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Job Accommodation Network

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Accommodation and Compliance Series

Accommodation and Compliance Series: Universal Design in the Workplace

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Introduction

In the labor market, employers strive to stay competitive by attracting and maintaining a diverse workforce. While a diverse workforce brings a wealth of experience and stability to the workplace, at the same time, a diverse workforce means different and unique needs among employees. One way employers can meet these needs is by using equipment that includes universal design (UD) features. UD is the process of creating products that are usable by as wide a range of people as possible. UD features are integrated into devices, environments, processes, and systems such as architecture, kiosks, telecommunications, restrooms, and workplace elements. Specific examples include door handles, keyboards, telephones, and transportation features that are more inclusive.

Equipment that has UD features can help employers attract and maintain a diverse workforce that includes employees with disabilities. Such equipment, by its nature, is going to be useful for a larger number of employees and often has built in accessibility features, which can reduce the need to purchase additional equipment for employees with disabilities. In addition, many product manufacturers have begun to integrate principles of UD into the newest available technologies and using the newest technologies can give employers an advantage over competitors.

Although employers may see the advantages of purchasing equipment with UD features, some may not know how to find it. In addition, even with UD built in, some equipment may not be usable by employees with disabilities and employers may need to consider purchasing assistive technology (AT) as an accommodation. AT is any item, piece of equipment, or product system, whether acquired commercially off the shelf, modified, or customized, that is used to increase, maintain, or improve the functional capabilities of individuals with disabilities.

A key consideration in purchasing any type of equipment, especially electronic and information systems, with UD features is the concept of interoperability. Interoperability means that the system is compatible with other technologies and has features that support the integration of AT. Without interoperability, it may be very difficult and time consuming to make changes, increase accessibility, or integrate AT. Working to make interoperability a part of the initial purchasing phase can help eliminate these problems.

Tips for choosing equipment that includes UD features can be helpful to employers. The following provides ideas for employers to consider when purchasing equipment for the workplace.

- 1) Consider equipment that has UD features integrated into its design. For example, many computer operating systems have display options that enable users to increase font size. Purchasing software that is compatible with these features will meet the needs of many users.

- 2) Assess new and emerging electronic and information systems for interoperability with AT. For example, implementing a database tracking system without considering interoperability with AT can result in compatibility problems if screen reading software is installed. Considering interoperability when the tracking system is purchased will prevent delays in implementing AT.
- 3) Evaluate whether the equipment can be maintained easily. For example, some evacuation devices are powered by batteries to assist those individuals who are evacuating people with mobility impairments. Whether the battery will be available and working during an emergency is an important consideration.
- 4) Evaluate whether the equipment can be upgraded easily. For example, speech recognition software is available to individuals who cannot use a keyboard to enter information. Upgrades of software typically require additional computer memory. Whether a new system has the capability to be upgraded should be evaluated.
- 5) Determine if the system can be used by a majority of the workforce. For example, if an employer provides cell phones to employees, determine whether the service provides alternative communication such as text messaging.
- 6) Include the disability program manager, as well as representatives from information technology, purchasing, management, and safety departments when considering purchases that affect many employees. For example, if a Web conferencing system is under consideration for training activities, consider options that make materials accessible to screen readers and captioning services.

Situations and Solutions:

A courthouse tax office recently underwent renovations.

In the process, the architect wanted to incorporate aspects of universal design at the service counter. As a solution, one area incorporated an adjustable counter where the height can be adjusted to fit the customer.

A rehabilitation facility recently installed a new restroom for its patients who are in the physical therapy area.

The restroom featured several aspects of universal design, including sinks at different heights, automatic doors, and large door handles.

A nonprofit turned its entrance from manual doors to automatic doors.

Individuals with various disabilities could then open the door to the establishment independently.

Although a hospital had the required number of curb cuts and accessible parking spaces, the director wanted to make certain areas more accessible.

Facilities implemented additional cuts and spaces at the Pain Clinic and Cancer Center.

A grocery store needed to update its signage.

In addition to using text, the signs were updated to use symbols and braille. This made it easier for individuals who benefit from descriptive signage.

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