



“Ask Dr. J”



The “Ask Dr. J” columns are authored monthly by Jennifer Christian, MD, MPH, President of Webility Corporation. See previous columns at www.webility.md.

Dr. J’s columns also appear in the monthly Bulletin of the Disability Management Employer Coalition (DMEC). To purchase a book of Dr. J’s collected columns, go to www.dmec.org.

The columns often summarize issues discussed by the Work Fitness and Disability Roundtable, a free, multi-disciplinary e-mail discussion group moderated by Dr. Christian. Apply to join the Roundtable at www.webility.md.

February 2008 – Are People with Disabilities Good Employees?

Dear Dr. J:

The president of our company is reluctant to implement an aggressive stay-at-work and return-to-work program for people who develop non-work-related medical conditions. Her view is that people with disabilities are going to be sick more often, have unreliable attendance, not perform up to snuff, etc. Do you have any tips I can use to respond to these questions?

Agatha in Athens

Dear Agatha:

Well, it’s lucky that your boss is straightforward enough to speak her concerns out loud, because now you can address them. One of the greatest challenges experienced by individuals with disabilities (or perceived disabilities) is employment. Employer attitudes are part of what creates this pervasive problem. Specifically, some employers have misperceptions about whether individuals with disabilities will be good employees, and the costs associated with the provision of accommodations. Actually, it is appropriate for your employer to be concerned about the bottom line, because its health determines whether the business that employs you will survive!

There are several possible areas of reasonable concern: loyalty and turnover; likelihood of workers’ comp and excessive healthcare benefit claims, attendance/absenteeism and job performance. Luckily, there’s a new study which, although it is imperfect, lends support to the optimistic but informal anecdotes and stories that many experts in this arena have told for years.

I recall being in the audience at the Washington Business Group on Health’s annual disability conference a few years ago. A senior executive at the US Department of Labor was herself a wheelchair user. She commented that the people in her agency who had obvious impairment-type disabilities were rarely the ones who had attendance or performance problems; it was the ones who THOUGHT of themselves as “unable” who did. Apparently, she is only one of many

employers who have attested that employees with disabilities are "better" employees or at least "as good" as those without (DuPont, Sears). When people have lived without a job for a while, they are grateful when they do find one, and will move heaven and earth to keep it.

With respect to healthcare benefits, here's a reassuring story. An employer I know provides comprehensive health insurance for their whole staff of whom more than half have substantial disabilities. Their healthcare utilization is no higher than that of any other similarly sized employer.

There is also some new research data to support these assertions. A recent study commissioned by the Chicagoland Chamber of Commerce's "disabilityworks" initiative was to examine the economic costs and benefits of workers with disabilities within three sectors (healthcare, retail, and hospitality). This is apparently a first-of-its-kind study, and the results were only unveiled to Chicago-region business leaders on January 28. A team of researchers at DePaul University did a focus group with administrators from 16 companies and analyzed data from 13 companies about 95 disabled employees compared to 219 non-disabled employees. The researchers found that the employees with disabilities were just as dependable and productive as employees without disabilities. In addition, the research results showed accommodation costs associated with workers with disabilities were often minimal and well worth the expense.

However, this data must be taken with a grain of salt. The study group was very highly self-selected. Employees were not asked to specify their disability. More than 14,000 employees were asked to participate in the cost-benefit portion of the study, but only 1000 responded. Of those who responded, about 2/3 agreed to allow disclosure of all the information the researchers required. After matching, that left only 314 total subjects, of whom 95 self-identified as disabled using the Americans with Disabilities Act definition. Small numbers of observations were a problem particularly in the hospitality sector of the study where there were only 4 disabled employees.

I want to bring up 2 key issues that are missing in these stories and studies that may help explain why some "disabled" people do better than others at work.

1. Whether they FEEL well or not. Personally, I'm a lumpner not a splitter, so I tend to group people with "impairments" into two groups -- those who are healthy but missing something, and those who are sick. By sick I mean they have an on-going disease process eating away at them somewhere.

As an example, people with some anatomical disabilities or residual from a prior medical event (e.g., amputated leg, blindness, mental retardation, frozen shoulder) will usually **feel** great and raring to go and can work as energetically as the next person -- as long as they aren't expected to do something they are simply incapable of doing. They're not going to be going to the doctor very often. On the other hand, people with some chronic illnesses (e.g. rheumatoid arthritis, congestive heart failure, migraine headache) may feel bum due to pain, fatigue, weakness, malaise, etc. Some of them may need to go to the doctor often for regular care or when their condition worsens. Of course, people who are depressed have many of those same symptoms. Many of those people keep going to the doctor to find an explanation for their symptoms. And of course there are many people with conditions that may fall in the middle or vary from time to time.

The implications of this distinction are significant. People aren't meeting the essential demands of a job -- which include showing up to do the work -- if they frequently feel so

badly that they don't come to work and thus are undependable or if needed work doesn't get done which then has a negative impact on their employer's business.

2. What their intentions are about work. By that I mean are they committed to delivering on-going real value to their employer -- producing the thing they were hired to do -- or are they simply committed to keeping their paycheck? Some employees get so wound up in their own medical conditions and life predicament that they forget to make explicit statements to reassure their boss. The employer needs to hear the employee say out loud that they commit to holding up their end of the deal that is the basis for their relationship with the employer. If I were the boss and an employee who needed accommodations had a track record of at least average work, I would be a lot more predisposed to make the effort to provide them if I knew that the employee would be trying their best.

Some people are willing to come to work even when they feel badly. With that same level of discomfort, other people stay home. The difference is often the strength of their commitment to their job. Although business people talk about "presenteeism" like it's bad, absenteeism is worse. The employer is getting zero value out of person who is at home. If someone is at work and feeling sub-par, at least they are producing something. If the sub-par performance continues too long, however, performance will suffer and something needs to be done.

3. They know when to say when. Some of the most awkward situations occur when an employee can no longer cut the mustard at work, even with accommodations, but refuses to acknowledge it.

We need to acknowledge the reality that when human beings don't feel well, working consumes a larger fraction of our available energy -- our vitality. We should also acknowledge that people who have certain kinds of significant disabilities may also consume a larger fraction than most people would of their available energy to simply get around and perform their activities of daily living and working -- even if they feel well. So, I think it's appropriate to acknowledge the courage and commitment that people who are living with impairments and chronic conditions are exhibiting when they make the extra effort to stay at work and "hold up their own end."

Sorry I don't have more definite answers for your boss, but this should provide you with some fodder for a good conversation.

Smiling,
Dr. J

Webility Corporation • 95 Woodridge Road • Wayland, MA 01778

www.webility.md • 508-358-5218 • mail@webility.md