**Job Accommodation Network**

**Disability Awareness to Increase Your Comfort, Confidence and Competence**

**Slide 1**

Hello everyone. I am Lou Orslene one of the Co-Directors of JAN. In this module, I plan to provide you with a number of practical tips for making your workplace more inclusive of individuals with disabilities, focusing on language and communication.

On the presentation cover slide, we see a montage of photos of JAN customers along with the title Disability Awareness to Increase Your Comfort, Confidence and Competence. Also, please note that my email is on the cover slide for any questions you may have after watching and listening to the module. My email is Orslene@jan.wvu.edu

**Slide 2**

The Goal of this module is to increase your comfort, confidence, and competence in working with people with disabilities. Over the decades, much research has been conducted into the barriers to employment of people with disabilities. This research suggests attitude towards people with disabilities is “the” major barrier. This training will attempt to improve attitudes by helping to better understand disability in the workplace and good practices for managing disability. With this understanding, I hope that you will become more comfortable in your dealings with individuals with disabilities. We are all intimidated by things we do know and while it is impossible to know the implications of disability in the workplace, we can come to acknowledge disability is a common, human experience that we all share. Without an informed understanding of disability we will be unable to capitalize on the talents of people with disabilities.

In meeting this goal, I will talk about:

* Understanding the five signs that your doors are open to people with disabilities
* Developing skills that help to more effectively communicate at work with people with disabilities
* Developing good practices for managing individuals with disabilities

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So to understand how to develop a more inclusive workplace, there are what I call the five signs that your doors are open to people with disabilities.

These include:

1. Accessible buildings and workplace technology – I think most workplaces are physically accessible these days, but are your workplace technologies such as applicant tracking systems, employment testing software, training portals accessible?

2. Do you have inclusive policies and practices? Does your policy contain actionable steps that people need to follow in order to receive an accommodation in a reasonable timeframe?

3. Are people with disabilities included on your website, in your marketing materials, and in your career portal?

4. Do you partner with the US Business Leadership Network and its affiliates, the Job Accommodation Network, the American Association of People with Disabilities for their annual Disability Mentoring Day, or do you partner with a local group that serves people with disabilities?

5. And finally and I think most importantly does your workplace have an inclusive ethos or character? Are all employees trained in basic disability etiquette? Do supervisors and managers insure that an employee’s disability is not the subject of talk around the water cooler? Do you know what to do when someone who is blind or deaf is slated to attend a business meeting?

And this, the last of the five, will be the focus of the rest of the module: how to create an inclusive workplace ethos, especially related to language and communication.

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So let’s talk about the basics:

Do not refer to or talk about a person’s disability at all unless it is crucial to the conversation.

This is particularly true when introducing someone with a disability. A person’s disability should not be used to describe the person. Avoid such labeling.

A couple examples of when it is appropriate to discuss an employee’s disability are: when an emergency evacuation plan is being discussed or when an employee requests an accommodation. Remember, of course, that it’s up to the employee with a disability whether to and when to disclose.

Do not make it your role to advocate for a person with a disability. Colleagues with disabilities are independent adults capable of determining what they need and want. If they need your advocacy they can ask. And if you get the urge to do so, please talk with the person with a disability first to insure your advocacy is desired.

Do not assume a person cannot function on his or her own and perform a specific task.

Just because someone has a disability, don’t assume he or she needs help in completing a task. Research suggests that most people with disabilities do not need accommodations. For those that do, with the right accommodations and support, they can be as productive as anyone else or more so. So always assume a person with a disability is just like you – a fully capable, independent adult.

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Do your part to dispel myths and stereotypes. Speak out when you hear others talk negatively about people with disabilities.

Again, disability is not a subject for small talk.

Do insure your office spaces and business social event venues are accessible. If the setting is accessible, people with disabilities can usually get around fine without assistance from others; creating an “accessible for all” workplace reduces the need for accommodations.

Do realize and then let it be reflected in your behavior that people with disabilities are more like you then not.

People with disabilities have families, jobs, hobbies, likes and dislikes, and problems and joys. Disability alone does not define a person. Offer a person with a disability the same respect you would expect.

Do offer assistance in that rare instance when a person’s safety may be in jeopardy.

Offer assistance only if the person appears to be in need. A person with a disability will most often communicate when he or she needs help. If help is wanted, ask how before you act. If your offer of assistance is declined, be graceful about it.

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Effective communication is essential for a productive workplace and for quality customer service. Enhancing your ability for spontaneous conversation with peers and customers with disabilities can increase your comfort level and insure positive, long term relationships.

