



MS Learn Online Feature Presentation MS in the Workplace

Tracey>> Welcome to MS Learn Online. I'm Tracey Kimball

Tom>> And I'm Tom Kimball. One of the biggest challenges for people with MS is employment. Many people with MS are unnecessarily unemployed or under-employed. There are many reasons for this, and they can be overcome when the right combination of resources, action and attitude is put into place.

Tracey>> One of the key factors, though, has to do with the attitude and knowledge that employers have about hiring people with MS. This feature presentation, examines the issue of MS in the Workplace from the perspective of the employer.

Tom>> It begins by profiling a number of employees with MS, and explores key issues such as the Americans with Disabilities Act, disclosure and accommodations.

HOST:

American business is facing ever-increasing challenges in the 21st Century. The need to do more with less. Increasing competition, governmental regulations, and finding top-notch people to do the work. More than ever before, the success of your business ultimately depends on the quality of the talent you hire. It's critical for any business today to nurture the talents of its employees. Unfortunately, physical conditions sometimes get in the way of discovering and nurturing those talents. One such condition is Multiple Sclerosis.

More than 400,000 Americans have MS, so if you overlook the talents and abilities of people with MS, you're missing out on a huge talent pool. MS is a disease that is frequently misunderstood. And for good reason. The characteristics of MS are such that it affects different people in different ways. The best way to understand MS is to meet a few people with MS and see how the disease affects each of them.

Sue Nerlinger is an optician at W.A. Jones Optical in Cleveland, Ohio. As the manager at their University Hospital location, she's on the front line. Providing customer service while managing a very busy store.

SUE:

I dispense eyewear to costumers. I fit them, I help them choose their frames I take their measurements, I manage the store, I do inventories I do all the paperwork.

JEFF:

What Sue does for us here at the University Hospital store is phenomenal. She takes care of every walk of life that comes through the door. She has a hand in picking out her merchandise at the store. All the billing she takes care of, pretty much runs the store all herself.

HOST:

Sarah Keitt is a Program Associate with the American Medical Student Association, a membership organization in Washington DC that represents medical students internationally.

SARAH:

I do a little bit of everything. I do a lot of grant writing I organize conferences and meetings, and do research on different health issues. I'm pretty lucky in that my MS is very stable at this point. I sometimes have difficulty remembering things. Occasionally I might have trouble with my speech.

After talking with my neurologist and being sent to a neuro-psychologist for evaluation, I was able to understand how it was impacting my ability to work. So, together we came up with a plan for me to address these issues with my employer, and work out a way to make sure that I could stay working.

HOST:

Joel Kahn is an engineer with Procter and Gamble in Cincinnati, Ohio. While MS has given him severe physical limitations, it has not kept him from

doing his job.

JOEL:

What I do is help develop policy around managing our supply chains. Supply chains are the system of network that goes from supplier all the way to our customer's shelf.

JOE:

Joel has a skill set that's very valuable and so as his MS has progressed over time it hasn't been a matter of what do we do about Joel's employment with Procter and Gamble, it's been a matter of what we do to help Joel to continue to be as productive as he is and use his skills.

HOST:

Sue, Sarah and Joe are just three of the tens of thousands of people with MS who have demonstrated their abilities to companies, non-profit and governmental organizations throughout the nation. While MS affects each of these people differently, the one thing they have in common is that they are all very productive employees. Clearly it makes good business sense to seek out and nurture the talents of *all* your employees, whether or not they have MS.

But there's also a legal side of the issue. The Americans with Disabilities Act covers a wide range of issues protecting the rights of people with disabilities. Part of it deals with employment issues. Essentially it says that, if you have 15 or more employees, you cannot discriminate against a person because of a disability. The ADA defines a disability as a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more of your major life activities.

STEVE:

That can be things such as seeing, hearing, walking, working, learning, so it's a pretty broad definition in terms of what those, activities of daily life are.

HOST:

The ADA is very clear that the person you hire must be qualified for the job.

KATHERINE:

The ADA doesn't mandate that we hire people with disabilities. It simply makes sure that we have an equal playing field as people come into the workforce and have disabilities and need accommodations.

STEVE:

The person still needs to be qualified based on their experience, their education, their training, their certain skill set in order to perform the job.

HOST:

The ADA says that the person must be qualified to perform the “essential job functions.” What does this mean? Let’s say you’re hiring an administrative assistant. Some of the essential job functions may include answering the phone, operating the computer, and having basic writing skills. Reaching the top shelf of a bookcase to retrieve one of your supplier’s catalogues is *not* an essential job function.

Being able to retrieve information out of the catalogue may be an essential job function, but reaching to the top shelf is not. Moving the catalogue to a lower shelf is an example of a simple accommodation.

But in order for one of your employees to receive an accommodation, they need to disclose that they have a disability. Now they may not necessarily tell you that they have MS. They may just say that they have some sort of physical or cognitive impairment that prevents them from being fully productive without an accommodation. It’s up to the *employee* to make recommendations to you, the employer, on what accommodations he or she needs.

KATHERINE:

At SunTrust bank when accommodation is requested the manager and the employee sit down to determine what kind of accommodation will work for that particular disability, so we ask the employee. We do have a process in place and we ask the employee to give us input.

