

## 9034 On the Job with a Disability: It's Just the Beginning!

Finding a job is only the first step for people with disabilities who are entering the work world. Next comes the task of making that job a success. Presents the problems you're most likely to encounter and then suggests how to go about finding realistic solutions.



**Frank D. Lanterman Regional Center** coordinates services for over 6,000 individuals with developmental disabilities and their families within a defined catchment area of Los Angeles.

A developmental disability is defined by state law as a disability which originates before an individual attains age 18, continues or can be expected to continue indefinitely, and constitutes a substantial handicap for that individual. This includes mental retardation, cerebral palsy, epilepsy and autism and closely related disabling conditions.

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7. Advocacy
8. Training and Educational Opportunities
9. Koch-Young Resource Center

We encourage you to contact us for more information:

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# On the Job with a Disability

## It's Just the Beginning!





All of the above are national; many are staffed by people who have disabilities themselves. All of these organizations exist to help you find the best way to a secure and satisfying work life. It can be done; there are people, laws, and organizations to help you do it. Good luck!

## Worksheet for Job Success

Two skills/areas of knowledge I have that my supervisor/co-workers may not know about are:

1. \_\_\_\_\_

2. \_\_\_\_\_

Three *barriers/obstacles* I need to overcome to be successful on my job are:

1. \_\_\_\_\_

2. \_\_\_\_\_

3. \_\_\_\_\_

I can overcome problem area #1 by:

a. \_\_\_\_\_

b. \_\_\_\_\_

I can overcome problem area #2 by:

a. \_\_\_\_\_

b. \_\_\_\_\_

I can overcome problem area #3 by:

a. \_\_\_\_\_

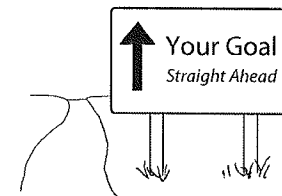
b. \_\_\_\_\_

c. \_\_\_\_\_

## It's your job!

Congratulations! You've done the work you needed to do, and you've won your job. Whether it's entry-level or a job higher up the ladder, whether it's part-time or full-time, it's going to have a big impact on your life — for better or for worse.

That's why *landing* a job was only the first of your goals. The next goal is to *make a success* of your job, and the third goal is to *do well enough that you can advance*, if you so desire. This pamphlet is about that second goal: making a success of this job so that things work out well for you and for your employer.



## Give yourself a chance

Once you've got the job, you'll need to make all the usual adjustments that every other new employee has to make; but, as comes as no surprise, you're likely to have more to contend with because of your disability.

Starting a new job is hard. It's even harder if you haven't had a job for a while. So the way to begin is to start out with the knowledge that *it'll take some time* for you to feel comfortable and confident in your new role... your doubts and uncertainty are completely normal! Look around at people who enjoy their work and do it well; they too had to go through those first weeks and months of adjustment.

(Note: For grammatical simplicity, "he" will be used in this pamphlet to represent both genders.)

## The law is on your side

The Americans with Disabilities Act (A.D.A.) is the federal law that guarantees you certain rights and protections if you work for a company that has more than 14 employees. It includes the following rules:

- When you're applying for a job, the employer may not ask you about your present or past medical conditions; neither can he require a medical examination.
- Your employer must not deny you a transfer or a promotion just because of your disability; if you are qualified, your employer must consider you in exactly the same way as he would any other applicant.
- Employers are required to make the workplace usable to all their employees, including those with disabilities. This might mean adding wheelchair ramps, enlarging employee bathrooms, installing TTY telephones, or lowering the height of a desk, among many other possible modifications; it all depends on the disability.

The A.D.A. is the biggest law affecting employees who have disabilities, but it's not the only one. Your state also has laws designed to protect your working rights and improve your employment opportunities. You can find out about your state laws by calling your state Employment/Economic Security service or its Rehabilitation Services office or its Human Services department; look in the "Government" listings of your phone book.

669-4000 to find the location of your local EOC office. You can also report the problem to your employment office, and of course you can hire a lawyer — though it's best to know you have a strong case before you begin to spend your money.

*Q. My disability is one that doesn't "show." I worry that my co-workers don't understand my situation, and that they resent my special schedule. What can I do?*

*A. You're under no obligation to explain your special circumstances. On the other hand, it makes sense to help other employees understand and to correct any wrong impressions. It's easiest to do this through natural conversation. Remember, most people want to be understanding and supportive.*

## Need some help?

There are many sources of help and information for workers with disabilities. Here are a few of them; they can point you to additional sources of help closer to home.

