



Job Accommodations for People with Learning Disabilities

By: Dale S. Brown (2008)

The term "reasonable accommodations" refers to changes in the workplace that enable people with disabilities to effectively perform the tasks associated with their job.

Accommodations can help people with learning disabilities do their work well, even when their disability gets in the way of doing the work. Accommodations can include variations in: work space and equipment needed to do the task; communication of the work; the tasks themselves; and the time and place that the work is done.

The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) requires that reasonable accommodations be made by employers who have 15 or more employees. Accommodations should be based on the specific needs of the individual with learning disabilities. Employers can claim that a given accommodation is an undue hardship, and can propose a different one. The process of negotiating for reasonable accommodations is one of give and take.

You can request accommodations even if your employer has fewer than 15 workers on the job. It is to your supervisor's advantage to help you be productive. Even people with learning disabilities who work for themselves need to think about how to incorporate accommodations into their work routines. They must identify their areas of strength and figure out how to get around areas of weakness.

The following can help you determine what kind of accommodations might be useful to overcome difficulties in the workplace:

1. Analyze the task that is giving you difficulty. Be exact about the nature of the problem you encounter.
2. Analyze the aspect of your disability that is contributing to the difficulty.
3. Brainstorm solutions. Consider changes in the work environment, your work style, your communication style, that of your supervisor, and the job itself.
4. Implement one of the solutions.
5. Assess whether the accommodation is meeting your needs. Make sure to share feedback with your supervisor and implement any necessary adjustments in work routines in order to sustain your success.

If you need suggestions, call the **Job Accommodation Network (JAN)**, a project of the U.S. Department of Labor, at 800-526-7234. JAN consultants have a database of over 200,000 possible accommodations and may be able to give you more ideas once they are familiar with your specific situation.

To get you started, here are some typical job problems which cause difficulty for people with learning disabilities. They are followed by possibilities for reasonable accommodations:

Job Problem: You have severe difficulty reading

Possible accommodations:

- Get voice output on your work computer.
- Ask someone to read to you.
- Have people read written notes on your voicemail.
- Request that your boss gives you oral rather than written directions.
- Ask that important information be highlighted.
- Use a reading machine.
- Have people talk to you instead of writing you letters.

Job Problem: Your reading problem is not severe, but it is still hard for you to read large amounts of material

Possible accommodations:

- Attend meetings about the material.
- Discuss the material with co-workers.
- Obtain taped versions of documents.
- Ask someone to tell you the key points.
- Manage your work so that you have enough time to read what is required to get the job done.
- Get information from drawings, diagrams, and flow charts. Your supervisor, team members, or subordinates may be able to organize some information in this way.
- Use voice output on your computer.
- Request shorter versions of documents.

Job Problem: You lose things frequently

Possible accommodations:

- Organize your work area and keep it that way! Work with your supervisor and team to assure that common areas such as tool stations, files, and bookshelves stay neat.
- Put important objects, such as keys, in the same place each time you use them.
- Color code items.
- Keep things on shelves, bulletin boards, or other places that are visible; avoid storage in drawers or cupboards.
- Attach important objects to the place they belong. For example, you might tie your scissors to a hook bolted to your desk, or place important documents on your bulletin board so they do not get lost.

Job Problem: You have difficulty following spoken directions

Possible accommodations:

- Ask people to tell you important information slowly and clearly and in a quiet location.
- Ask people to write things down.
- Request that people follow-up their conversations with an e-mail note.
- Ask people to demonstrate tasks, then watch you do it.
- Take notes and ask your supervisor to review them, or write a memo that summarizes the information.
- Repeat instructions back to people, making sure they verify that your interpretation is correct.
- Tape-record important procedures and instructions so you can playback and review as needed.
- Ask several people for feedback about how to do a task.

Job Problem: You have difficulty understanding the underlying message of what is said

Possible accommodations:

- Ask people to talk to you directly and to be specific in their message.
- Ask questions designed to draw out hidden meanings. For example: "Are you saying you disagree with me?" And, "It sounds like you are irritated because you think I did something wrong. Is that true?"
- Come up with a hypothesis about what a person meant, if you find yourself in a situation where you think there is a hidden meaning. Then discuss the interaction with others and study the surrounding events to assess your accuracy.
- Develop a relationship with someone who can let you know if a misunderstanding seems to have occurred. Either privately or within the conversation they can clarify the miscommunication.