HOST:

After all, the people with MS are the ones who best know what they can and cannot do. And they’ve probably gotten advice from an occupational therapist, physician, physical therapist or the National MS Society regarding the kinds of accommodations they might need. The reality is that most accommodations cost little or nothing. In fact, some people with MS may never need an accommodation.

KATHERINE:

Actually more than 51% cost less than 500 dollars, and for us most of our accommodations have been changing a schedule, moving a desk, allowing someone to telecommute things that didn’t cost anything at all

BRYAN:

PNC has helped me with parking, that's a big deal. I mean it sounds silly but parking is a huge deal and my scooter can be next to me.

KATHERINE:

We accommodate people all the time, whether they have a disability or not. We accommodate people who need to be at work earlier, or come to work later or might have elder care issues, or a youth, young people to deal with, school issues it's simply a matter of good business.

JOE:

What you need to do is you need to make sure you're doing the right thing because in the end run when you take a look at it, the business needs and the employee needs, they're inseparable.

HOST:

So why would you want to employ people with MS? The bottom line is that it makes good business sense for a lot of reasons.

KATHERINE:

If we have to replace a person it usually ends up costing the bank 1-1/2 times the salary and benefits of that person we've recruited. So it's a very costly expense for us to be constantly recruiting.

JOE:

So when you've invested a lot of money in an individual both in training and development and if we lose that we lose a tremendous amount of skill from the company

HOST:

Whether your dealing with an existing employee or a new hire, it's about having the most qualified and motivated employees you can find. And many people with MS have learned to turn their disability into an asset.

KAREN:

People that have a disability of any kind are probably the most employable. I think that we are probably the best at making adjustments, making changes, and so we're probably better to employ than most. We don't use it as an excuse. We have to overcome that. We can't allow ourselves to use it as a crutch.

HOST:

Good employers recognize good talent. A talented employee who has MS is first and foremost, a talented employee.

JEFF:

Sue's priceless, I couldn't replace Sue. We've tried several people down here, and nobody has been as successful as Sue. Nobody has connected with everybody like Sue has.

JOCK:

It's important for us to have the best workforce possible so many times that what we look for is just getting a lot of good work done here and disabilities are, they don't seem to block that good work from happening.

KATHERINE:

We've seen some major changes in our corporate culture, we've seen retention levels rise, absentee levels drops, we've seen moral go up and productivity increase. And we can definitely attribute that to having people with disabilities in our workforce.

JOE:

What we focus on is our decision is based on the capability first and then the disability and the accommodation is the secondary thing you do to get that talent to contribute to you as a business.

KATHERINE:

From a diversity standpoint it's important that we include people with disabilities in our workforce so they can help us market our products and services to costumers with disabilities

HOST:

Living with MS can be a challenge. As you've seen, MS affects different people in different ways. It can even affect an individual differently over time. Fortunately, in recent years, new medications have done much to improve the productivity and quality of life for people with MS

As an employer, it can be a challenge to know what you can do to maximize the productivity of an employee with MS. But you don't need to figure it out on your own. There are plenty of resources for you to turn to for help. One good place to start is the National Multiple Sclerosis Society. Your local chapter is the best place to get information about Multiple Sclerosis. They may even be able to offer educational programs for you and your employees on how

to best manage MS symptoms on the job.

The Job Accommodation Network, or JAN, is a great online resource to get practical information on how best to incorporate accommodations into the work place. And since they're funded by the US Department of Labor, their service won't cost you a penny.

Each state has a Vocational Rehabilitation Office, which works closely with people with disabilities to help them become productive employees. They're a good resource to find people with disabilities who are qualified for positions you might need filled. They'll even come out to the job site to work with you and your employees to help with accommodations.

The Business Leadership Network is a national organization of business leaders who recognize and promote best practices in hiring, retaining, and marketing to people with disabilities. You can get together with others in your community to talk ... businessperson to businessperson.

And finally, if you have positions that need to be filled, you'll want to check out the Employer Assistance Recruiting Network, or EARN. This is another free service by the US Department of Labor. They match employers with qualified candidates with disabilities. You can go the EARN website to post a position that you need filled, or to find that the person that you're looking for.

So there are plenty of reasons why you should take a closer look at the talents that people with MS can offer your business. And there are plenty of resources to help you to make the most of those talents. But working with people with MS is like any other business decision that you make. You need to do your homework. If you know what you're doing and why you're doing it, you'll make the right business decision by maximizing the productivity of your employee with MS.

KATHERINE:

To bring somebody in with a disability just because you want to hire that person, and haven't done the training within your own organization would be a disservice for both of you. So prepare for that person, but also don't be so concerned about myths and fears that you may have heard; go to the source get some information, talk to the individual, and absolutely include that person with disabilities in your workforce if they're qualified and able to do the job. Don't include them because they have a disability. Include them because they want to be there and they're going to add to your bottom line.

Tom>> It's good to hear employers talking about the importance of having quality employees regardless of whether or not they have MS.

Tracey>> It's also good to see things from the employer's perspective. But if you want to know more about how you can maximize your employment options while living with MS, you'll want to watch our six-part series Career Crossroads.

Tom>> You can see a complete listing and description of each of the Career Crossroads episodes to the right of the screen. Just click on the one you want to watch. Thanks for joining us.