We all communicate in various ways with or without a disability.

You may have a colleague whose speech is difficult to understand, but who wants to talk in his own voice, or someone with Asperger’s Syndrome who prefers to communicate in writing, or a person with a mental health disability who prefers to meet in a quiet location.

Pay attention to cues from the person you are communicating with.

The person with a disability if provided the opportunity will let you know what works best.

Don’t be afraid to say that you do not understand; if you don’t understand, be real enough to say so and then work with the person to insure an effective communication exchange.

Model professional behaviors such as active listening and a service-minded orientation. Listen, observe body language, paraphrase, clarify, summarize, and most importantly show your eagerness to understand the challenge.

This technique works well with people with disabilities as with all other people.

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Language in all fields is a moving target. Remember “paradigm shifts” from the 1980’s and now in the workplace we hear so much of “metrics” and “benchmarking.” Who just several years ago heard of “Twitter” or the “cloud. “ So language in our culture is always changing. This is not different with disability. As society changes and progresses language changes for the better. Resist thinking this is political correctness. It is simply the march of progress and change.

So the preferred language of disability is that of “people first language.”

Along with adopting people first language, we no longer use language that can offend. For instance, the term “mental retardation” is no longer acceptable and has been replaced by “intellectual developmental disorder” as the medical term or just “intellectual disability” as the more informal terminology. Intellectual disability is just one of the “developmental disabilities.” Developmental disabilities are those that originate before the age of 18.

But do note though that language is ever changing and some disability groups have embraced language such as the deaf community which have taken phrases like “the deaf” and now use these words as a source of pride much like others groups have done with language.

So think before you speak to help insure that you do not demean and undermine the inclusion of people with disabilities your workplace.

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Now let me offer some common sense tips for engaging with a person with a disability.

* First, relax. Be approachable.
* Smile and look a person with a disability in the eyes, as you would with anyone else, and listen attentively.
* Talk directly to the person with a disability, not a companion, assistant, or sign language interpreter.
* Use “people first” language, like “a person who uses a wheelchair,” but only mention a disability if it is essential to a conversation.

If disability it not important and contributes nothing to the conversation then do not mention the word disability at all.

And never, ever introduce someone with a disability to another person by talking about the person’s disability, for example, saying this is the “employee that is blind I told you about” or this is “Jenny and she is bi-polar.” Disability is not a matter to be discussed in the workplace unless a person has disclosed to you as the supervisor or human resource representative. And even if it is then it is confidential. If you are serving in one of these roles, always take your cues from the person with a disability and be a good listener in order to understand what the person wants and doesn’t want to share with others.

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Now let’s talk about some of the “Don’ts” when engaging a person with a disability –

* Don’t be afraid to say what you do not understand. Consider writing information down if communicating verbally is not effective.
* Don’t touch, play with, distract, or feed a service animal without the person’s permission. Service animals are working to support the individual.
* Don’t touch, lean on, or move a person's mobility device or wheelchair without consent. Devices and wheelchairs are part of the person and essential to their lives. Respect that.
* Don’t elevate your speech when interacting with people who have disabilities – maintain a natural tone.

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And now the Do’s….

* Be considerate of the extra time it may take a person with a disability to walk, talk, write or perform a task.
* Extend your hand to shake if that is what you normally do. A person who cannot shake hands will let you know.
* Sit down when speaking for more than a few minutes with a person who uses a wheelchair so you will be at eye level.

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Now let’s talk about etiquette and actions for specific workplace situations.

Say you are working to create a more inclusive work environment. What should I do?

* Insure everyone has a focus on abilities – it is abilities and productivity that matters at work. Do not let yourself get absorbed in what you think the person can and cannot do because of a disability. Unconscious bias can hold people back. So don’t assume.
* Ask the person first – before assisting or advocating for a person always ask if and how you can help. This extends to accommodating a person as well. Insure you have asked the person what they think will work to overcome a workplace challenge before deciding on an accommodation. Most often the person can tell you what will work and sometimes you will be surprised by the simplicity of the solution.
* Be aware and make your IT team aware of adaptive devices and assistive technologies – know that there are many devices including screen reading software, speech recognition software, video phones and a myriad of other devices that now level the playing field for people with disabilities. The more knowledgeable you are of these devices, the better employer you will be.
* Be aware of the worksite and its accessible and inaccessible elements - Being more diligent in observing the barriers to accessibility will make all employees safer, the workplace more inclusive, and reduce the need for accommodations.

