



## **Employment Accommodations for People with Mental Health Challenges**

People who experience mental health challenges represent an undervalued and untapped pool of talent and are four times more likely to be unemployed than non-disabled people. Most want to work, either in paid or in voluntary positions. Reasonable accommodations and support enable many people with mental health issues to lead stable and productive working lives, making a valuable contribution to the workplace.

Once someone has been offered a job, you may need to put in reasonable accommodations to ensure they can perform to their highest capability. Start getting the accommodations in place as soon as practicable after you have made an appointment – it may take time. Consult the individual and make sure that the employee's manager or supervisor understands the agreed accommodations.

Build in regular reviews of accommodations, e.g. at the end of the probationary period, in supervision sessions and in appraisals to ensure that the accommodations are still effective. Ensure that you take the same approach to accommodations when an employee with mental health problems applies for promotion, again not making assumptions about what the employee can or cannot do.

People with mental health issues are not all the same, and any accommodations required will vary from person to person. Many people need few, if any, accommodations. The most important single accommodation many organizations need to make concerns attitudes and assumptions:

- ensure that you have a clear, credible and well communicated disability policy that includes mental health so that employees feel safe about disclosing problems
- ensure that training on managing disability and disability awareness training is provided regularly.
- if you need to make reasonable accommodations remember your employee may be entitled to support from various community employment support programs and government services in your area.

## **Orientation and Training**

Whether an employee with mental health issues is returning to work or starting work for the first time, ensure they have a thorough orientation:

- be sensitive. Group orientation activities can require strong social skills and be difficult for those who lack confidence or have low self-esteem. Provide support in team building and ice-breaking activities if appropriate
- communicate expectations of the employee clearly. Outline the job requirements and how they fit into the overall business objective
- provide peer support or a workplace mentor. This can be extremely beneficial to an employee with mental health problems and provide their colleague with valuable personal development
- provide training and resources to equip the individual to perform their role. Some employees with mental health issues may need additional managerial support and supervision in the induction period
- make sure everyone is aware of any employee support and wellness services and knows how to access them
- ensure that the person is confident and comfortable with existing tasks before you look at increasing the pace of the work or introducing new tasks
- use an external support worker if the employee would find this useful.

## **Working Arrangements to Retain Employees**

You may need to provide additional reasonable accommodations after orientation, for those who either acquire a disability during the course of their employment or whose condition or needs change.

Accommodations may include:

- allowing flexible working hours and working arrangements. For example, a later start and finish time or more regular rest or toilet breaks during the day
- offering support with prioritizing workload, e.g. time management training and stress management training
- if required, providing a safe, secure and confidential place to store and take medication and easy access to drinking water
- accepting inconsistencies in behaviour or mood
- if required, allowing time off work for rehabilitation, assessments and medical, counseling or psychotherapy appointments



- encouraging feedback. Praising employees' achievements instills confidence; constructive criticism helps to define boundaries and expectations
- appreciating that a person with a mental health issues may require extra management support. Allow additional time for supervision where necessary and if appropriate provide a support worker
- allowing the employee extra time to carry out certain tasks where appropriate
- providing equipment to help the employee, e.g. colour coding, an electronic calendar or a digital recorder can be useful for employees experiencing memory difficulties
- making changes to the work environment. For example, room dividers, other soundproofing or visual barriers can be useful for an employee who has difficulties with concentration or memory, a private room where an employee can take a rest will help an employee experiencing distress or fatigue
- being prepared to reallocate some duties throughout the team, remember this does not mean that the core tasks need to be removed from the job
- providing formal and informal support systems such as employee wellness schemes or disability networks and encourage employees to take advantage of them
- recognizing that everyone is different and will have their own distinctive mannerisms, behavioural patterns and personality traits. Promote a culture of tolerance that recognizes and accepts that, at times, some people with mental health issues may communicate or behave in ways that are different to other employees.
- this list is not exhaustive, and you may need to explore other reasonable adjustments in consultation with your employee.

### **Supporting a Distressed Employee**

Anyone can become upset and distressed at work, regardless of whether they have a mental health issue. Managers need to be able to identify and respond sensitively and sensibly to individuals who are going through a difficult time. It is important that line managers and others feel confident about how to support an employee who becomes distressed. However while you should be alert to the signs of mental distress you should not attempt diagnosis or treatment. The following principles may be helpful:

- ask the person how you can help and what they would find useful, e.g. someone to talk to, or some time to be on their own



- ask if there is anyone they would like contacted, e.g. a friend, partner, relative, or colleague
- provide a suitable space for the person to express emotion, and compose themselves in comfort and privacy
- once the person has recovered sufficiently, they may want to carry on working or they may need to take a break or just go home early. Try your best not to let the person leave your premises alone if they are still very distressed
- the employee may feel embarrassed about the incident. Reassure them that they are valued and supported. If the individual requires a longer period of absence stay in regular contact and give them every opportunity to request any adjustments that would enable them to return to work.

### **Follow-up Actions:**

- do not ignore the fact the person was distressed or pretend it did not happen. Instead deal with the situation directly and honestly
- ask the employee if there is anything you can do to help and make sure they are aware of the support the organization offers including reasonable adjustments
- when the person feels ready discuss if work has contributed to their distress. Listen without passing judgment and make sure you address their concerns seriously
- if appropriate, discuss the possibility of seeking professional help. Encourage the person to get help from the welfare officer or occupational health department, their GP or other health professional.
- in rare circumstances you may be required to support an employee who is in crisis, and is a risk to themselves or to others. In this situation, where possible alert the emergency contact of their choice. If this is not possible, contact the duty social worker at your local social services for advice or intervention.
- try to work with the individual to remove or manage the triggers that exacerbate their distress. Consult the employee about what they would like to be done should they experience such distress at work again.

### **Performance Appraisals**

- ensure that employees with mental health issues are not penalized through inflexible performance criteria, (e.g. some employees may be placed at a disadvantage by a workplace culture which expects employees to regularly work overtime, or



by attendance criteria, which penalizes an employee who has flexible working patterns)

- ensure any concerns that an employee with mental health issues raises in their appraisal process are taken seriously. For example, if an employee complains of conflict with their line manager, do not assume it is a consequence of their mental health issue, it may be the manager who is performing badly
- ensure that employees with mental health issues are given equal access to training and opportunities for career development. An individual's mental health issue should never be considered an automatic barrier to career progression
- deal with any outstanding concerns relating to conduct and performance sensitively but firmly and in accordance with your written procedures. Make your expectations clear, listen to the employee's explanations and set reasonable time-frames for improvements.
- where concerns about someone's conduct or performance may be for a reason connected to their disability you must explore reasonable accommodations to resolve the difficulties prior to an employee undergoing disciplinary or capability proceedings. Failure to do so could constitute disability related discrimination or less favourable treatment for a reason related to a disability and would be difficult to justify.

Following is a brief list of useful resource links for employers wishing to increase their capacity to recruit, employ, and retain employees who experience mental health challenges:

accessWORKS: <http://www.accessworks.ca>

BC Business and Economic Roundtable on Mental Health:  
<http://www.bcmehworks.ca/>

BC Government, Ministry of Health, Mental Health and Addictions:  
<http://www.health.gov.bc.ca/mhd/>

BC Mental Health and Addictions Research Network:  
<http://www.mhanet.ca>

BC Mental Health and Addiction Services: <http://www.bcmhas.ca>

Canadian Mental Health Association, BC Division:  
<http://www.cmha.bc.ca/>

Mental Health Works: <http://www.mentalhealthworks.ca/>

Mental Illness First Aid Course: <http://mifa.ca/>

