

WORKING EFFECTIVELY WITH PEOPLE WHO HAVE LEARNING DISABILITIES AND ATTENTION DEFICIT HYPERACTIVITY DISORDER

This brochure was written by Dale S. Brown, President's Committee on Employment of People with Disabilities, 1331 F Street, NW, Washington, DC 20004. For additional copies of this brochure, or others in the series, contact your Regional Disability and Business Technical Assistance Center by calling 1-800-949-4232, or write to the ILR Program on Employment and Disability at Cornell University.

**Program on Employment and Disability
New York State School of Industrial
and Labor Relations
CORNELL UNIVERSITY**

What are Learning Disabilities and Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder?

Learning disabilities and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder are related but different disabilities. Both are neurological in nature.

A learning disability may make it difficult for a person to receive information from his or her senses, process it, and communicate what s/he knows. The learning disability frequently causes severe difficulty in reading, writing, or mathematics. Many celebrities such as Susan Hampshire, Dexter Manley, Greg Louganis, Nelson Rockefeller have made public statements about their learning disabilities.

Attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (often shortened to attention deficit disorder or ADD) may make it difficult for an employee to sit calmly and give a task his or her full attention.

Both learning disabilities and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (LD and ADD) affect 3 to 10% of the American work force. LD and ADD have been publicized extensively. Many students are diagnosed with these disabilities. As a result, today's employer often finds applicants and current employees who state that they have a LD or ADD. These workers are often intelligent, creative and productive. Hyperactivity, properly channeled, can enable the worker to finish projects swiftly. However, s/he may need reasonable accommodation to share his or her talents with employers.

Is There a Connection Between The Americans with Disabilities Act and People with Learning Disabilities or Attention Deficit Disorder?

The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) prohibits discrimination against people with disabilities. The term disability under the ADA refers to a person with "a) a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more of the major life activities of such individual, b) a record of such an impairment or, c) being regarded as having such an impairment." Job applicants who have been through special education may not be discriminated against based on a school record of a disability. Employers may not discriminate against applicants with LD because of fears that they cannot read.

Both LD and ADD are considered physical or mental impairments. The term "Specific Learning Disabilities" is cited in the EEOC regulations implementing the employment provisions of the ADA (29 C.F.R. Part 1630). Frequently LD and ADD substantially limit one or more major life activities of the individual. Major life activities refers to functions such as caring for oneself, performing manual tasks, walking, seeing, hearing, speaking, breathing, learning, and working. LD and ADD can affect all of these activities with the exception of breathing. But the impairment must be substantial. For example an employee whose auditory perception difficulty caused them to be unable to learn

from lectures would be substantially limited. The inability to take excellent notes of a highly detailed, eight-hour technical discussion would not constitute a substantial impairment.

An individual's limitations must be caused by learning disability. Thus, an employee who is unable to read or write because he or she was never taught these skills and not because of a learning disability, would not be an individual with a disability under the ADA.

How Can a Person with LD and ADD be Accommodated?

Job accommodation begins with an examination of whether any adjustments or modification in the work environment or in the way things are customarily done are necessary to enable an individual with a disability to perform the essential functions of a particular job. Some people with LD and ADD do not need accommodation, because they have developed helpful strategies and made a good match between the job and themselves. Some people with ADD control their symptoms with medication.

However, a learning disability may interfere with the ability of the person to perform the essential functions of the job. In that case, the employer may need to accommodate the employee. The employee is your partner in job accommodation. First, ask them what they need to be the most productive. For example, what is the best way for you to communicate

with them? In writing? Speaking? Both? If they need to learn a new process, do they prefer you to tell them, show them, or give them a manual? Flexibility and patience are crucial.

A typical but hypothetical story involves "Diedre", a writer for a major national corporation. She had mild dyslexia which caused her to reverse letters, words, and numbers. She was also hyperactive due to ADHD. Her coping strategy was to take breaks and walk once around the block. When she was wrestling with a tough writing problem, she took longer walks, since her hyperactivity made it difficult for her to think clearly about creative problems while sitting still.

Despite these challenges, she produced more work than her coworkers. Her supervisor, John, gave her the most complicated writing assignments he had. When John left for another job, Tom took over. Tom was concerned about Diedre's "typos." John had simply made the changes required and never bothered Diedre about it. In addition, Tom objected strongly to Diedre being "away from her desk." Diedre and Tom came into frequent conflict over these issues. After a month of difficulties, Diedre disclosed her learning disability to Tom through a memorandum that included medical documentation. Tom did not believe her. She appealed to Tom's boss who ignored the situation, refusing to meet with her or answer her memos.

Tom's apparent reluctance to accommodate Diedre's disability could be discriminatory under the

ADA, unless the company could prove that providing the accommodation (which had been given to Diedre before) would result in undue hardship on the operation of the business.

In this story, Diedre did not pursue a complaint and was laid off one year later. Interestingly enough, Diedre was soon earning more than her old salary as a freelance writer. John, the first manager, never realized he was accommodating her disabilities. He felt he was simply doing what was necessary to help his employee be productive.

What are Some Accommodations for specific aspects of LD and ADD?

