

Event: Karen Milchus will present on workplace accommodations

Date: 7/27/2022

This is a Captioned transcript provided by CIDI to facilitate communication accessibility and is not a verbatim record of the session.

>> Rayianna Daniels: All right.

>> Karen Milchus: So, Rayianna, do you want to introduce the series or just jump in?

>> Rayianna Daniels: Sure. Sorry, you guys. This is the CIDI web series, learn from the experts. Today we'll be hearing from Karen Milchus. Making workplace accommodation decisions.

>> Karen Milchus: Thank you. So my name is Karen Milchus. I'm a senior research engineer at CIDI. Focused on workplace accommodation research. We've had a number of projects on developing new accommodations and the types of accommodations people are using and develop tools to help people make better decisions. So I would like to share what we have learned.

A lot of it is very similar to what you're doing already as I've been told this audience is primarily disability student support types at colleges, universities, tech schools.

You'll find that many of the things you're doing for your students apply to the workplace as well.

To get started, I wanted to talk to you about employment and people with disabilities, talk about what workplace accommodations are, the accommodation process, and share a couple of resources including two that we are currently developing. And then we should have time for questions at the end.

So, first of all, people with disabilities are very much underrepresented in the workforce. The latest numbers will be coming out Friday, but the numbers for June are that only 38% of people with disabilities who are working age are actively working or seeking employment. This is only about half the number compared to people without disabilities. People with disabilities are also twice as likely to be unemployed. 8% versus 4%.

When we talk about accommodations and people with disabilities in the workplace, yes we are talking about people who use wheel chairs, people who might be blind. But we also find that many of those disabilities are hidden. Are less apparent. The most common disabilities that people have in the workplace are low back pain and repetitive motion disorders such as carpal tunnel. Employees may not be aware of learning disabilities. So this is a challenge that we run into.

Another challenge is that from our research we

found the majority of people who need workplace accommodations don't go to the experts for help. We conducted a survey asking people who are involved in making accommodations for them. Only 1/3 said they received accommodations through a Vocational Rehabilitation program. So 2/3 didn't. 46% said they had gotten accommodations through an employer-supported program and 19% had identified their own accommodations and many had not disclosed. They were winging it on their own. So we're trying to develop tools to help people figure out how to make better informed decisions on their own if they aren't going to be involving experts.

But sometimes there are experts involved. So how does this impact your work? Like said I, I was told most of you are providing support services at colleges, universities, and tech schools. So the thing that comes to mind are students transitioning to work. That's probably the least likely situation you're going to run into. Unless the student has a very good working relationship with you or is trying to replicate an accommodation they're using in school, this is something that falls firmly as a responsibility of the future employer.

So that's probably something that you're not getting questions about too often.

Where you might get questions is when you have a student who has an internship or field work that's required as

part of their degree. I did confirm yesterday with legal experts that although it would be nice for the field site and the school to work together, when all is said and done this is the responsibility of the school to provide accommodations if it's something required for the degree. So this is something that might fall under your job duties.

Another situation is student employees. Whether it's undergraduate, work study students. Usually they go to the school's HR department. The HR department may not be as familiar of the types of technology out there so they may turn to you for advice. And finally you may need accommodations yourself.

So I will talk a little bit about what that all means.

Before I move on I have one slide here -- I don't know if I can hide this.

We had a study about 10 years ago where we were looking at the accommodations that teachers and faculty members use in the workplace. One of the questions we asked was about their experience as students. So we asked the grade school teachers about their experience as student teachers and the faculty members about their experiences as a graduate teaching assistant. We asked did they get the accommodations they needed. 24% of the student teachers said they needed accommodations but they were not provided. 35% of the teaching

assistants said the same. These numbers were higher for individuals with cognitive disabilities. 50% for the student teachers. 86% of the teaching assistants with cognitive difficulties said they didn't get the accommodations that they needed. I'm really hoping because this study was done 10 years ago and these were people already looking and looking at their student experiences I'm hoping that's improved since then but I wanted to share this slide as a warning that this is something we need to be aware of and make sure that we're providing those supports when they're needed.

