

Cantor Access Inc.
hands-on consulting and training

Part 2: The Costs and Benefits of Accommodating Employees with Disabilities

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This article was originally written for [Worksite News](#),
Western Canada's Occupational Health & Safety
News Magazine.

Overview

In the first of two articles, Alan Cantor illustrated the idea of employment accommodation for people with disabilities; discusses the role of human rights legislation in settling the question of who is responsible for providing workplace accommodations; and clarifies the extent to which an employer is responsible for ensuring that a qualified individual is accommodated.

In this article, Mr. Cantor discusses the benefits of accommodating employees with disabilities. Arguing against the commonly held view that workplace accommodations are expensive, he demonstrates that many accommodations cost little or nothing, add value to the workplace, and result in significant benefits for a company.

Introduction

Treating people equally does not always mean treating them the same. In some situations, equal treatment for employees with disabilities may require different treatment. In the March-April issue of Worksite News I described how human rights legislation in Canada requires employers, unions and co-workers to accommodate the accessibility needs of persons with disabilities, provided that doing so does not cause "undue hardship." Undue hardship does not mean experiencing an inconvenience. The criteria for assessing undue hardship are cost (i.e., the cost of accommodating an employee affects the financial viability of the company) and health and safety risks (i.e., the risks caused by accommodating an individual outweighs the benefits of enhancing equality). A company must demonstrate due diligence when providing accommodations and be prepared to defend decisions made on the grounds of undue hardship due to cost or risk.

Moving the discussion now from legal considerations to practical incentives, this article examines the costs and benefits of accommodating employees with injuries and disabilities. Arguing against the commonly-held view that accommodations are always expensive, it will be shown that most accommodations cost little or nothing to acquire, have reasonable costs to implement, and actually add value to the workplace. The bottom line is that accommodating employees makes good business sense.

The cost of accommodations

The average cost of accommodating people with injuries and disabilities is surprising low. In 1994 the Job Accommodation Network (JAN) published data demonstrating that the majority of workplace accommodations cost less than US\$500. See Figure 1.

Cost (US dollars)	Percentage
0 - 500	68%
501 - 5000	27%
5001 or more	5%

Figure 1: The cost of accommodating

JAN reports the median cost of accommodating an employee is about US\$250. In some companies,

accommodation costs are lower. The National Council on Disability (NCD) Bulletin of April 1996 notes that accommodating a worker at Sears, Roebuck and Company averages \$45.

Despite the fact that job accommodations, in general, are reasonably priced, many employers overestimate the cost, assuming that people with disabilities depend on expensive and exotic technical aids. A businessperson of my acquaintance vehemently opposed providing text-enlargement software to an employee with low-vision because it costs "at least \$8000." In reality, the price tag of state-of-the-art text-enlargement software is about Cdn\$625, and less expensive alternatives are available. Furthermore, modern computer operating systems have basic accessibility aids, including a magnification system, built in.

Many people with disabilities do benefit from high-tech adaptive devices — speech synthesizers, reading machines, speech recognition systems, modified keyboards, and the like. Expensive when first brought to the market, adaptive technologies are becoming affordable. A voice recognition system for a PC (personal computer) that cost \$20,000 in the late 1980s can be gotten now for \$500 - \$1000.

[Endnote 1] High-tech accessibility aids rarely require special computers. Low set-up costs are assured because any recent-vintage IBM-compatible PC or Apple Macintosh can house, with little or no modification, virtually any adaptive technology.

The reasonable cost of accessibility aids is also attributable to the fact that many — perhaps most — do not involve high technology at all. Low-tech and no-tech accommodation solutions abound, and the combined cost of materials and implementation is trivial. For example:

Problem: A construction worker develops a medical condition. His hands cannot tolerate the cold.

Solution: Purchase a pair of battery-powered, heated gloves — the kind used by hunters.

Cost: \$50

Problem: A laboratory technician who is deaf cannot hear the buzz of a timer that signals the end of an experiment.

Solution: Connect an indicator light to the timer.

Cost: \$30

Problem: An employer wants to make an elevator accessible to a new employee who is blind.

Solution: Apply adhesive-backed Brailled labels on all elevator control panels.

Cost: \$10

Problem: Because of repetitive strain injuries, an articling student lacks the strength to hold open books and journals.

Solution: Buy an adjustable, wire-frame book holder at an office supply store.

Cost: \$7

Problem: An administrator whose arm is in a cast types with one hand. She finds it awkward to capitalize letters because the shift key and the letter key must be pressed simultaneously.

Solution: Install a freeware "sticky-key" program to enable her to enter combination keystrokes sequentially.

Cost: \$0

Problem: An office worker's shoulder injury makes it hard to reach items on high shelves.

Solution: Reorganize the shelves so that all items that the worker regularly uses are within easy reach.

Cost: \$0

Problem: A person who uses a wheelchair cannot sit at a desk because it is too low for his knees.

Solution: Raise the desk on wooden blocks.

Cost: \$0

Figure 2: Inexpensive workplace accommodations. (Many of these examples have been adapted from Successful Job Accommodation Strategies. June 1996. Volume 2, Issue 2. p. 11).