- **ARC National Employment and Training Program**  
500 East Border, Suite 300  
Arlington, TX 76010 (800) 433-5255
- **Just One Break**  
373 Park Avenue South (212) 725-2046 (TTY)  
New York, NY 10016 (212) 725-2500 (V)
- **National Center on Disability Services**  
201 I.U. Willets Rd. (516) 747-5355 (TTY)  
Albertson, N.Y. 11507 (516) 747-5400 (V)
- **Job Accommodation Network**  
U.S. Dept. of Labor  
janweb.icdi.wvu.edu (800) 526-7234 (V, TTY)

A. The A.D.A. does not require companies with fewer than 15 employees to make workplace adjustments for workers with disabilities. Generally, this means that smaller companies are not required (and will probably not want) to make architectural changes. However, *all* employers still have to meet other requirements of the A.D.A., as well as state laws against discrimination.

Q. *My company is “self-insured” — the employees contribute to a fund that’s used for health insurance. Because of my disability, I’m being asked to pay more than other people do. Is this fair?*

A. It may or may not be fair, but it is legal. Remember that this is not just the case with self-insured companies; most health insurance plans increase the rates for people who have a known health problem.

Q. *My employer has agreed to give me the two or three afternoons a month I need for medical appointments, but I won’t get paid for that time. Is there anything I can do?*

A. Your employer *does* have to allow you to keep medical appointments related to your disability, but he *doesn’t* have to pay you for time off. Some people solve this problem by staying longer on other days, so that they still have the number of work-hours they need; others arrange to take work home; and some work a different schedule (four 10-hour days, for instance).

Q. *I think my employer is discriminating against me because of my disability. What can I do?*

A. You can bring your problem to the Equal Opportunity Commission, found in the “Government” listings of the phone book, or you can call 1-800-

## Rights and responsibilities

**Y**ou have both **rights** and **responsibilities** in your new job. Knowing what they are and handling them well is going to be the most important factor in how well you do your job and how much you enjoy it.

You have these legal rights:

- ◆ That you will be included in the **normal routines** of the workplace;
- ◆ That you won’t be subjected to **standards, tests, or policies that exclude you** because of your disability;
- ◆ That you will not be **classified in any way that limits your opportunities** for advancement or other jobs;
- ◆ That you will be able to **freely move around** to all areas involved in doing your work;
- ◆ That you will receive the **materials, equipment, and information** necessary to do your job;
- ◆ That you will have a **safe workplace** — for example, emergency exits that you can use, an explanation of any known risks, etc.;
- ◆ That you will not be **involuntarily transferred** or have your hours cut back because of your disability;
- ◆ That you will be treated with the same **courtesy and respect** shown to others;
- ◆ That your employer will not **retaliate against you** if you do make a complaint to the government about unfair working conditions.

## How will this affect you?

Let's look at how these rules play out in real life. Marie was in a car accident a few years ago and it left her needing a wheelchair. She gets a job at the customer service desk of a supermarket.

The customer service counter is too high for Marie to use in her wheelchair; the employees' bathroom is big enough, but the door to it is not; and the emergency exit has steps, but no ramp. The supermarket is *required* to make the changes that will allow Marie to do her job safely and efficiently.

Here's another example: Roger has two disabilities — he has very poor hearing, and he's learning-disabled, so that he reads and writes slowly. Roger is doing fine at his new job. But the workers have to fill out quality-control forms every week; Roger has a terrible time with this because of his learning disability, and when the instructions were



given he couldn't hear them.

Roger's company is *required* to provide him with the instructions in written form, and to give him extra time to complete the forms.

## The other side of the coin

Wherever we have rights, we always have responsibilities, and that's true of the work world, too. For you to be successful and happy at your job, you need to meet your responsibilities as an employee:

- ✓ **The responsibility to know how to do your job well.** It sounds obvious, but you've probably seen people who *don't* know what they're doing.

existent. You may also find that the work is rather simple and you'd like to do something more challenging.

This is the normal experience for *everyone* in entry-level jobs. So it's also normal to start thinking about looking for a job that offers you more all around — just don't do it until you've truly mastered this one.

How do you know when you're ready to look for a better job, either within your company or somewhere else? Ask yourself these questions:

- ? Can I do my work without having to ask other people how to do it?
- ? Have I received at least one very good performance review (job evaluation)?
- ? Have I succeeded in forming good working relationships with my co-workers?
- ? Do co-workers seek me out to solve problems and answer questions?
- ? Do our clients or customers like to deal with me?
- ? Would my supervisor give me a good reference?

If you can answer *yes* to these questions, you're ready to look for opportunities to move on.

Employment and rehabilitation counselors all agree: this first job has to be a strong learning experience. It's a chance for you to learn specific work *skills* and, just as important, work *attitudes* that will prepare you for other opportunities.