So, what are workplace accommodations?

Well, it's defined as any change in the work environment or change in the way things are customarily done that enables an individual to enjoy equal employment opportunities. This is mandated by the ADA. This is focused on the worker.

Reasonable accommodation enables qualified employees to do and apply for their job despite having a disability unless doing so would pose an undue hardship on the employer or it poses a safety risk. I will talk about both of those in a few minutes.

Of course qualified employees are those who have the degrees, skills, experience to perform the job's essential functions.

Workplace accommodations can make a big

difference. In one of our surveys we asked people about the impact of using workplace accommodations. 75% of our respondents said they could not provide their job duties without accommodations. In spite of the ADA 15% said they had been fired or laid off in the past because they couldn't get the accommodations they needed. So this has a big impact on a person's ability to work. There was a survey of people in California on their AT usage. And their respondents reported -- 80% -- improved their productivity and 70% reported it improved their self-esteem. So there are benefits to providing workplace accommodations.

What are we talking about? Things like remote work opportunities. For years we were talking about how people who had trouble getting into the workplace may need to telework and there was resistance and then COVID-19 happened and it's now reasonable.

Modified schedules, flexible hours. For people who may need support -- people with intellectual disabilities a job coach may be a good accommodation. Some of the other accommodations may be similar to what you're seeing at your schools. Things like worksite modifications or low, medium, or high-tech assistive technology. This may be similar to the AT used in school especially if talking about computer access or accessing a printed material or time management technology. All those sorts of things might be the same sort of solutions that

they're using currently in the class.

So how do we figure out what exactly is needed? The Americans with Disabilities Act requires people to go through the interactive accommodation process. I think the interactive is there to emphasize that this is done with the employer and employee together -- working together to figure out what types of solutions are needed.

It starts with an initiation. The employee will have to disclose and ask for an accommodation. Sometimes this happens. Sometimes it doesn't but that's officially what is needed to get the process started.

Of course we start by gathering information about the problem. So we ask questions about the person's abilities, what tasks are being done, what the environment is like and the work requirements. Then we analyze the situation. That might include breaking down that problem task into smaller steps to figure out what aspect of it is causing the difficulty.

So if a person is having trouble using the phone, is it speaking over the phone or holding the receiver or hearing the ring. What aspect of that is causing the difficulty.

Once we have the problem defined, we start looking at solutions. Again, you've probably had a lot of experience with this with students but in general we might look at some of the solutions that I talked about in the earlier

slide in terms of changing schedules or changing work location. But sometimes we'll look at other approaches. For example, for a person who is -- who has low vision, we might look at trying to enhance what vision they still have. Or we might look at trying to provide the information in a different manner.

For example, we might look at trying to magnify things, trying to use high contrast more. Or we might try to look at the information presenting in an auditory manner.

For people difficulty using their hands we might look at trying to provide a better grasp surface or come up with a hands free method. These are different mindsets that we might look at these different solutions. Training, trial periods might be needed to implement these solutions. At some point we have a review and follow up step to look at what's working and what isn't and determine whether or not if we need to loop back through to come up with a different solution or we might find the solution worked but we find other issues to be addressed. We may keep cycling through.

There are common misunderstandings that people have about the ADA that I wanted to highlight today.

First, it's wonderful when employers carve out positions for people with disabilities but employers don't have to remove essential functions to create an accommodation. They can if they wish but it's not required under the law.

I mentioned undue hardship as a reason for not

providing a particular accommodation. Typically people think that refers just to cost and it does, but what pops up even more often were accommodations that are unduly disruptive. For example, I'm broadcasting from my living room now. I'm able to telework. If I was working in a storefront, that might not be possible. I might need to be at the store. So telework might not be a viable option.

If I need to work slow and that's impacting the work of others, for example on an assembly line that could be disruptive.