The employee has difficulty with visual perception (seeing). This employee needs neat and well organized surroundings. Color coded files may help to distinguish similar objects from each other. Some software has graphic symbols that refer to different operations but look alike. In that case, your system manager may be able to change the icons.

The employee has difficulty reading. This employee often "reads" printed matter by using "talking" computers and calculators. Another individual might read to them. They use tapes. They usually prefer verbal rather than written instructions. For people who read slowly, allow extra time. Let them know about the most important items to read. Tape written communications. Highlight pertinent information. Graphic presentations such as diagrams and flow charts may assist.

The employee has difficulty with auditory perception (hearing). This employee hears inaccurately and often can not understand a person who is speaking when there is background noise. Catch their eye before beginning the conversation. Talk to them in quiet places. Ask them to repeat what you said. If they take notes, allow them to finish writing before you continue talking. The supervisor must be sure the employee understands.

The employee has difficulty writing. This employee may find working with the supervisor on and outline of the assignment to be helpful. Computers can be crucial. Software which checks spelling and grammar is useful. Arrange to have someone proofread their work.

The employee does not manage their time well. Many LD and ADD employees lack an inner sense of time. The LD or ADD employee may come in late and work past breaks and quitting time. They have difficulty with deadlines. Consider flextime, unless coming in on time is essential to your work. Offer to remind them before deadlines. Buzzers, computer software with "reminder" features, and detailed scheduling are common ways to resolve these difficulties. The employee who comes in late but leaves on time may have a motivational problem.

The employee is easily distracted. Some employees, particularly with ADD, are not able to shift their attention at will. They may have extreme difficulties in an open space environment and need quiet to concentrate on their work. Accommodations have included

allowing the employee to work at home on occasion, providing a private space, providing a quiet location, and allowing the employee to work at night and on weekends in return for time off during the busier days. These employees may find interruptions particularly problematic. Allow them to turn the telephone off and return calls later.

The employee is restless. Hyperactivity can make it difficult for some employees in sedentary jobs to stay at their work station. Usually, frequent short breaks solve this problem. Hyperactivity can be an advantage enabling the employee to work long hours and sustain an energetic pace.

How Can Employers Assist in the Advancement of People with Learning Disabilities and Attention Deficit Disorders in the Workplace?

People with learning disabilities and attention deficit disorders have the same desire and skills for promotions as your other employees. Sometimes, a person who is an excellent candidate for promotion will refuse it, because they are concerned about the reading and writing demands. In this case, accommodation can enable the employer to gain an excellent manager or supervisor. Care should be taken to assure that promotional examinations do not screen out employees with learning disabilities. People with LD and ADD often make excellent leaders. Their creativity and problem solving capacities can add tremendously to the bottom line of your company.

Resources

Learning Disabilities Association of America

4156 Library Road
Pittsburgh, PA 15234
(412) 341-1515

President's Committee on Employment of People with Disabilities

1331 F Street, N.W.
Washington, DC 20004
(202) 376-6200

Job Accommodation Network

West Virginia University
P.O. Box 6080
Morgantown, WV 26506-6080
(800) 526-7234

National Center for Law and Learning Disabilities

P.O. Box 368
Cabin John, MD 20818
(301) 469-8308

The Equal Employment Opportunity

Commission, 1801 L Street, N.W.,
Washington, DC 20507, 800-669-4000
(Voice) to reach EEOC field offices; for
publications call (800) 800-3302 or (800)-
669-EEOC (voice/TTY).

*ADA Regional Disability and Business
Technical Assistance Center Hotline*
800-949-4232 (voice/TTY).

This was written by Dale S. Brown, author of Steps to Independence for People with Learning Disabilities. She has written over 100 articles on various aspects of employing people with learning disabilities. In 1994, she was selected by the International Jaycees as one of Ten Outstanding Young Americans, to honor her work as a leader in the self-help movement for people with learning disabilities. She would like to thank the following people for their assistance reviewing this document:

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OTHER TITLES IN THIS IMPLEMENTING THE ADA SERIES ARE:

- ❖ Working Effectively with People who are Deaf or Hard of Hearing
- ❖ Working Effectively with People who are Blind or Visually Impaired
- ❖ Working Effectively with Persons who have Cognitive Disabilities
- ❖ Workplace Accommodations for Persons with Musculoskeletal Disorders
- ❖ Working Effectively with Employees who have Sustained a Brain Injury
- ❖ Employing and Accommodating Workers with Psychiatric Disabilities
- ❖ Employing and Accommodating Individuals with Histories of Alcohol and Drug Abuse
- ❖ Employment Considerations for People who have Diabetes
- ❖ Accommodating the Allergic Employee in the Workplace
- ❖ Causes of Poor Indoor Air Quality and What You Can Do About It
- ❖ Working Effectively with People with Learning Disabilities
- ❖ Working Effectively with Individuals who are HIV-Positive

These and other informational brochures can be accessed on the World Wide Web at:
www.ilr.cornell.edu/ped/ada

For further information about publications such as these, contact the ILR Program on Employment and Disability, Cornell University, 102 ILR Extension, Ithaca, New York 14853-3901; or at 607/255-2906 (Voice), 607/255-2891 (TTY), or 607/255-2763 (Fax).