Job Problem: You tend to forget deadlines

- Use Web-based reminder systems such as **Remember-the-Milk** which sends you reminders via e-mail, instant message, or text message.
- Use a voice organizer or signal watch to remind you of scheduled events. Some telephone voice mail systems have scheduling reminders that ring at a specific time and even play a reminder message.
- Use a tickler file with a section for each month and a section for each day. Put follow-up notices in the file and review the file each day.
- Ask your supervisor (or a fellow team member) to remind you of important deadlines or to review priorities and deadlines on a regular basis.

Job Problem: You have difficulty doing more than one task while managing interruptions from co-workers

Possible accommodations:

- Put up a "Do Not Disturb" sign when you really need to work without interruption.
- Write down what you were doing when interruptions occur, so that you can resume your work seamlessly.
- Do one task at a time. Do not start a new one until the current one is complete.
- Initiate telephone calls rather than waiting for people to call back.
- Ask your supervisor to clarify priorities.
- Work on major projects early, late, or on weekends when the office is quiet.

Job Problem: Your spelling and grammar are poor

Possible accommodations:

- Use spell check and grammar check computer software.
- Use software that predicts the word you are going to write based on the first few letters you type.
- Use a computer that says what you wrote on the screen. Hearing your words may highlight mistakes.
- Ask a colleague to proof your work before you consider it complete.
- Proof only those documents that must be proofed. Do not be a perfectionist.

Job Problem: When you copy or calculate figures, you tend to reverse or confuse number sequences

Possible accommodations:

- Say aloud each number as you write or type it to ensure that it is correct.
- Do calculations twice, checking to see if the answers are the same.
- Use a talking calculator.

Job Problem: You have no inner sense of direction (you have been known to get lost in your own building)

Possible accommodations:

- Use maps and keep copies handy, both at home and at work.
- Have directions written, highlighting significant changes in direction.
- Ask people to accompany you to unfamiliar places.
- Practice going from one place to another using maps and noting landmarks.
- Hang pictures or other items on walls in ways that make the left and right side different from each other.

Job Problem: You are easily distracted and you work in an open space

Possible accommodations:

- Ask to move your work area to a more enclosed space.
- Arrange to work at home.
- Request to work in a location that is away from noise and busy office traffic.
- Identify file rooms, private offices, storage rooms, and other enclosed spaces that might be used as alternative work spaces.
- Use a white noise machine (creates background noise that covers up other, ambient sounds).

Job problem: You have short-term memory problems (details such as names and numbers tend to be easily forgotten)

Possible accommodations:

- Use mnemonic devices to remember sets of information. For example, HOMES is the acronym for the names of the Great Lakes: Huron, Ontario, Michigan, Erie, Superior.
- Create charts (often called graphic organizers) that allow you to quickly find the information you want.
- Use web tools such as **Evernote** which allow you to copy and paste information from websites, create diagrams, record information, and add comments and tags to information that you find. You can send the material to your computer, cell phone, or handheld device and access it.
- Think about new information and try to associate new ideas with facts that are already familiar.
- Make good use of your computer software. Sometimes, well-designed menus and help features can assist you.
- Use a miniature tape recorder or voice organizer.
- Have co-workers check with you to be sure that you understand. Repeat back while they confirm.
- Obtain information ahead of time (such as a list of conference participants so you can review names and affiliations ahead of time).

Job problem: You have difficulty learning a lot of information quickly in intensive training classes and conferences

Possible accommodations:

- Ask for written materials ahead of time. If the request is refused, ask former students to loan you their materials.
- Sit in the front and/or center so you can more easily follow what is said.
- Ask former students to brief you on the training.
- Tape record for review. Get telephone numbers of co-trainees for later follow-up.

These ideas may help you think about effective accommodations. Always try to get along without the accommodation from time to time to see if you still need it. Remember that you can do the job as well as everyone else even though you are doing it in a different way. On many occasions, accommodations for people with learning disabilities have been adopted by other people in the office, raising productivity for everyone.

About the author and the article

Dale S. Brown is the Senior Manager of LD OnLine. She wrote this article in 1988 and it was published in Newsbriefs, the newsletter of Learning Disabilities Association of America and several other publications. She updated it for LD OnLine.

Dale is author of five books on disabilities and employment including "**Job Hunting Tips for the So-Called Handicapped**," which she co-authored with Richard Bolles. She has several other articles about the workplace in the **Adults with LD** section of this website, including **Meeting The Challenge of Conformity** and **Dyslexia and the Challenge of Using Today's Technology**. She received the Ten Outstanding Young Americans Award for her work as an advocate.

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