## Questions and answers

- Q. *I'm going to be working for a company that has only 8 employees. Does this mean I don't come under the protections of the A.D.A.?*

## How come I don't have any money?

It costs money to have a job. While clothes, transportation, and meals can all add up, most people find that their biggest costs are child care and medical care. What can you do?

Most state workforce centers have programs to help you get through this time. And many states have funds available specifically to help you make the transition to a secure work life — money for transportation, child care, health insurance, even electric bills. Talk to your counselor; he can also direct you to community resources for help and support.

## I'm getting depressed...

...or frustrated, or angry, or stressed out. Some people — with or without disabilities — become weary and run-down as a result of the combination of pressures from work, family, bills, health, and so on. This can hurt your health, lead to bad ways of coping, and make you want to forget about the job altogether.

There's a better way. Most large companies have an Employee Assistance Program (EAP). This is a *confidential* source of help with problems about stress, health, money, substance abuse, family problems — anything that impacts your ability to do your work as you'd like to. Use it!

If your company does not have an EAP, go back to your rehabilitation counselor as soon as you notice that your problems are starting to get you down. Employment centers are very concerned with helping you make a *successful* transition to the work world, and you will be offered realistic ways to handle your problems.

## Will I ever get to advance?

Entry-level jobs can be tough. The work is often hard, the wages usually minimal, and the benefits skimpy or non-

- ✓ **The responsibility to know and to follow the company's policies.** You must follow the rules regarding lateness, sick time, break times, and work schedules. If your disability requires you to have certain times off, that's something you must work out with your boss *in advance*.
- ✓ **The responsibility to let your employer know what you need in order to do your job properly.** Suppose, for example, you have a vision disability that keeps you from reading the labels on the materials that are used in your job. You could take the job and hope for the best — maybe you can ask someone else to read it, or maybe you can watch what other people do and try to copy them as best you can.

But *why* would you take that risky approach? Your employer has the duty to make it possible for you to know what's on those labels — maybe by providing very large-print labels, or mounting a magnifying glass on your workspace. But it only becomes his duty when he *knows* it's a problem! Letting him know what you need is *your* job.

- ✓ **The responsibility to use the accommodations your employer has provided in order to do the best job you can.** Once that magnifier is mounted, don't take shortcuts; use it!
- ✓ **The responsibility to keep up good communication in the workplace.** This includes sharing information with your co-workers, asking questions when you need to, keeping your boss informed of changes, and treating everyone — customer, employer, and co-workers — with courtesy and respect.



# Great expectations

Knowing what to expect in your new job — or in any new experience, for that matter — will decrease your anxiety and increase your readiness to get started.

## Planning ahead: what to expect in the workplace

It's a lot easier to settle into a new work environment if you have some idea of what to expect. If at all possible, visit the exact area where you'll be working *before* your official first day; that way you can have a look around and see how you and your workspace will "fit."

Take the time to look for features in the work area that could cause you difficulty; then decide whether the problem is something you can work around or something that will

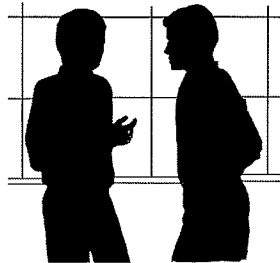
have to be changed. Don't expect others to know what you need! What may be "obvious" to you may not be at all clear to others.

If you're going to need any changes in the work environment, you must let your employer know as soon as possible. Remember to approach this (and every interaction at work) with courtesy and

a positive attitude.

Plan ahead in other ways, too. Does your workplace have a cafeteria? If so, are you able to use it easily? If not, where do people eat? Is there a refrigerator and/or microwave oven readily available to you?

Are you going to need to bring along any aids that will be needed to help you do your work? Is there a place where you can lock up your personal articles? This can be especially important if you need to carry medications with you.



# Expect the best!

We've talked about the things that can go wrong as you try to find your place among your co-workers. But it's really important for you to understand that *most things are likely to go right*. There are several good reasons why:

- ★ **Your employer** wants you to succeed; he wants you to be able to do a good job and fit in because that way the company benefits.
- ★ **Your co-workers** want to get along with each other, including you, and they want you to be a full member of the team; their own jobs go better that way, and they want to think of themselves as cooperative people.
- ★ **You** want to be a productive and satisfied employee, and that means you're ready to learn and practice the teamwork that leads to success.

So go ahead — expect that you'll go through a period of adjustment, but that it will be a positive and rewarding experience. The odds are on your side.

# Don't stop now!

If you're already working at your new job, you know that getting the job was only the first step. If yours is like most jobs, now there are other problems to be dealt with — and they can make you wonder what you've gotten yourself into! But you've made a good start, so *don't stop now!*

Instead of becoming discouraged, learn about some of the resources available to help you solve work-related problems.



