A HUMAN RESOURCE GUIDE FOR WORKING WITH EMPLOYEES EXPERIENCING VISION LOSS

NATIONAL RESEARCH & TRAINING CENTER ON BLINDNESS & LOW VISION

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Transportation Resources
www.blind.msstate.edu/our-products/transportation
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provide a guide for this
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evaluate and navigate
mobility options availab

Working with an employee who experiences vision loss can initially be challenging for human resources (HR) managers and supervisors unfamiliar with blindness or low vision, especially if unaware of the various accommodations available to assist persons with vision loss in completing job duties. Successful organizations invest in all employees and work to find creative solutions to retain loyal employees. This guide provides useful information and guidance for HR staff who are helping employees who experience vision loss maintain employment.

Vision loss can cover a wide range, from moderate difficulty seeing to total blindness. A common misperception is that blindness equals total darkness but the majority of people considered "legally blind" have some level of useable vision. Legal blindness is defined as best corrected visual acuity of 20/200, where 20/20 is considered normal, or a visual field less than 20 degrees where normal fields are approximately 167 degrees.

People with less severe vision loss are referred to as having low vision. People with low vision have a condition for which glasses cannot restore vision. Anyone can experience loss of vision because of an accident, disease, or the aging process. The type of vision loss can vary depending on the condition that causes the loss. Some people experience vision loss gradually, and some experience sudden vision loss or blindness.

Signs of Changes in Vision

People experiencing a decrease in vision may have difficulty completing paperwork, reading standard-size print, discerning regular or colored font on the computer screen, or locating the cursor. A person with a vision loss may squint, angle their head, tilt their computer monitor, report frequent eyestrain or headaches, or have difficulty transitioning between light and dark. Sometimes people do not recognize, or want to acknowledge, that their vision is decreasing, and the person's productivity may change.

Job Accommodations

A person who experiences a vision loss will likely need some job accommodations. Providing job accommodations may allow employers to:

- Retain valuable employees
- Improve productivity and morale
- Improve company diversity

Accommodations for an employee with vision loss may improve the workplace for all employees, which then improves the organization as a whole. For example, an accommodation that improves lighting and reduces glare may make the job site more comfortable for all.

Employers are responsible under Title I of the Americans with Disabilities Act for providing reasonable accommodations to allow employees with disabilities to perform the essential functions of their jobs, unless this would cause undue hardship. HR staff can help managers identify accommodations that function as tools to assist a person with a disability, just as tools are provided to employees without disabilities. Assistive technology is one accommodation that enables people with vision loss to remain competitive, productive employees.

Both low-tech and high-tech accommodations are often available at little to no cost to the employer and with minimal changes to the work environment. Low-tech accommodations might include:

- Placing tactile dots on controls on equipment, such as the telephone, a copier, the microwave in the breakroom, etc. so that an individual who is blind or visually impaired can determine which buttons perform different functions.
- Placing a braille sticker on an employee's mail slot to identify it.
- Increasing or decreasing lighting in an office or cubicle to increase visibility or reduce glare.
- Covering a window to reduce glare.
- Providing extra floor space in a cubicle to accommodate a guide dog.

Examples of more high-tech accommodations include:

- Screen reading or screen magnification software to allow an employee who is blind or has low vision to complete computer tasks.
- A larger monitor or dual monitors to allow an individual with low vision greater access to visual information.
- A braille display paired with the computer, an iPad, or used independently to take notes and recall information.
- A video magnifier to increase the size of print, and enhance the contrast of printed materials.
- Optical character recognition hardware or software to capture print information and translate it to audio output.

Examples of other accommodations that may assist an employee with blindness or visual impairment include:

- An altered work schedule to accommodate transportation.
- A longer work schedule with additional breaks to prevent headaches or eye strain.
- A modification to the job description or job-sharing with another employee.

Job sharing involves swapping tasks between two employees, replacing tasks that are difficult for the employee with low vision with comparable tasks. Tasks that are difficult for the employee with vision loss would be moved to another employee, and some of that employee's tasks would be moved to the person with a vision loss.

Essential Job Functions

Essential job functions are the duties an employee must perform to complete the job. It is helpful for employers to think carefully about what the essential job functions are and consider how the tasks could be accomplished with job modifications. For example, reading and creating documents might be considered essential job functions when the true task is the ability to access and produce documents. A person with a vision loss could access and produce documents using assistive technology.

