

## Chapter XV

# Accommodating Persons with Disabilities in Virtual Workplaces

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### ABSTRACT

*Virtual workplaces offer persons with disabilities new opportunities in the workplace that may simultaneously accommodate their disabilities while posing challenges in terms of access to the information that they need to perform their jobs. Employers also need information about various disabilities and ways to accommodate the limitations imposed by each one. This chapter provides background and rationale for including persons with disabilities in the virtual workforce, detailed descriptions of each disability category, and common accommodations for each disability category. Resources for employers are discussed.*

### INTRODUCTION

Over 600 million people worldwide live with a sensory, physical, cognitive, or self-care disability that limits their ability to learn, work, and participate in daily activities (Heumann, 2004). Most people with disabilities wish to pursue careers like their non-disabled peers and many complete post-secondary degrees that provide them with a high level of skills in a wide variety of vocational areas. Many are highly motivated to achieve in the workplace and wish to become productive employees who are able to earn a living and reduce or eliminate their dependence on public assistance. However, a survey conducted by the International Labour Organization (2004-2005) showed that 80% of persons with disabilities in

developing countries are unemployed and 65% are unemployed in industrialized countries. As a result, approximately, fifty countries worldwide have enacted disability anti-discrimination legislation that provides greater access to the workplace for persons with disabilities (Quinn & Degener, 2002).

Prospective employers who fail to hire persons with disabilities either assume that they cannot work or are unable to perform tasks that are required to complete the job. Employers also express concerns that costly special facilities, special safety facilities and procedures, and complicated accommodations will be needed to compensate for limitations that may be the result of disabilities. The sobering labor statistics worldwide and the misconceptions held by pro-

spective employers show that the capabilities of persons with disabilities are often misunderstood or disregarded. In fact, studies show that many employers do not understand disabilities and employment practices that allow them contribute to the workforce (Hendren & Sacher, 1992). Employers need information about disabilities and workplace options that reasonably accommodate persons in all disability categories.

Over a dozen specific disabilities and chronic medical conditions exist and require accommodations that help people become productive employees in both traditional and virtual workplaces. And, although accommodations may require the use of non-traditional approaches to a particular job, a U.S. survey of employers found that most accommodations cost less than \$500 and 73% of employees with disabilities did not require any type of structural accommodation. And, in some cases, virtual workplaces may be an accommodation for persons with disabilities (U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, 2002).

Employers need to understand the capabilities and needs associated with each specific disability, the advantages and disadvantages of the task demands of virtual workplaces, and the specific accommodations that compensate for a variety of disabilities. The objectives of this chapter are to:

1. describe disabilities in general and specifically to enhance employers' understanding of the impact of each disability on the employee's performance
2. explore the demands and advantages of virtual workplaces for persons with disabilities within the context of employment demands
3. provide guidelines for developing appropriate accommodations for disabilities
4. recommend specific accommodations that are commonly used for each disability category.

## **UNDERSTANDING DISABILITIES IN THE WORKPLACE**

According to the United Nations (2006), approximately 10% of the world's populations live with some sort of disability and, due to population growth, improved medical care and ageing, the numbers of persons with disabilities are increasing worldwide. In fact, they represent the largest minority population in the world. General definitions of disabilities vary by country and legislation, however, most of the general definitions focus on the limitations of the disability in terms of independence and daily life functions. For example, the Americans with Disabilities Act (1990) and the United Kingdom's Disabilities Discrimination Act (2005) describe a disability as any physical or mental condition that substantially limits or prevents a person's full participation in major life activities. General definitions also include the caveat that the disability must be viewed by the individual and others as a specific disability.

Specific disabilities have existed for centuries and many have been systematically researched since the mid-nineteenth century. As a result, detailed definitions and common characteristics of most categorical disabilities exist and are widely accepted by professionals in each field. Also, adults with specific disabilities usually understand their disabilities well enough to explain them to others and suggest accommodations for various job tasks. However, virtual workplaces are relatively new environments and accommodations that worked in traditional workplaces may not be useful for tele-workers. So, employers and personnel in human resources need to understand the basic aspects of various disabilities in order to help develop realistic accommodations that offset the impact of each disability

## **PHYSICAL DISABILITIES**

Physical disabilities are more widely understood by prospective employers than sensory or cognitive disabilities because the physical effects of the

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