It's important to accommodate all aspects of the job. Studies have shown that using meeting rooms, breakrooms, cafeteria -- being able to access those spaces has a large impact on a person's perception of workplace participation and sense of being part of the team. So this actually does turn out to be very important in the workplace. Too often accommodations just focus on the person's specific work area and we need to look broader than that.

Another misunderstanding is that accommodations are not one size fits all. An accommodation for one employee with one diagnosis may not fit an employee with the same diagnosis.

We find that often companies will have a list of what types of accommodations they keep making for people and they split into that mindset easier. Oh, we have someone who's

blind so they need such and such screen reader but maybe for that person a braille display will be a better option.

So something to keep in mind.

Another issue is that -- I think most of you are probably familiar with Title III of the Americans with Disabilities Act and the standards for accessible design. That whole section about doors need to be this wide and slopes need to be at this angle and things like that. That's great but those types of rules may not fit the Title I requirements for accommodating individual workers.

For example, back with our study when we were talking to the teachers I interviewed a teacher who was using a scooter to get around a large campus. Here's a quote from her. I asked the principal for a parking space closer to my room where there's only one handicap parking space and she said we have designated spaces out in the main parking lot but that's a half mile from my classroom. So the school was meeting the ADA standards and Title III but they weren't meeting the needs for the specific employee. So that's something to keep in mind again.

And finally, employers can only use safety as an excuse if they can show that the specific employee poses a problem. Not any employee with a particular condition. This has come up in court cases involving epilepsy. Epilepsy can be a concern for particular jobs but you have to prove that person

is actively having a problem in that job. You need to look at a very individual level.

Actually one last misunderstanding is the belief that accommodations cost a lot. There's a group call the job accommodation network, JAN. They found that 56% of accommodations cost nothing to implement. This would be the types of accommodations involving just moving a work station or flexible hours. The rest of the accommodations cost under \$500 and only 6% resulted in annual costs. For example, annual subscription fee for some software -- a licensing fee. So, not very expensive.

So with that, I would like to leave you with some resources that I'm hoping will be helpful. Two are the ADA national network and the job accommodation network. These are national resources. The ADA National Network has 9 or 10 regional centers around the country that provide legal and procedural information. This is the group I talked to yesterday about responsibility for field work accommodations. But they are a very nice group and have good information. The Job Accommodation Network has articles about accommodations. You can search a data base by disability for accommodation ideas and they will take phone inquiries.

The State AT Act Projects. Every state in our country has an AT Act Project. They provide information and training and they may have a loaning closet. For Georgia our

Tools for Life is our State AT Act Project. The link here can help you connect to the group in your own state.

And finally, when I was asking the ADA network for information they sent me an article providing reasonable accommodations to individuals with disabilities in internship sites and post-doctoral internship positions. So those are resources that currently exist. I also wanted to spend a few minutes talking about two resources that we're currently developing here at CIDI. One is Work ACCESS. This is an online workplace accommodation assessment tool for employers and employees to use together. The other one is the assistive software knowledge-base. It's a data base that could include computer access technology and also things like a task -- or a scheduling app that you might use for time management or an app that does color identification. Depending on what type of work tasks you might need to do.

I will talk about both of those. I have a link here to a video which I won't show today but I think you're going to get a copy of these slides later. If you want to look at that on your own that tells you about those tools.

For Work ACCESS, this is the assessment tool, we started out by looking at many of the tasks that are common to an office environment. We're now just starting to look at retail as well but most of what we have now is office. It includes tasks such as using facilities, moving through the

workplace, using doors and the restroom. Communication, probably similar to what you're dealing with in classes. So in-person communication, remote communication, written communication, reading and writing. Using a workstation, using equipment such as a computer or phone. Organization such as planning the work day and staying on task. And maintaining wellbeing such as managing stress and anxiety.

For this tool, we ask questions. We collect **surveys** about the individual, environmental and external factors. We have a decision tree that links difficulties with performing activities to accommodation suggestions. These suggestions can be assistive technology, policy changes, universal features. A whole range of possibilities. We are providing information about product types and features, rather than specific products because the product information goes out of date so quickly and we want something that's more lasting.

