

Multi-disciplinary support team

Employer: Large multifaceted financial services company

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Summary of the promising practice

This company's stay-at-work and return-to-work program (work accommodation program) is the central contact or portal of entry for personal assistance services (PAS) for the entire company. The staffing model of the department is multidisciplinary, with a team of ten professionals who staff it. In addition, the work accommodation group collaborates with other groups with expertise in benefits, leave management, and ergonomics on behalf of the employees. In 2006, the work accommodation served 2,250 accommodation cases.

Organization that uses this practice

According to the company's web site, the company is "a diversified financial services company providing banking, insurance, investments, mortgage and consumer finance" Respondents indicated that a return-to-work program has been in place since the 1980's and 1990's. The work accommodation group was restructured in 2003 when there was a redesign of the staffing model which enhanced program capabilities and efficiencies.

The company prides itself on its commitment to diversity of all types. One example is its Employees with DisAbilities group, which was formed in 1993. It sponsors, among other things, sign language classes and an annual Disability Awareness Day for all employees.

Description of the promising practice

The work accommodation program is the centralized portal of entry for accommodations at the company. A team of ten professionals monitors and supports employees with chronic conditions or disabilities. The team is comprised of occupational health nurses, vocational rehabilitation consultants, mental health specialists, Human Resources professionals and an intake coordinator. When an employee indicates the need for an accommodation, the intake coordinator is the first point of contact and triages the case by gathering initial information from the employee about his/her request. The employee signs a release so information can be shared. The employee is assigned to a consultant in the group based on the nature of the employee's issue. The consultant engages in the interactive process with the employee to better understand the functional impairments and the type of accommodation the employee feels would be helpful. The consultant requests that the employee sign a release of information so that the treating healthcare provider can be contacted for additional information and suggestions for accommodations.

| PAS is arranged through the supervising manager or HR department in collaboration with the work accommodation consultant. The company has vendors for voice-activated computer services, ergonomic accommodations, interpreter and other services. For employees who need readers or interpreters, the supervisor contacts readers and interpreters on an as needed basis and in some instances the company provides CART services (Computer Aided Real-Time Captioning, a method of speech-to-text translation.)

The work accommodation manager reported that that supervising managers are very willing to collaborate to accommodate employees, with consideration of business needs as well. The company has had only one request for a personal assistant (PA) by an employee with paraplegia who needed a PA when traveling. PA services would be provided if needed and would be paid for by the company.

To the extent feasible, the company uses technology extensively as an accommodation. A wide variety of AT is used: voice-activated computer software, wheelchairs, hearing aids, zoom text, various magnifying screens, carts for lifting, sit-stand workstations; real time captioning for meetings; glare screens; white noise machine, changes lighting, and others

A variety of PAS is provided, based on job duties: interpreters for trainings and meetings, TDD lines, PAS company services, and readers. The company has experimented with closed captioning and other technologies. For example, an employee may not need additional assistance if s/he uses net meetings and real time transcription of the meeting is provided. Reassignment of marginal job tasks occurs at the local level where the local supervisor brokers job tasks among employees as needed. An example of an accommodation might be that a cart is provided to handle coins that may be heavy.

Other examples of work accommodations include intermittent absence protection, work breaks, and leaves of absence related to a medical condition or disability. For example, people with chronic conditions may be allowed to take some intermittent absences that do not count against their attendance record. Accommodations for an individual with diabetes may include the need for breaks to check blood sugar levels or for more frequent meals or snacks. Respondents indicated that these kinds of accommodations are among the most frequent. The work accommodation consultants

generally coordinate the services and may also contact vendors to conduct evaluations or provide services.

Among program participants, 85% are actively at work, the other 15% are on a reduced work schedule or on medical leave. All active employees and applicants are eligible for the program.

Employees learn about the practice in the new hire orientation, by word-of-mouth, from their supervisor or human resources or through the internal website that provides a variety of information for employees.

Costs of the promising practice

The Central fund is the main source of funding. Each department pays an initial \$500 per employee per calendar year. The Central fund picks up any additional costs over \$500. However, all ergonomic evaluations are the responsibility of the department.

Often there is no direct cost involved unless the accommodation requires technology. It was difficult for respondents to estimate the costs of the practice. They indicated that one would have to add the cost of the work accommodation program and the accommodation fund to get that figure.

The company uses a variety of different vendors for services. The vendor bills the local department. Once the local department pays the vendor, the local department is reimbursed by the Central fund. The payment approach is the same for both task-related and personal care services.

Benefits and challenges

The work accommodation program has allowed people to stay at work who might otherwise have had to go on disability. Both the company and the employees benefit by having trained employees able to continue their employment in a tight labor market.

One respondent reported other benefits to the company: "Without a doubt. There are more diverse candidates to hire, more ideas, and to hire the most qualified makes it more profitable."

One of the challenges is educating supervisors about the program, and ensuring consistency. In a large company, individual supervisors may make agreements with employees that are not consistent with the overall program. Continuing education of supervisors onsite, through communications, and the internal intranet helps to address this issue.

Respondents also reported that some employees may have opted out of the medical plan and may not be receiving appropriate care and treatment for their chronic health conditions. The Work Accommodation consultants coach employees and try to connect them with appropriate resources. (e.g., Employee assistance consulting, LifeCare).

Transferability to other organizations or industries.

The program is available throughout the company through the centralized work accommodation group.

Respondents felt that any company could build a stay-at-work/ return-to-work program. The implementation of this type of program requires that executive and upper level management, the company's Human Resource community and line managers all "buy in" to the program and support its development.

Supervisor education is especially vital. Supervisors need to know about the work accommodation resources and what services are available. This can be done in on-site meetings, by teleconference, or with information available on an internal web site.

Support from the executive team and a manager in charge of the centralized function makes the practice work. The company's disability vendors need to be part of the process, and partnerships need to be built that include Human Resources and rehabilitation people and supervisors.