## What if I'm the one being shut out?

It's possible that you'll find it hard to break into a group at work, especially if there are only a few other people and they've been working together for a long time. Almost always, this has nothing to do with disability; it happens because the long-timers are set in their ways and are forgetting to extend themselves to make you feel welcome.

Most of us have had this experience at one time or another. Be patient. **Smile** in a friendly way...



say hello and all the other courtesy phrases (*How was your weekend? Congratulations on your engagement!*

*Sorry to hear about your aunt...* and so forth) on a daily basis, and bide your time. The "strangeness" between you and your co-workers will gradually melt away.

What should you do if you're the target of jokes or other mean behavior based on your disability? The ideal first step is to deal with it directly: *"I know you don't mean any harm, but what you're doing makes it hard for me to work with you. Please don't do it anymore."* If you can get the support of another co-worker, all the better.

However, if the behavior is clearly hostile and if it goes on, you need to take the matter to your manager — or to *his* manager. Explain the situation and explain that it's interfering with your work. You should receive his assurance that the problem behavior will come to a halt.



*You have the legal right to work without being harassed, and your employer is required to make sure that right is protected.*

## Planning ahead: what to expect from co-workers

The other people you'll be working with have exactly the same role as you do: to do a good job for the company. And, just like you, that includes the responsibility of maintaining good, open communication and the kind of daily courtesy and friendliness that keeps an organization running smoothly.

What should you expect from your co-workers?

- ♦ **That you will be included in normal workplace activities** such as informal meetings;
- ♦ **That they will keep you informed** of rules or changes the same way they keep each other informed;
- ♦ That they will **offer you help** with work activities and **ask for your help** when appropriate;
- ♦ **That they will treat you with normal respect.**

Notice that your co-workers are *not* required to help you do your job; it's nice if they're considerate and helpful, but they have their own jobs to do. And they are *not* required to include you in their social activities; it's likely that they will, but that's not part of work and it's their choice.

## Finding your place on the job

**S**tarting a new job is a lot like moving into a new house or apartment: it takes a while to get to the point where you really feel at home.

## Being a team player: the key to fitting in

You *will* fit into your job environment if you are a member of the team in every way possible. The goals of the work team are to: help the company succeed; develop the company's good reputation; keep smooth, positive communication among the co-workers; and keep the workplace safe, productive, and efficient.

How can you be a valued team player? First, know how to do your job, and do it. Second, use



courtesy and respect in *all* your interactions; that means with your employer, the customers, and your co-workers. Third, *think* of yourself as part of the team; this will lead you to *work* as a team member, and others

will see you that way too.

Your disability may be a complication in your life, but — as you can see — it does not have to interfere with these three rules of fitting in: **do a good job, be courteous, and think and work as part of the team.**

If you hang back and act as though you're "different," people will take their cue from you and treat you that way! If your attitude says, "*I'm one of the gang. We're in this together as equal partners. I'm not all that different from you,*" then chances are good that's how other people will see you too.

## This isn't the place to be a "loner" . . .

It may seem that the easiest way to settle into your job is to focus on your work and *only* on your work — shutting out your co-workers, keeping to yourself, taking your breaks alone, and so on. This is especially likely if:

- ♦ You feel that you can't "fit in" with co-workers who have no disabilities;

- ♦ You are embarrassed about any special adaptations that have been made to accommodate your disability — alterations in the workplace, special equipment, a different schedule, etc.
- ♦ You resent co-workers without disabilities, believing that they can't understand your situation;
- ♦ You feel overwhelmed by the demands of your new job and you just don't have the energy to develop work relationships; or,
- ♦ You're just plain shy.

But being a loner is not a good idea! Getting along with people at work is not a social activity; *work* relationships are a part of *work*. Getting along with others on the job has a lot to do with how satisfied and effective you'll be.

It's important to let go of those awkward feelings. People with disabilities (even severe ones) *can* and *do* "fit in" with their co-workers who have no disabilities. Your co-workers just need *you* as a member of the team. Feeling overwhelmed and/or shy is something you can work at, little by little, as you develop these important connections.

## . . .and it's not the place to join a clique

If there are other people with significant disabilities at your workplace, it may be tempting to stick together. It may seem more comfortable and just plain easier to be with people who feel *and act* separate and different from the rest of the team.

Like setting yourself apart as a loner, setting yourself apart as a member of a special group — a clique — is a bad idea! You may feel that you're just making a comfortable place for yourself at work, but your other co-workers are going to feel that you're snubbing them. And that's not the way to become one friendly, cooperative team.