



The FORUM

A Newsletter for Illinois Corporate Partners February 2011

Be Aware of Disabilities, Whether Visible or Not

By Rebecca R. Hastings, SPHR

Employees with non visible disabilities face a decision with every new employer, co worker, boss and client: to disclose or not to disclose. Such a decision is a personal one, and it probably will be based on the nature of the work environment, the disability and the likelihood that it will impact the workday. Employers can create a workplace environment that supports people with disabilities, including employees who have chosen not to disclose their conditions.

Some employees have learned the hard way to be cautious.

Marilyn Heywood Paige was fired just days after her boss noticed that she wore an emergency bracelet indicating that she has epilepsy. "She said she just didn't think I was quite the right fit," though Paige was told there were concerns about her safety. Her advice to others with non visible disabilities is clear: "Don't disclose it unless you absolutely have to. You don't know how people will react."

Preparing the Workplace

In Getting Support, Supporting Others: A Handbook for Working with Non Visible Disabilities, produced for the benefit of employees and people managers by Ernst & Young (E&Y), a global professional services firm, non visible disabilities are grouped into three broad categories:

- Chronic health conditions and illnesses (such as diabetes and cancer).
- Sensory impairments (hearing loss, low vision, mobility limitations).
- Mental health and learning disabilities (depression, anxiety disorders, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder).

E&Y uses "non visible" rather than "hidden" to refer to disabilities that are not obviously apparent to avoid any implication of concealment or shame.

"There are a host of practical things that may go along with working with a person with a non visible disability," according to Lori Golden, who leads AccessAbilities, E&Y's initiative to build an inclusive work environment for employees with disabilities. "With a non visible disability or non apparent disability, people don't necessarily know how to react. They don't necessarily know the impact on the person," she said. "They are likely to forget or to make assumptions of health because they are not seeing anything that is obvious."

One Employee's Story

An E&Y employee, who will be referred to as "Caroline" for privacy reasons, chose to disclose her disability a systemic form of arthritis diagnosed at the age of 19 about six months after she joined the firm. At the time, she was

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EMPLOYERS

The Illinois Department of Human Services' Division of Rehabilitation Services is proud to announce a new web site:
**"DRS Success:
 Making It Work Together".**

Employers can obtain current information on working with DRS regarding the employment of people with disabilities.

Visit:

drs.illinois.gov/success

DHS/DRS Mission

The Illinois Department of Human Services' Division of Rehabilitation Services (DRS) is the state's lead agency serving individuals with disabilities. DRS works in partnership with people with disabilities and their families to assist them in making informed choices to achieve full community participation through employment, education and independent living opportunities.

Illinois Corporate Partners Mission Statement

The mission of DRS' Illinois Corporate Partner initiative is to create a strong partnership between the Illinois business community and DRS to assist Illinois residents with disabilities at the local level in attaining stable employment that leads to economic self-sufficiency.

Illinois Corporate Partners will:

- Lead the way in providing job opportunities in the marketplace for persons with disabilities.
- Invest in the untapped and unused labor resources provided by DRS.
- Re-invest in the community by providing an opportunity for Illinois residents to become productive and responsible taxpayers.
- Receive the benefits of qualified employees while providing career opportunities to those individuals with work abilities.
- Give serious consideration to hiring qualified persons with disabilities and encourage other businesses to tap into this pool of talented employees.

experiencing a flare up of her condition, which was, in her words, "so bad I couldn't walk." Because she had a trusting relationship with her "counselor" the executive assigned to advise her throughout her employment in the absence of a fixed supervisor she chose to disclose her condition to him.

"It was the best thing I ever did," she told *SHRM Online*, because his response was to say, "I'm so sorry you are going through this. What can we do to help you?"

Though he had not suspected that she had such a condition, Caroline's counselor told *SHRM Online* in a separate interview that his immediate concern was for her, her health, and her family: "It was a lot for her to deal with personally," he said.

Eventually, their conversation turned to business. "We talked about what we would need to do from an engagement point of view and, more importantly, from a communication point of view so we could respond to her needs in a timely manner," he said. "We realized we both needed to be very open about this event so we could manage it best for both of us going forward."

Though Caroline's news came as a surprise, her counselor said he was prepared for such a disclosure by the discussion and "organized infrastructure at E&Y around flexibility and inclusivity." It's important for managers to "create an open communication environment" in which managers and employees talk about the employee's needs, as well as the needs of the business, he added. "Everyone has other stuff going on in their lives."

Business Benefits

Some say that a positive disclosure experience can pay off in employee loyalty and productivity.

Michelle Brown, associate publisher of *MR Magazine*, a Business Journals Inc. publication, joined the company in 2002, three years after being diagnosed with multiple sclerosis (MS). However, it wasn't until 2005, when a series of early morning steroid treatments caused her to reach her office in New York a little late, that she decided it was time to disclose her condition.

