methods in training and work-related situations. For example, if providing verbal instructions, it may be helpful to follow-up with an e-mail that clarifies your request.
- Treat the individual as an adult. Speak directly to the individual, rather than his/her companion, and use words and phrases according to his or her level of complexity.
- Be patient. Allow the individual time to think and answer questions independently.

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References

Weathers, R. (2005). A guide to disability statistics from the American community survey. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University, Rehabilitation Research and Training Center on Disability Demographics and Statistics.

Other Publications

City of San Antonio Planning Department's Disability Etiquette Handbook
http://www.sanantonio.gov/planning/disability_handbook/disability_handbook.asp

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