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CHAPTER

This chapter discusses a range of workplace accommodations that may help to improve on-the-job functioning for individuals with ADD.

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Reasonable Workplace Accommodations

The Americans with Disabilities Act (discussed in detail in Chapter 14) calls on employers to make “reasonable” accommodations for people with documented disabilities. It has not yet been clearly defined what accommodations are “reasonable” for persons with ADD. However, certain precedents are being set, and we are in the process of establishing a set of standards. This chapter attempts to list a number of accommodations that might be helpful to you in the workplace. Keep in mind, however, that this is merely a suggested list. Because something is suggested here does not mean that a court of law would require your employer to provide such accommodations. These decisions are made on a case-by-case basis. The needs and resources of the employer, as well as the needs of the employee, must be taken into account in determining what is reasonable. The list of accommodations in this chapter is meant to be used as a guideline as you try to develop a set of accommodations that are workable both for you and for your employer.

11 ACCOMMODATIONS

What Are Accommodations?

Accommodations are methods, techniques, or approaches that can be used to enhance the functioning of a person with a disability. In the case of people with certain physical handicaps (e.g., paraplegics,

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the blind, the deaf), accommodations needed in the workplace are fairly easy to define and understand. In the case of invisible handicaps such as ADD or learning disabilities, however, necessary accommodations are less clear. An additional complication in the case of ADD is the fact that there is a wide range in the types and severity of symptoms.

How Do I Know What Types of Accommodations Would Be Helpful for Me?

We are now in the early stages of studying workplace accommodations for adults with ADD and/or learning disabilities. This chapter includes a list of suggested accommodations that have been useful to others. Accommodations for adults with ADD need to be devised on a case-by-case basis. The Job Accommodations Network,¹ a service of the President's Commission on the Employment of Persons with Disabilities, maintains a list of accommodations for persons with all types of disabilities. Some of the accommodations described here are included in the network's list of accommodations for individuals with learning disabilities; others are accommodations that were developed from my clinical experience.

Some accommodations are methods or techniques that you can provide for yourself. Others can be provided only by your employer. It may be most useful to work with an ADD expert as you attempt to work out a set of accommodations that will be the most appropriate for you in your particular workplace.

General Accommodations for ADD Adults in the Workplace

Changes in Supervisory Techniques

- Meet more frequently.
- Set short-term concrete goals.
- Give more emphasis to positive outcomes.

General Accommodations (continued)

- Clarify guidelines and job performance expectations.
- Provide frequent job performance reviews and use concrete, reasonable measures to assess improvement; give regular positive feedback as well.
- Evaluate employee in terms of strengths, not just weaknesses.

Changes in Job Description

- Remove from job descriptions particular tasks that cause the most difficulty.
- Increase proportion of tasks that are more closely suited to employees' strengths and interests.

Changes in Communication Patterns

- Provide more written communications.
- Communicate more frequently.

Changes in the Physical Work Environment

- Provide less distracting environment.
- Change lighting, work station, etc., to improve efficiency.

Use of "Assistive Technologies"

- Use tape recorder to record ideas and reminders.
- Use timers or beepers to assist with time management.
- Use computer software to assist with writing.

Provision of Specialized Training to Enhance Functioning

- Offer time management seminars.
- Offer seminars teaching organizational skills.

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Symptom-Specific Accommodations for ADD

Distractibility

- Provide flashing light on phone (to be used instead of bell).
- Change location of work space to less distracting location.
- Permit use of meeting rooms, library, or another's private office, when available.
- Permit working at home for some defined fraction of the work week.
- Permit use of flextime, making it possible to work during the less distracting off-peak hours.
- Use a white noise machine to mask distracting sounds.
- Use headphones to mask distracting sounds.
- Permit closing office doors during certain time periods.
- Assign office mates with compatible work styles.
- Route phone calls to voice mail to minimize interruptions.
- Provide private office.

Hyperactivity

- Permit shift to job that allows more physical movement.
- Permit shift in work hours to allow extended exercise period at midday.
- Permit extended breaks several times a day for walking.
- Permit work in varied locations.
- Minimize need for participation in extended meetings.
- Provide table for employees who prefer to stand while working.
- Provide sufficient office space to allow pacing while working.