Managing the cost of accommodations

As noted above, the cost of meeting one's legal duty to accommodate usually is modest. However, accommodating some individuals is expensive. Statistics from JAN indicate that 5% of accommodations cost \$5000 or more — a significant sum for a small firm. Fortunately, expenditures are controllable through such strategies as cost recovery, cost sharing, cost containment and efficient assessment and implementation:

- Apply for a tax exemption. Most assistive devices used by persons with disabilities are GST exempt. For more information, contact your local Excise/GST office, or Revenue Canada.
- Speak to your provincial Workers' Compensation Board, and the Ministries of Labour, Health and Social Services to find out what grants and subsidies are available to offset the cost of accessibility aids.

- Contact Human Resources Development Canada about wage subsidy programs to help defer the cost of on-the-job training for people with disabilities.
- Establish partnerships among benefit-providers to assist an employee with disabilities to overcome his or her functional limitations. Find out which organizations in your jurisdiction have legislative and contractual obligations to the employee. Partners in funding may include your Ministry of Health, Vocational Rehabilitation Services, Assistive Device Programs, Workers' Compensation Board, insurance companies, and so on. Also, where appropriate, involve charitable non-profit social service and health organizations in your benefit coordination plans. Three valuable sources of information on funding are your local Human Resources and Development Canada Employment and Insurance office, the Canadian Clearing House on Disability Issues (1-800-665-9017), and the Integrated Network of Disability Information.
- Count an employee's accommodations as tax-deductible business expenses.
- Amortize the cost of depreciable technical aids.
- Get help when planning and implementing complex accommodations. An inadequate assessment can lead to inappropriately chosen and improperly used accessibility aids. Seek the services of knowledgeable and experienced professionals.
- Act quickly to meet an employee's needs after he or she discloses a disability. Every day a person remains unaccommodated results in reduced output, wasted time, lowered staff morale and frazzled nerves. The costs of not accommodating accumulate rapidly. One of my former clients is a Human Resource manager who developed an injury. Her request for accommodations floated in bureaucratic limbo for six months, during which time she could not perform her essential job duties. The cost of the delay, as measured in lost productivity alone, was \$30000. The accommodation process, once begun, took one week, and cost \$2000.

The benefits of accommodating

Companies that accommodate employees enjoy substantial benefits. First, accommodations save money. According to JAN, a company reduces its insurance premiums; cuts its rehabilitation expenses; avoids costs associated with hiring new workers — recruiting, interviewing, selection and training; and eliminates the need to settle civil litigations, human rights complaints and union grievances.

As well as saving money, accommodations add value to the workplace. By accommodating employees a company preserves its pool of talent and experience. Accommodated employees can participate fully in the culture of the workplace and take advantage of opportunities for personal and career development — activities that benefit the company. JAN reports that nearly half (49%) of the companies surveyed said that accommodations allowed them to retain a qualified worker and increase the worker's productivity.

Accommodations are investments that facilitate business activity and boost productivity. Like desks, computers and telephones, accommodations give a qualified person the means to succeed. An accommodated employee is a productive employee. Long-term productivity gains can easily offset the initial cost of an accommodation.

This raises an important question: Are accommodated employees as productive as non-disabled co-workers? Research suggests that people with disabilities are more effective in their jobs than their non-disabled colleagues. DuPont surveyed staff in 1958, 1973, 1981 and 1990. It compared employees with and without disabilities in terms of Safety, Attendance and Job performance. In Safety, 97% of employees with disabilities were rated average or above average. In Attendance, 86% were rated average or above. In Performance of Job Duties, 90% were rated average or above.

When JAN asked companies to assign a dollar value to the savings resulting from accommodating, 38% reported saving between \$1 and \$5000. One-third of the companies saved \$5000 to \$20,000, and another one-quarter saved \$20,000 to \$200,000. Only 3% of companies surveyed said that there was no discernible value to the benefits gained. See Figure 3.

\$US saved	Percentage of total
1-5000	38%
5001 - 20,000	34%

20,001 - 200,000	23%
200,000 or more	5%

Figure 3: Savings that result from
accommodating employee

Among the companies surveyed, the median benefit value was \$7250 — a benefit to cost ratio of 29:1. For every dollar a company spent to accommodate an employee, they received \$29 in benefits.

An unexpected dividend of accommodating is that non-disabled employees benefit too. Accommodations are a source of improved work practices. An accommodation package usually consists of two things: better tools to do the job, and smarter ways to work. For an individual with typing injuries, for example, an \$8 copy-holder that clips to the side of a computer monitor lessens the biomechanical stress of transcribing documents. Through collaborating with an accommodation consultant, the employee may discover that leaning ones' hands on a wrist-rest increases, not decreases, typing strain. When an injured worker receives appropriate equipment and good advice, co-workers are likely to notice and adopt the improved measures as well. The result is a safer, more productive workplace for everybody.

Conclusion

By accommodating its employees a company saves money and cultivates a competent, effective, diverse and healthy workforce. The interests of a company are served best by retaining people with injuries and disabilities. Retaining them means knowing how to plan and implement workplace accommodations.

In the next issue of Worksite News I will describe an approach to accommodation planning. This approach enhances the productivity, comfort, and occupational safety of employees with injuries and disabilities without compromising their privacy, autonomy or dignity.

Acknowledgements

I thank Ms. Barbara Roberts, M.S. OTR OT(C) of Queen's University for her ongoing support, encouragement, and editorial advice; and Ms. D.D. Radcliffe, Staff Development and Training, Ministry of Labour, Toronto Ontario, for sharing her

encyclopaedic knowledge of this subject with me,
and for critiquing drafts of this article.

Endnotes

In June 1996 the manufacturer of a popular voice
recognition product introduced a shareware version
that recognizes 12,000 words and costs under
US\$50.

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