



EMPLOYEE ASSISTANCE REPORT

Bonus!
Extra Pages!

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24 years
of service!

supporting EA professionals

You Don't Look Sick Assisting Individuals with Invisible Disabilities

By Maureen Hotchner



“Parking Lot Vigilantes Abuse Woman with Invisible Disability.” This was the headline in the January 2, 2015, edition of the *South Florida Sun Sentinel*.

Shocking? Yet, this is precisely what happened to 58-year-old Debbie

Mizrahi, a brain cancer survivor, who faced abuse from strangers who accused her of faking her disability. It would not be obvious from looking at her, but Debbie suffers short-term memory loss, and has a handicap placard which she relies on in order to find her car. But parking lot vigilantes yelled at her and left nasty notes on her car. Worse still, she returned to her car to find a bent windshield wiper, snapped antenna, and smashed sideview mirrors.

Defining Invisible Disability

Debbie is hardly alone. According to the Invisible Disabilities Association (IDA), these types of accusations and abuses are common for people with invisible disabilities. Disabled-World.com defines an invisible, or hidden disability as an umbrella term, “*that captures a whole spectrum of hidden disabilities or challenges that are primarily neurological in nature. They are not immediately apparent.*”

“*Although the disability creates a challenge for the person who has it, the reality of the disability can be difficult for others to recognize or acknowledge. Others may not understand the*

cause of the problem, if they cannot see evidence of it in a visible way.”

A Pervasive Problem

According to Accessibility.com:

“Most invisible disability metrics in the U.S. say that roughly as high as 20% (or more) of Americans have an invisible disability. Further, most people who have a disability don’t use obvious assistive technology like a wheelchair or cane.”

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It's more likely, then, to meet someone with a **hidden disability** than an obvious one. *Since employee assistance professionals (EAPs) undoubtedly have clients with hidden disabilities, it stands to reason that EAPs need to be aware of this issue and take measures to help this underserved population.*

Disclosure Remains an Issue

In 1990, President George H. W. Bush signed the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) into law, a landmark civil rights law that prohibits discrimination against people with disabilities in several areas, including employment, transportation, public accommodations, communications, and access to state and local government programs.

But despite the added protections, many with invisible disabilities still struggle with the decision whether to disclose the existence of their disability to

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their employer (or potential employer). Many opt not to share this, for one reason: fear. **Fear** of discrimination by their boss or co-workers. **Fear** about being passed over for the job or for a promotion. **Fear** of being terminated.

Even upon making the decision to disclose the disability, figuring out the right way to do so brings upon its own challenges. Is it safe? Who do I tell—my immediate supervisor? The HR manager? How will it be received? What if they don't want to grant an accommodation?

The Spoon Theory

These decisions can be exhausting. Christine Miserandino, of ButYouDontLookSick.com, developed what she calls “spoon theory” to explain how incredibly tiring life can be for those with disabilities. Looking for a way to explain to her friend what it was like to live with an autoimmune disorder, Christine

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came up with spoons as a metaphor to represent a unit of energy. As Christine explains:

“I start each day with 12 spoons. In the morning after waking up, showering, washing my hair, getting dressed and eating breakfast, I have already used up six of the 12 spoons. When commuting to work, if I do not get a seat on the subway and did not rest well the night before, two more spoons are spent.

“Even though I sit at a desk, I am bone weary by the end of the day. At least three spoons have been used up at work. Once home, I must decide if I have energy left (or a spoon left) to prepare and eat dinner, or just flop into bed exhausted.”

Steps for the EAP to Put into Practice

With those thoughts in mind, the following are four actionable steps that your corporate clients can put into place to support people with disabilities.

❖ *Encourage HR to embed accessibility into every part of their recruitment process as well as your own.*

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Let people know your company is committed to diversity and inclusion. Consider including this in your own EAP's mission statement. Promote an environment where it's easy to request accommodations. Provide a safe place for disclosure. For example, managers at Microsoft realized that not enough people with autism were hired despite clearly having the knowledge and intellect. When they discovered that the problem was the interview process, they sought help from a local autism support organization. Microsoft was able to create an assessment of exercises designed to test teamwork and technical skills. The company's chief accessibility officer stated, "Now we feel confident we haven't overlooked a strong candidate simply because a common practice doesn't play to their strengths."

❖ **Contact the Jobs Accommodation Network**

(JAN), funded by the Department of Labor) JAN will give free, one-on-one consultations, with businesses to give guidance and training assistance for accommodations in the workplace. JAN reports that accommodations cost little to no money, and that even the costliest ones usually do not exceed \$500. Go to askjan.org for publications, trainings, and resources. The site has a tab for Employers and one for Individuals. Their Workplace Accommodation Toolkit is a free online resource that shows managers how to create a disability-inclusive workplace. There are sections for recruiters and hiring managers. They even include a section for Role-Play Training Videos and Accompanying Presentations. Ann Hirsh, JAN Associate Director, is in charge of education. JAN has a myriad of courses, most virtual but live training can be arranged. Subscribe to their newsletters. They offer practical advice for every type of accommodation question. JAN is an extraordinary resource.