Symptom-Specific Accommodations (*continued*)

Difficulty with Organization/Planning/Follow-Through

- Provide possibility of teamwork with someone who can provide structure.
- Permit frequent face-to-face supervision.
- Provide means of sending frequent updates to supervisor—by voice mail, e-mail, or memo.
- Assist in breaking down long-term assignments into daily tasks.
- Provide training in time management and organization.
- Provide software to assist in scheduling and planning.
- Assist in devising an ADD-friendly filing system.
- Hire professional organizer or coach to organize physical office space (regular, repeated assistance is typically most useful).
- Reassign those with ADD to jobs that do not require supervision from others.
- Provide training in management and supervision if these duties are part of job description.
- Provide coach to assist those with ADD in ongoing development of better organizational skills.
- Provide checklists to give structure to multistage tasks.
- Provide regular assistance in prioritizing requests from multiple sources.
- Provide sample forms, letters, etc., to use as models.

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Symptom-Specific Accommodations (*continued*)

Paperwork Problems

- Provide clerical support to handle paperwork.
- Reduce paperwork requirements.
- Provide coach to assist those with ADD in developing better paperwork techniques.
- Permit exchange of job duties with other workers (e.g., exchange phone duties for filing).
- Simplify forms and paperwork requirements.

Memory Difficulties

- Follow up verbal communications in writing.
- Make written communications clear and concise.
- Use video or audio equipment to record meetings.
- Provide training in memory enhancement.
- Train ADD employees in use of a day planner as a memory aid.
- Provide tape recorders so that employees can record reminders to themselves.
- Regularly post notices of events.
- Provide notes or minutes of meetings.

What Accommodations Is My Employer Required to Provide for Me?

If you have questions of a legal nature, you should refer to Chapter 14 to better understand what your employer is required to provide under the Americans with Disabilities Act.²

Keep in mind that as a general rule the primary responsibility for managing your ADD remains with you. Many approaches outlined in other chapters (see Chapters 3 and 4 on taking charge of your ADD) are steps you can take without the participation of your employer. Your employer and supervisor should be engaged in the process only when you have a need that cannot be met without their permission or cooperation.

How Should I Approach My Employer about Providing Accommodations?

Your employer is not required to provide any accommodations to you without a formal disclosure of a documented disability that is covered under the Americans with Disabilities Act (see Chapter 14). There are pros and cons to making such a disclosure (which are discussed in more detail in Chapter 14).

Often, the best approach is an informal request made in a positive, problem-solving manner. Present your difficulty to your supervisor, express your desire to function more efficiently, and suggest the accommodation that would help you do so. For example: "I have the problem of being easily distracted by sounds. Ever since we purchased the new high-speed copy machine, I have noticed that I have much more difficulty concentrating at my desk. If it is possible, I would like to have the location of my cubicle changed to a spot further from the copy center so that I can be more productive." Your supervisor may respond that he or she cannot grant special favors to you and that such a change could only be made on the basis of a documented disability. In this instance, you will have to decide whether the advantages of disclosing your disability outweigh the disadvantages of such a disclosure. Your supervisor may say that such a move isn't feasible at the moment but that when an anticipated reorganization takes place, he or she will keep your request in mind. In this instance your request for accommodations may be granted without official disclosure of your disability.

Conclusion

Reminder: Don't rely on your employer to take responsibility for accommodations. Be proactive. You must always take charge of your ADD needs. Many of the accommodations described in this chapter are things you can provide for yourself or can arrange for yourself. If you must look to your employer to accommodate you, it remains your responsibility to understand your needs and present them to your employer. Make reasonable requests for accommodations that are compatible with the overall functioning of the organization.

What's good for ADD is good for the organization. Everyone struggles with some of the symptoms associated with ADD—absentmindedness, distractibility, disorganization, and difficulties with verbal memory and decision making. Employees with ADD strongly need accommodations, but everyone can potentially benefit from them. For example, one woman with ADD worked in real estate sales. The forms she was expected to complete following each sale were complicated and poorly designed. As a way to cope with her ADD paperwork problems, she developed a simplified form for herself that was soon in widespread use among her non-ADD coworkers!

Employers who become more sensitive and responsive to the needs of those with ADD will find that in the process of improving the efficiency of their ADD employees they have developed approaches that improve the overall efficiency of the organization, thus creating a win-win situation.