Although her manager was out of town at the time, Brown decided to tell him that she had been late, and why. "He was glad I 'came clean' about being late when he was away. Those were his exact words," she told *SHRM Online*. "He was 100 percent supportive," she added, and told her he knew of other people with MS.

"The company has always been 100 percent supportive of all of its employees' personal needs as long as we are all doing the jobs expected of us," Brown said. "I believe it breeds a strong sense of mutual loyalty and employees give it their all for the company."

The company supported Brown again when she returned from a September 2006 business trip with a limp and needed to drive to work instead of take the train. "By June 2008, I could no longer drive and was in a wheelchair full time," she explained. "My boss and the owners of my company agreed to pay for a private car service to bring me to work a few days a week, but when I couldn't get in and out of the car anymore, they let me work from home.

"Other companies would have let me go or offered me a lesser job," she noted. "At Business Journals, I got promoted."

"Dealing with a disability can be depressing and can affect an employee's motivation to work," said Brown's boss, Stu Nifoussi, publisher and executive vice president of Business Journals Inc. "In Michelle's case, working was a motivator, not only to keep the money coming in but also to have contact with the outside world and give her a reason to get out of the house each day or as often as possible. She was driven to succeed in spite of her challenges. How can you not support someone like that?" he added. Brown said managers should "have empathy and be supportive. Disclosing a problem is difficult and stressful. If you support your employees, they will give back to the company through productivity."

Paige said that if an employee reveals a disability, a manager should:

- Ask for information, without judgment, such as what signs to look for to indicate that the person is having a medical emergency and what they would like you to do besides calling 911.
- Know where the employee keeps emergency medicine and personal phone numbers if needed.
- Get on the web and learn something about the condition to be better prepared for and sensitive to the employee's needs.
- Avoid showing pity or making comments such as "Oh, you poor thing!"

HR's Role

HR needs to let employees know what kind of resources are there for them, E&Y's Caroline said, and to remind them that the reasons for needing those resources are confidential. A simple question what do we need to do to help you be successful? can go a long way, she added.

For example, E&Y's AccessAbilities Network taught her about intermittent leave under the Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA).

Golden said HR professionals can make the work environment better for people with non visible disabilities by:

- Raising awareness. "Many people don't realize that most of the disabilities we are encountering in a work environment are probably not visible," she said. "There are people all around us who have health issues, mental health issues, etc, that affect the way they work and live each day."
- Educating employees and managers at a very basic level, covering things such as "language, etiquette and ways to be inclusive." One of E&Y's "quick guides" discusses things that are helpful to say to a colleague with a serious health condition and what is not helpful.
- Communicating the organization's commitment to supporting people with visible and non visible disabilities. This is "absolutely critical," according to Golden, because otherwise employees might choose not to disclose a disability even if they need an accommodation to perform their job effectively. "The only way we can get people to speak up is in what we write about the organization, the messaging leaders use, and the images we use internally and externally," she added.

Deciding to Disclose

Despite the efforts of organizations such as E&Y, some employees choose to keep their non visible disabilities to themselves. "It comes as a very personal decision for people," Caroline noted. Before disclosing, "you need to know the culture of the organization where you are working ... to know who you can confide in," she said.

Some choose not to disclose out of fear or denial.

"My clients report that they don't *really* have a hearing loss and that they are concerned they could get terminated if their employer found out about their hearing impairment," said Katie Schwartz, a corporate speech pathologist and speech coach.

"Anytime you have to ask something of a company, there's a concern," Caroline noted, such as colleagues believing that you are not contributing as much, that you are getting added flexibility or that you can't take on certain opportunities. "I didn't want to be perceived as a slacker," she said. But she found that her colleagues were interested in having her succeed. The reaction she conjured up in her mind "was much worse than it ended up being," she said.

Avoid Assumptions

Because many workers might choose not to disclose their non visible disabilities, Golden says it's important to avoid assumptions about what people can't do as well as assumptions about what people can do. For example, one of E&Y's training videos portrays a team of employees taking the stairs from one floor to another for a meeting. Yet when one member of the team stops to wait for the elevator, a colleague turns back and says, "Come on, don't be lazy," not knowing that the individual has a non visible disability and cannot use the stairs. "It's very easy to make assumptions" when you are not seeing a visible disability, Golden said.

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Olive Garden Restaurants and Disability Mentoring Day activities provide hands-on career exploration opportunities for people with disabilities.

The Olive Garden has been a long-time advocate of hiring people with disabilities in Central Illinois. Darden Concepts, Inc., parent company of Olive Garden, continues to work with DRS in developing relationships with the brands that they operate. Those brands are Red Lobster, Longhorn Steakhouse, The Capital Grille, Bahama Breeze, and Seasons 52.

In recognition of National Disability Employment Awareness Month and Disability Mentoring Day, the Illinois Department of Human Services' Division of Rehabilitation Services (DHS/DRS) organized activities statewide throughout the month of October to promote career development for students and job seekers with disabilities and matched them with the needs and expertise of local employers.