This tool is fairly unique. Only a few sites have attempted to -- only a few attempts to develop tools to recommend accommodations. Most of those that are out there have focused on just linking things to the person's diagnosis. The JAN site for example.

We realize there are other factors that come into play as well. So how comfortable is the person using a computer? Are they using a shared work station? Do they need something portable? We're trying to look at all of those

factors. Either use that to prioritize recommendations and in some cases we will list the suggestion but may put in a warning that people need to be aware there might be a slight problem for a noisy work station for example.

We're also warning users when a situation is more complicated and experts needs to be involved. This is a tool for employers and employees used together. Not necessarily with experts involved. So we try to warn them for when they try to cross the line. With things that might have health implications we want them to pull in experts. And finally although we only have links we do have specific products.

One of those is the assistive software knowledge-base. We take information from manufacturers and crowd sourcing and resources to provide general product information, compatibility, reviews and usage and training tips. We have a site available for the public. We don't have the reviews and training tips yet. Which is what is crowd sourcing? That's utilizing the idea of a group of people that result in better information than a specific expert.

So we're trying to turn to experts such as you to find out what solutions we need to include in our decision trees or find out what success you've had with different types of apps.

So before I wrap up here today I wanted to make a plea for some help. How can you contribute to these sites? Work

ACCESS is free to people who provide feedback. It's not available yet but check back at the end of the year hopefully we'll have a beta version to try out. We're looking for help with our decision tree development. We've had periodic focus groups. We have several validation surveys out there where we're asking people to take a look at part of our decision tree. Tell us if the solutions that we're suggesting are appropriate, are they worded in a clear manner, are there things that we're missing? Which ones might need expert help. Right now we have some surveys posted for issues related to organization, time management, staying on task. That sort of stuff. So we would love to get your feedback. We have a preliminary version for the assistive software knowledge-base. We are asking for helps with reviews and usage tips. We ask questions about -- we ask you to give product ratings and share how it's being used in the workplace. Likes and dislikes. Is training needed. A bunch of other questions like that. For either of these surveys -- the validation surveys or the reviews, if you contribute we will enter you into a drawing for \$50 gift cards. I believe we'll hold a drawing for every 50-100 entries. So your odds are good. With that are there any questions? I would like to acknowledge NIDILRR. National institute on disability, independent living, and rehabilitation research is a center within the administration for community living.

When I'm sharing my screen I can't see what's in the chat. So do we have any questions or what is the best way of doing this?

>> Rayianna Daniels: I don't see any questions right now in the chat.

>> Karen Milchus: Or do people have microphone access?

>> Rayianna Daniels: They should, yes.

>> Karen Milchus: If they're not going to ask me any questions, I'm going to ask them a question.

>> Rayianna Daniels: We have one in the chat. For student teaching would the district we responsible for the accommodations or would the sending college coordinate them?

>> Karen Milchus: The sending college is legally responsible if it's required for a degree. Having said that, it's hard to make accommodations for another site without their input. So it's a collaborative venture. I don't know if that answered the question. I hope so.

>> Rayianna Daniels: Any more questions, guys, and gals?

>> Karen Milchus: How many people on this call have run into the situation where they have been asked to provide accommodations for some sort of field work experience?

>> Rayianna Daniels: Sandra said, yes many times.

>> Karen Milchus: Many times? Okay.

>> Karen Milchus: Well, in the absence of other questions, should we wrap this up?

>> Rayianna Daniels: We have another comment from Sandra. It says we have a graduate school of psychology with requisite practicums.

>> Karen Milchus: Ah, medical settings are another one. I know we've hosted several occupational therapist at our center before.

>> Rayianna Daniels: I think that is about it for questions. Going once, going twice.

>> Karen Milchus: Okay. Well, thank you. Thank you for joining our webinar series today. If there are particular topics that you would like to hear about in the future, please let us know.

>> Rayianna Daniels: I believe the next one is August 31. I will be presenting. So you can come listen to me talk. Thank you, Karen. Have a great day.