

Self-Advocacy in the Workplace: Requesting Job Accommodations

by Dale S. Brown

Self-advocacy is knowing what you want, what you do well, and what you have difficulty doing. It includes knowing your legal rights, your needs, and telling that information to the appropriate person.

Effective self-advocacy empowers people and gives them access to reasonable accommodations and strategies.

Following are some tips for becoming an effective self-advocate in the workplace.

Setting the Stage

1. **Be productive!** Bosses and co-workers are more likely to agree to accommodation requests from people who are considered productive workers. Do your personal best at all times.
2. **Market your work to your bosses and co-workers.** Each organization has its own signals that show you are a hard worker. Common expectations include wearing clean, well-fitted clothes; arriving at work on time; staying at your desk; keeping connected to the office through e-mail if you are working at home; and keeping conversations with co-workers related to the job. Marketing your work to your supervisors may mean asking their advice, keeping them posted, writing memoranda, and representing yourself well with internal reports.
3. **Be helpful.** When you are asked to do something, see it as an opportunity to serve. The more people feel supported by you, the more likely they are to give you the support you need when you ask.



Finding the Accommodations You Need

1. **Know your legal rights as a person with a disability.** Study the [Americans with Disabilities Act \(ADA\)](#) and its amended version, the [ADAAA](#). Knowing that the law is on your side will give you tremendous confidence. If you are in a unionized workplace, meet your union steward or other union officials before you need them to represent you. In order to receive accommodations as your legal right, you must disclose your disability.
2. **Study yourself doing your job, and consider:**
 - a. **Your work space.** Can you find everything you need? Does it support your productivity?
 - b. **How you communicate with others.** Does your supervisor insist on writing you e-mails rather than talking to you? Are you familiar with your voice mail system? What is the procedure for handing off your assignments to co-workers and turning them in for production? Does the system work for you? How do you give and get instructions?
 - c. **The job tasks themselves.** Are there some tasks which are challenging to you because of your learning disability? Many employees have successfully accommodated themselves by using appropriate assistive technology, such as text-to-speech software. In other cases, tasks have been assigned to other employees, which allows you to focus on what you do well.

Research Accommodation Options

Information on accommodations is available through many learning disability organizations. The Job Accommodation Network (JAN) at <http://askjan.org> has qualified people to help you find the best accommodation solutions. Call them at 1-800-526-7234 and be ready with a clear definition of your problem.

Also, see the "Accommodation and Compliance Series: Employees with Learning Disabilities" at <http://askjan.org/media/LD.html> for examples of job accommodations and solutions.

Make Your Request

Many accommodations can be requested without disclosing your disability, especially with all of the new assistive technology used by people with and without disabilities. Whether or not you disclose your disability, it's best to come with your own suggestions and solutions rather than expecting your employer to decide what helps.

If you do not wish to disclose your disability or prefer to stay away from legal discussions, "productivity" and "quality improvement" are good reasons for the employer to meet your disability-related needs. Explain what you want in positive terms. For example, you might say something like, "On important matters, I'll probably write you an e-mail about it. That way, we'll both have something to refer to and not have to rely on our memories."

Your other option is to tell them about your disability and ask them for the accommodation(s) you need.

If you decide to ask for accommodations on the basis of your disability, first visit your Human Resources department and then talk to your direct supervisor. If you work within a self-managed work team, your accommodations might be an issue for the whole team to consider, so talk to your team

leader first.

Although you do not need to submit documentation of your disability at the time you first make your accommodation request, you should have this documentation available to you. Your employer can request proof of your disability prior to providing an accommodation.

Have a clear description of your disability, the accommodation(s) needed, and the modifications needed in the work environment to ensure that you successfully perform your job tasks. The ADA allows employers to legally turn down accommodation requests if they can prove "an undue hardship." Sometimes they may offer alternatives that would result in the same outcome. For these reasons, you should suggest the most appropriate accommodations that will enable you to do your job well.

Follow up with a written request.

Make the request brief. Include relevant information about your disability and the need for accommodation(s). Explain how the accommodation(s) will help you meet your work goals.

Should that request be denied, the next step is to work with a higher level of authority (e.g., the human resources department, union representative, EEOC officer, etc.) or file a written complaint under the Americans with Disabilities Act.

Assess the Results of Your Accommodation(s)

If you are able to obtain reasonable accommodation, be sure to use it well. Be productive and helpful to your co-workers and your supervisors. If the accommodation does not help, restart the process of researching, choosing, and requesting a different accommodation.

Revised July 2013

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