

## *Accommodation for Everyone*

### **Scenario Activity Summary**

During EARN's 2019 Conference, we asked attendees to give their feedback on five scenarios which focused on various forms of workplace accommodation. This activity was a component of the afternoon session, "Accommodation for Everyone", a conversation with Debbie Orme-Rego, Senior Director, Human Resources, United Way Ottawa, facilitated by Shannon Bruce, Manager of Business Development, EARN.

The following is a summary of key points raised by participants. Common themes emerged from their feedback, ranging from the value of education to potential solutions and best practices. One best practice that stood out amongst participants' feedback was the value they ascribed to including employees themselves in workplace accommodation conversations.

This summary is not intended as a guide to creating accommodation policy and procedure, rather it is a synopsis of the collective input of conference attendees. We hope it may give you some tips and insights about workplace accommodations and adjustments, a place to start the conversation in your organization.

**Scenario #1:** When Reese is exposed to certain ingredients or chemicals in scented products they can experience headaches, dizziness, nausea and other symptoms. This often impacts their ability to work effectively.

***How could you manage this in your workplace? Is it fair that everyone is asked to not wear scented products?***

The value of education:

- Education is crucial.
- Present fact based information.

Complexity of meeting everyone's accommodation needs:

- Some participants expressed concern that it might not be possible to ban all scented products ("What about employees who use scented oils to reduce stress?").

Best practices:

- Involve the employee directly in the conversation. Factors to consider:
  - Understand why Reese needs a scent free environment.
  - What would work best for Reese?
  - Ask the person how they want the process rolled out.
- Provide an open space to talk about it.
- Be sensitive to intersectionality i.e., a potential cultural angle.
- It's fair that everyone can go to work and work effectively.
- Ensure any adjustment is a win-win for everyone.
- Take into account all employee perspectives.
- Leverage work on corporate policy.

**Scenario #2:** When Parker stopped by to say hello to the new employee, Peyton, they noticed that Peyton had a standing desk. Parker does not have a history of back pain and he does not have a doctor's note for one. That being said, Parker asks for one.

***How could you approach this situation in your workplace?***

Solutions and logistical issues:

- Request an ergonomic assessment and a doctor's note.
- Is there financial capacity?
- Are there legal and/or union factors to consider?

Best practices:

- Talk with the employee to find out more:
  - Have an open discussion with Parker about why he wants a standing desk.
- Don't make assumptions.
- Consider other accommodation options (e.g., work at home).

**Scenario #3:** Mo is interviewing for a position. Although disclosure isn't required, because of questions about a particular job requirement for which he may need an accommodation, he tells you that he has diabetes. He also reveals that he needs to eat at specific time each day and may also need to test his blood sugar and take insulin while at work.

Mo is happy to work an adjusted schedule or extra hours provided that he can take the steps necessary to regulate his diabetes.

***How could this work in your environment? How could you prepare to handle other staff who inquire why Mo gets a "special" schedule?***

The value of education:

- Provide education and awareness around stigma [concerning disability] (e.g., lunch and learn sessions).
- The employee may be willing to participate in educational efforts to demystify colleagues about his disability.

Solutions:

- Allow the accommodation – by providing flexible hours.
- If other staff question his break, inform them that he has an accommodation in place.

Best practices:

- Put in place the same policy around flexible hours for all employees.
- Seek advice and guidance by meeting with accommodations specialist in the organization.

**Scenario #4:** Fatema lets you know that Ramadan, a month in which Muslims fast from sunrise to sundown, will be beginning soon. During Ramadan, Fatema requests adjustments to her schedule to accommodate her fasting. This year Ramada falls in the spring when the hours of daylight quite long.

***How could this work in your environment? How could you prepare to handle other staff who inquire why Fatema gets a "special" schedule?***

Value of education

- Educate staff /colleagues, provide training and raise awareness.

- Stress this is a normal, reasonable thing to do. It is an adjustment to allow a colleague to practice her religious rite.
- One diversity specialist sends out Friday Facts – send out information about Ramadan the week before it occurs.

#### Solutions

- Offer a flexible or different schedule.
- Plan meetings earlier in the day.
- Book a meeting room for prayers.
- Plan an inclusion party.
- Ask if her job needs to be adjusted – i.e., limit heavy lifting?
- Be sensitive and do not plan food events at work during this period.

#### Best Practices

- Involve the employee in the conversation. Some factors to consider:
  - Ask her what she needs or would like.
  - Approach the conversation with curiosity.
  - Ask if she would like co-workers to know.
- Have open and honest conversation without breaking confidentiality.
- Use the opportunity of this request to have a broad discussion of diversity.
- Use it as a team building exercise.
- Post relevant information in a shared space for all staff to access.

**Scenario #5:** It is time for performance reviews in your workplace. You notice that Chris has not been acting like herself lately, and her performance has definitely not been as consistent as in the past. You have heard mention that she has recently had her aging mother move in with her, her spouse, and 3 children. It's not like Chris to not show commitment and drive on projects.

**What could you do to help support Chris in this situation? Is there an opportunity to offer any workplace adjustments to support Chris? What are the risks of starting the conversation, or not starting the conversation?**

#### Solutions:

- You need to talk in order to assist Chris.
- Invite Chris for a conversation and outline its purpose.
- Acknowledge her strengths and team contributions first.

- Ask her how she is doing.
- Start the conversation with what you have observed.
- Make suggestions as to what accommodations/adjustments could be made e.g., adjusted schedule, flexible hours, teleworking, and family leave.
- Offer EAP resources.
- View this as an opportunity to help Chris.

The risks of starting a conversation:

- It may be viewed as intrusive, judgmental, employee may feel singled out.
- It could add to the stress and /or discomfort she may be feeling.
- She may assume her job is threatened.
- Employee may need more support than can be offered.

The risks of not starting a conversation:

- Continued deterioration of performance; things might get worse.
- Engagement, sense of belonging & overall morale of the team / manager could drop.
- Resentment could develop.
- Conflict could increase.
- Employee becomes discouraged and goes off on sick / stress leave; her mental health could decline.
- Chris could be terminated.
- There could be a negative impact on productivity /profitability.
- There will be no solution.

Best practices:

- Include the employee in the conversation. Some factors to consider:
  - Make sure Chris is heard.
  - Many people do know what they need.
  - She may have a game plan.
- Set the conditions for disclosure: this will be an explicitly safe space conversation.
- Establish respect and trust by having someone with whom the employee feels comfortable meet with her.
- Gather information & understand the situation, including personal factors, before prematurely suggesting accommodations / adjustments.

- Have the conversation before the performance review - to decrease fear, apprehension & stress on the part of the employee.
- Ensure an employee is fully accommodated prior to the performance appraisal.
- Make it a regular practice for managers / supervisors to conduct check-ins with all staff to see how they are doing; if everyone is asked the question then no-one is singled out or feels patronized.

We want to thank all the 2019 EARN conference participants whose feedback informed the information presented here. Your thoughtful contributions made this resource possible.