Disability Mentoring Day (DMD) continues to grow as hundreds of customers and employers participated around the State this year. Events and activities included: employer recognition events, mock interviews, one-on-one job shadowing, on the job experience, as well as on the job training opportunities.

In **Springfield**, the local DRS office partnered with the Olive Garden and arranged job mentoring experiences for three (3) customers. In addition, the Springfield Olive Garden hosted a luncheon and presentation regarding their company for ten (10) DRS customers and their vocational rehabilitation counselors. Each customer was provided the opportunity to complete an application for employment and schedule an interview. As a result, the Olive Garden offered employment to two (2) DRS customers and both accepted the positions!

The **Decatur** DRS office also partnered with their local Olive Garden to provide mentoring opportunities for three (3) DRS customers. In speaking with the Service Manager and Certified Trainer for Olive Garden, DRS staff learned that the General Manager had previously been involved with the DMD in our **Champaign** office and wanted to establish the same relationship in Decatur. This type of community involvement falls within the "Hospitaliano Program" designed by Olive Garden Corporate that encourages restaurants to invest in their local communities.

During the mentoring, the DRS customers were introduced to various jobs and duties within the restaurant. Instead of just following the staff, the three (3) DRS customers assisted with prep cooking and then were coached in cooking their own lunch from the Olive Garden menu. The General Manager and Trainer joined the group for lunch and discussed the application and interview process they use for employee selection and highlighted the qualities they seek in a successful candidate. The following week, they hosted an informational luncheon for seven (7) more DRS customers and again discussed the hiring process utilized by Olive Garden.

The Olive Garden in **Peoria** also participated in Disability Mentoring Day (DMD) and worked with a vocational rehabilitation counselor to arrange a mentoring experience for a DRS customer in the kitchen. Due to the customer's experience and enthusiasm displayed during the mentoring activity, the Managers at the Peoria Olive Garden were impressed enough that they created a part-time position for her. The DRS vocational rehabilitation counselor followed up with the customer's supervisor and reported they are so pleased with her performance that if the full-time position becomes available, she would be offered the position!

DMD is part of a national effort to increase internship and employment opportunities for qualified individuals with disabilities; promote disability as a central part of diversity recruitment for a more inclusive workforce; dispel fears about hiring individuals with disabilities; increase motivation and confidence amongst students and job seekers with disabilities; and serve as a launching point for a year round effort to foster more career oriented mentoring opportunities!

To partner with DRS and to participate in employment and mentoring activities go to our web site: drs.illinois.gov/success.

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The Valued Employees You're Missing: People With Disabilities

By Joy Buchanan – Diversity Inc. – Nov 18, 2010

In the disability community, John Kemp, executive director of the US Business Leadership Network (USBLN), is in the minority. He started life with his disability—which he manages now with two prosthetic arms and two prosthetic legs—but just 17 percent of people with disabilities are born with their disabilities. The other 83 percent acquired a disability along life's path. That, Kemp explained to DiversityInc's audience of chief diversity officers and executives at our two-day diversity event in Washington, D.C., is why most people with disabilities do not identify with the disability community.

“Why do we have to make a business case that we belong?” Kemp asked. “Our employees should look like our customers, like our suppliers, like our shareholders.”

In October, the percentage of people with disabilities in the labor force was about 21 percent. That percentage hasn't changed since the passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act in 1990. Many workers with disabilities—particularly disabilities that are not easily seen—do not disclose their disability to employers or coworkers. Kemp said that this “hiding” takes considerable effort and, thus, hurts productivity. “We have a long way to go to create safe environments for employees with disabilities.”

The good news is that progress is possible. Kemp recommended that employers emulate children in being open. “Children confront us; adults avoid us,” he said.

“Children are the ones doing it right. They ask, ‘Can you drive?’ ‘Can you play basketball?’ ‘Can you hold this?’ That's OK. It's the separation, distance and avoidance that cause problems.”

Employers should also avoid making assumptions about a person's abilities. “People who aren't disabled, when confronting disabilities, think it's worse than it actually is. ‘I don't think this person can do the job,’” Kemp said. “Ask and let the person tell you what he or she can or cannot do.”

Finally, positive psychology and identifying with the core values of the disability movement—including heightened acceptance of differences, interdependence, humor and future orientation—can help bridge those gaps. There has been some progress as younger workers with disabilities are more willing to disclose their status and ask for what they need to be productive, but the problem isn't solved, Kemp said. “We've got a long way to go and it will take a long time.”

“The facts show the VR Program not only benefits its participants. It also is a cost effective way to assure America retains a talented and expanding labor pool that can contribute to all of society. Vocational rehabilitation represents a critical part of what we pride ourselves in as a great nation: opportunity for all.”

Robert Dole, Retired Senator Kansas

The Forum is a bi-monthly publication for the Illinois Corporate Partners. We welcome any news or suggestions for the newsletter. We also welcome photos in tif or jpg format. For more information contact Tom Lowery at: 309-798-6844 (V) 888-340-1004 (TTY) or email at tom.lowery@illinois.gov

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