❖ **Provide unconscious bias training for all employees.** Provide leadership training on how to handle requests for accommodations and conduct an awareness campaign that focuses on understanding and supporting people with disabilities. The goal is to create cognitive empathy to help employees "walk in someone else's shoes." The Society of Human Resource Management (SHRM) is an excellent resource for unconscious bias training. On their website, shrm.org, they offer hundreds of courses on this topic alone. They also offer an Implicit Bias Resource Guide. It provides a video, articles, and links to books and research articles. Major universities such as UCLA and Stanford offer these courses to the community. In addition, Microsoft e-lesson:

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Editor's Notebook

After 17 years editing this newsletter, the last four of which have also been as publisher, totaling more than 200 issues, the December/January *EAR* is the last issue you will receive in its present form.

It is not a decision made lightly, but many publications are struggling today, and *EAR* has not been any different. It is certainly MUCH easier to download an article you've read online for free than to subscribe to a given newsletter, etc., but therein lies part of the problem. Without printing or mailing costs, digital newsletters like this one are certainly *less* expensive to produce than their print versions, but they are still NOT without costs, something many people overlook.

A number of you took heed about the repeated announcements this year regarding our need for renewals and new subscribers to move us into "the black" and I thank you! It helped, for a while. With a lack of new subscribers, there simply were not enough of you to offset expenses, even after we switched to a bimonthly schedule.

While I've enjoyed editing the *EAR*, my first love has always been writing, and I have started writing a book about my mental health journey, tentatively titled, "Climbing Out of the Darkness." In addition, I will continue to solicit select writing and editing projects. Contact me for a quote.

I'd like to point out that *EAR* will continue to be a solid source of information. 2021-2020-2019 *EARs* will remain available to subscribers on our website at www.writeitrightllc.com.

Even more important, thanks to **Pat Herlihy** and **Jodi Frey**, the International Employee Assistance Digital Archive has archived issues of this newsletter dating back to 2004.

Check out <https://archive.hshsl.umaryland.edu/handle/10713/2345> and type in "Employee Assistance Report" and then "go." It is a treasure trove of info, and it's all free!

Thank you all for reading!

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Unconscious Bias (mslearning.microsoft.com) offers a comprehensive course open to the public. Compare that to a one-day training given by training professionals that can cost up to \$6,000.

❖ **Start an Employee Resource Group.** This is a platform for members to share their unique experiences, with common interests such as gender, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, or disability. ERGs are an excellent way to promote diversity and inclusion with a company. These peer-led groups offer another resource and sources of support for people with disabilities. There are six basic steps to creating a successful Employee Resource Group:

➤ Check with management first as it is important to identify an executive sponsor. Also, you will be requesting a budget to support the activities of the group.

➤ Evaluate the client company's needs and identify a resource. For example, is there a group that is underrepresented in your organization? ACCESS (<https://www.accesscommunity.org/node/327>) and Pride & Allies (<https://americas.societegenerale.com/en/careers/get-know-diversity/pride-allies/>) are among the many possibilities.

➤ Do an employee pulse survey to get feedback on what topics employees are interested in most.

➤ Once a topic is chosen, develop outreach strategies and generate interest for the group. Reach out to employees through a company newsletter, e-mail blasts, flyers, and inserts and events such as a welcoming breakfast.

➤ It's necessary to name the group, set a mission and goals, design the structure, and assign roles or officers within the group.

➤ Measure success. This is another way of determining if goals were achieved. For example, did we consistently recruit new members each month, did we publish a quarterly newsletter, did we conduct one annual event. And did we form new peer support groups?

Studies Confirm ROI in Hiring Individuals with Disabilities

While EA professionals aren't typically involved in the employment process, they are surely aware that many of their clients are finding hiring difficult in the post-COVID work environment. As it turns out, hiring individuals with disabilities not only offers an answer, but it is also a profitable business strategy.

Findings from a joint study conducted by Accenture, Disability: IN, and the American Association of People with Disabilities yielded important findings, which demonstrated that companies that provide an inclusive working environment for employees with disabilities achieved:

- An average of 28% higher revenue;
- 30% greater economic profit margins; and
- Double the net income of their industry peers.

Hiring those with disabilities and then treating them with respect, dignity, and without discrimination, helps increase the bottom line by lowering turnover rates, increasing productivity, creating a more empathic corporate culture, generating fresh perspectives to different ways of doing business, and may even open up the company to certain tax benefits. ■

— Maureen Hotchner

A Word on Remote Work

Make working remotely a standard option, even after COVID-19 restrictions are lifted. It may be necessary to work with Human Resources. The lockdowns were a boon for employees with disabilities, who had been requesting this accommodation for decades, often with little success. The ability to work without a daily commute and utilize accommodations in the home was an incredible game changer for many employees with disabilities.

Summary

For people with disabilities—especially invisible ones—life can be daunting. By treating them with compassion, empathy, and respect, we can not only make their lives easier, but we can also strengthen our corporate clients' organizations in the process. ■

Maureen Hotchner is a licensed mental health professional, specializing in Workplace Mental Health. Her behavioral health trainings help identify problems and offer solutions to restore equilibrium and boost productivity in business. Maureen is the owner of Hotchner Workplace Wellness (<https://hotchnerworkplacewellness.com>).

Editor's note: Recognizing something was "off" with my mental health, I solicited my wife's EAP in 2002 and was diagnosed with ADD and depression. Two years later, I was editing a publication for EAPs!