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Invisible Disabilities And The Workplace

By Caroline Tapp-McDougall

We're all familiar with hearing aids, white canes, or power scooters. All are visible signs that a person may have a medical condition or a **disability**. And a good many of us, particularly those of us in progressive companies, are past the stage of thinking of just widening doorways and building ramps. But, how many employers have truly recognized that many more employees – despite the appearance of looking and being “perfectly **healthy**” – have invisible **disabilities**, chronic conditions that don't always manifest themselves in overt symptoms?

At times, even the most flexible employers face new challenges when it comes to understanding and making accommodations when emotional, physical, and behavioural conditions make daily living and working a bit more difficult.

Asthma, arthritis, depression, diabetes, epilepsy, fibromyalgia, heart disease, HIV, and multiple sclerosis are just a few examples of invisible **disabilities**, chronic conditions that don't manifest themselves in overt symptoms. Yet, the Council of Canadians with **Disabilities** says 15 per cent of Canadians at one point in their lives will be affected by a **disability**.

Unfortunately, some employees will feel compelled to hide their condition and will not feel comfortable disclosing their specific needs. They may fear being turned down for a promotion or possibly even being demoted or let go. Others may fear ridicule or an unpleasant atmosphere at work due to a stigma associated with their condition. For example, epilepsy is a well-known condition, yet many people only know about grand mal seizures. Co-workers of an employee who has even a mild form of epilepsy may worry about a sudden, unpredictable seizure and not know what to do.

An Environment Of Disclosure

So what can employers do? To start, create a supportive atmosphere in which employees feel valued and feel safe to talk to management. If a worker feels confident and secure, they will more likely share and help the company to bridge any gaps that exist. This way, you will be able to both learn more about the condition and make plans for meaningful accommodations.

One caveat, not everyone with an invisible disability will need support. It depends on their medical needs, the condition's severity, and the possible medication side effects. Often, based on their own special requirements, some employees will have made the necessary plans on their own.

Once an employee has disclosed their condition, it's often quite simple to facilitate accommodations. In the past, there has been the perception among employees that accommodating an employee with an invisible disability inevitably costs a lot of money.

However, research refutes this myth. Essentially, an accommodation package can consist of two things: better tools to do the job or a smarter way to work. For example, consider the case of a graphic designer who suffers a repetitive strain injury. Consulting with an occupational therapist and buying a new keyboard, mouse, and gel pad are all affordable interventions that could reduce time off work and thus be a big boost to productivity. Or think about an employee who has been diagnosed with epilepsy. Reasonable accommodations to ensure dignity – such as providing a private area to rest after having a seizure – could be made.

Worth The Investment

Are accommodations worth it? The Job Accommodation Network discovered that for every dollar a company spent to accommodate an employee, it received almost \$44 in benefits. Furthermore, onethird of all employers reported saving between \$7,000 and

\$30,000, and a further one-quarter reported saving between \$30,000 and \$295,000. These savings were realized in reduced time off work and increased productivity.

Are accommodated employees as productive as their co-workers? Research suggests so. Over the course of 32 years, DuPont evaluated employees in three categories – safety, attendance, and job performance. In safety, 97 per cent of employees with disabilities were rated average or above average. In attendance, 86 per cent were rated average or above. And in performance, 90 per cent were rated average or above.

Invisible disabilities may be more common in your workplace than you realize. By creating a supportive atmosphere, you can encourage employees to feel comfortable enough to disclose their personal needs. Making the necessary accommodations will help you retain valued employees and create a competent, diverse, and effective workplace and a culture in which everyone feels valued.

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