Vocational Rehabilitation Services

The vocational rehabilitation program, which is federally funded and operates in every state, assists both employees and the businesses that employ them. If an employee experiences vision loss, the employer or person with a disability should contact their local vocational rehabilitation office. Vocational rehabilitation staff may conduct an evaluation to determine which accommodations would allow an individual experiencing vision loss to perform the essential functions of the job. Vocational rehabilitation services may include financial assistance if an accommodation is an "undue hardship" for the employer or if the needed equipment is portable and may be used for tasks outside the workplace. Vocational rehabilitation agencies have a mission to assist individuals with disabilities to obtain and retain employment and to collaborate with employers to create an environment of diversity and inclusion. To locate the vocational rehabilitation agency in your state, visit www.askearn.org/state-vocational-rehabilitation-agencies/

Eligible veterans may receive vocational rehabilitation and employment services through the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA). VA services include job training and assistance with independent living skills. More information is available at www.benefits.va.gov/VOCREHAB/VRE_Process.asp

Adjustment to Blindness and Low Vision

Depending on the severity of the vision loss, job requirements, and other personal factors, an individual may have several options for acquiring the skills necessary to compensate for their reduced vision and to ensure maximum productivity in the workplace.

Itinerant rehabilitation services: An individual may elect to continue working while receiving training, which might occur before, after, or during the workday. A needs assessment, in consultation with the employee and the employer, will determine which areas need to be addressed first and the approximate timeframe for meeting that need.

Rehabilitation programs: If vision loss is significant, individuals may require a more comprehensive approach to learning new skills and alternative ways to complete their job tasks. There may be options for both residential and day programs that provide intensive individualized rehabilitation training. Employees may need to use short-term disability, FMLA, a leave-of-absence, or administrative leave to participate in intensive programs. Blindness rehabilitation programs may include:

- A low vision examination to determine if vision can be maximized with glasses, magnifiers, or other low vision devices.
- Orientation and mobility training to promote safe and independent travel in the workplace and community.
- Instruction in assistive technology to learn the use of a screen reader or screen magnification software to access a computer.
- Braille instruction, if an individual is no longer able to access print.
- Alternative techniques in skills of daily living to do things such as cooking, cleaning, shopping, and other essential life tasks.

Productivity

Employers should not assume that employees with disabilities cannot be held to the same performance levels applied to employees without disabilities. According to EEOC guidance, employees with disabilities must meet the same production standards, in both quantity and quality, as an employee without

a disability in the same job. Lowering or changing a production standard because an employee cannot meet it due to a disability is not considered a reasonable accommodation. With appropriate accommodations and training, an employee with low vision can perform at the same level as prior to their vision loss, and at the same level as their sighted co-workers.

If an employee has difficulty performing the essential functions of his or her job, even after receiving accommodations and training, consider identifying an alternate job within the company that the person could perform. Ideally, the knowledge and skills gained will transfer to another position within the company.

Conclusion

An employee experiencing vision loss can remain a valuable and productive employee if information is accessible, appropriate accommodations are provided, and the individual receives the training necessary to perform essential job functions. Vocational rehabilitation agencies can partner with employers and employees experiencing vision loss. Embracing the challenges that come with working with an individual with a disability leads to a more diverse and inclusive workplace.

Additional information is available from the following websites:
National Technical Assistance Center on Blindness and Visual Impairment: www.ntac.blind.msstate.edu/businesses/
Job Accommodation Network: askjan.org/

Need help? Contact The National Research and Training Center on Blindness and Low Vision

Phone: 662-325-2001
Fax: 662-325-8989
facebook.com/msu.nrtc/
@MSU_NRTC
www.blind.msstate.edu

The contents of this booklet were developed under a grant (90RT5040-01-00) with funding from the National Institute on Disability, Independent Living, and Rehabilitation Research (NIIDLRR). NIDILRR is the federal government's primary disability research agency housed within the Administration for Community Living (ACL), Department of Health and Human Services (HHS). The contents of this booklet do not necessarily represent the policy of NIDILRR, ACL, or HHS, and readers should not assume endorsement by the Federal Government.

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