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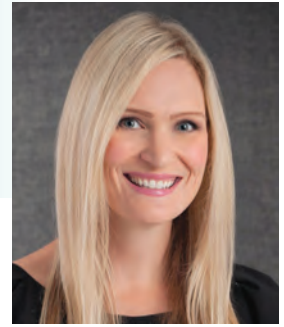
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Workplace Mental Health

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The Stressed-Out Worker and the Disability Interactive Process

"I'm seriously stressed over my workload, and I have not been able to eat or sleep in weeks."

"My doctor told me that I can't have stress at work, and this is absolutely stressful to me."

Are these statements verbal triggers that we need to enter into the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) interactive process? The simple answer is "Yes."

The difficulty with managing these requests is that the word stress often elicits a sarcastic response, and it's easy to see why, as the word is widely over-used in our culture. Life is stressful for everyone. Without it, some of us wouldn't complete a project, go to the gym, or wake up on time for work. But what is motivating for some can be debilitating for others, and understanding how to determine where a legitimate accommodation request or need occurs is vital for human resource practitioners to understand.

To start, it's important to understand when you are triggered to begin the disability interactive process. This occurs under three scenarios:

1. You receive a request for accommodation by an applicant or employee who verbalizes concern, regardless of the specific words used;
2. You perceive a disability impacting work, such as performance changes,

attendance problems/changes, or rumors, with an impact on work performance, attendance, or safety; or

3. You are notified of work restrictions or functional limitations impacting work by a medical note listing work restrictions or needed accommodations.

When you are triggered to begin the interactive process, you travel through four different steps to arrive at a reasonable accommodation decision you can feel confident about. The process has four basic steps:

1. Gather medical data;
2. Research and explore accommodation ideas;
3. Schedule and hold a reasonable accommodation meeting; and
4. Implement decisions and conclude the process with a formal resolution.

When seeking information at the first step, make sure you are obtaining clear data; for example, what environments, experiences, or workplace conditions need to be reduced or removed? In this stage, do not accept accommodation suggestions. Instead, seek the underlying restrictions or triggers to better understand and differentiate between needs versus wants and beliefs.

If the medical information shows the employee has a disability in need of workplace accommodations, then continue further in the process. If not, you

can consider discipline and/or whether your employee assistance program (EAP) is an appropriate resource. Fewer than 6% of employees take advantage of their employer's EAP. Reasons range from fear of confidentiality to not knowing it exists or that it offers more than therapy. Benefits of using an EAP are widely reported and include fewer missed days from work, less turnover, and higher employee satisfaction.¹

If the medical information indicates a disability exists, the ADA requires your organization to pursue the remaining three steps above. Document each step clearly and accurately; this will guide whether implementation of an accommodation is reasonable or not. Documentation is invaluable in the event of a complaint or lawsuit.

It's important to use the right tools — whether it be the interactive process, a performance tool and/or accessing your EAP — while not losing sight of your objective: to support improved outcomes for your employees and reduce the visible impact of stress on the organization.

References

1. McRee J. How Perceptions of Mental Illness Impact EAP Utilization. *Benefits Quarterly*. 33(1):37–42. 2017. Retrieved from <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/29465185>