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* Do not assume just because a person takes more time to do something that he or she is not intelligent – Instead give the benefit of the doubt knowing that if a person has been hired and works with you, that person is as qualified and intelligent as you are.
* Provide effective communication for complex meetings or social events where interaction is expected – there is too much risk that a person who is deaf or who has hearing loss will miss important information, so be prepared to offer alternate means of communication such as an interpreter.
* Respect personal space – as you would do with anyone else. Do not treat people like they are less than.
* If a person is in crisis, ask what you can do to help – and then follow the person’s lead. Again if your help is not accepted, be gracious.

**Slide 13**

If you are a supervisor and you have the responsibility for the first time of supervising an employee with a disability then…

Immediately orient the individual with a disability to the facility and equipment while assessing what is and what is not accessible for the employee. Nothing can doom a person’s employment more than an inaccessible legacy information system or human resource information system. The initial few weeks are so important in the employee life cycle.

If you identify barriers for new employees with disabilities, make adjustments as necessary. Identify assistive technologies available to increase workplace accessibility. Provide alternate formats (e.g., large print, Braille) of all necessary work-related documents including benefits information, employee manuals and policies, and professional development materials, as needed.

Orient the person to the emergency evacuation procedures.

And talk to the employee about the best way for them to be evacuated safely. I caution you here in developing your emergency evacuation procedures not to assume the best approach is for all people with disabilities is in “sheltering in place.” Again ask employees what they prefer within the context of your office space or building.

Respect privacy. All disability information should be kept confidential.

Know that employee requests for assistance can open discussions of accommodation needs so be apprised of your reasonable accommodation process and procedure.

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Now let’s talk about meetings and trainings.

So I am planning a face-to-face meeting/training for our unit. To be as inclusive as possible, what should I do?

* Send out a request for participant accommodations in advance of the meeting. This way someone who uses say assistive technology will be able to upload information into a device or listen to the information in advance so he or she has access to the same information everyone has at the meeting.
* Know and communicate any emergency evacuation procedures to your audience. This is just a simple way to start a meeting by directing people to exits. If you do not know if anyone coming to a meeting has a disability, send an accommodation request out in advance along with other meeting information. Then you will be prepared to insure everyone’s safety.
* Customize information provided in print. (Braille, large print, electronic, etc.) Always ask attendees who requests an accommodation to specify their needs. Even in regard to large print, someone who is low sighted may need the print in 18 font while someone else may need it in 44 font.

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And again, concerning meeting and trainings….

Insure accessibility of information to be shared including PowerPoint presentations.

If sign language interpreters will be present, insure they have a copy of the PowerPoint before the presentation begins.

If a presentation includes a video that video then MUST be captioned.

Send out information to be discussed during the meeting or the PowerPoint presentation in advance. Many people with disabilities use text-based screen reading software and computer devices; having information in advance gives the person with a disability time to best use the information.

Be prepared to describe slides during the presentation; presenters should describe slides and graphics briefly. For example: "This slide covers these three key points..." "This graph illustrates these key points.“

And presenters should speak clearly at a moderate pace. This practice promotes understanding in the audience and allows sign language interpreters or CART transcribers time to translate what you are saying.

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Now let’s talk about general suggestions for assisting someone who is blind, but as I have said many times, ask the person first. It is not assistance or help if you are not doing what the person needs in the way the person needs it.

So first verbally identify yourself when you approach and then let a person know of course when you are leaving the conversation.

Offer assistance and wait for an answer.

Ask for specific instructions on how you can assist – “Would you like directions to…?” Would you like to take my arm?

If offering to assist someone to find a seat, speak the person’s name and tap on the table where a space is available.

If offering to help someone to sit down, let the person know as you guide the person’s hand down toward the back of the chair.

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And some general suggestions for working with someone who is deaf and hard of hearing…

To get a person’s attention, it is okay to tap the person on the shoulder or wave your hand.

Ask what is the best way to communicate – reading lips, signing, gesturing, in writing, texting, etc.

When possible speak in a well-lit room that is free from background noises.

Do not put hands in front of your face or food items in your mouth while talking.

Maintain eye contact and direct your communication to the person who is deaf.

And know that deaf culture is unique in terms of disability groups. Members of deaf cultures often communicate via sign language. Deaf identity is constructed around specific beliefs and values such as a positive attitude toward being deaf - deafness is not generally considered a condition that needs to be fixed or is considered an impairment. So avoid using the word impairment.

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Globally as well as nationally there is an increase of people reporting mental health issues. Mental health conditions are three of the top 10 searches done on our website and one of our fastest growing categories for consultations and training.

In assisting someone who has a mental health condition…

* Avoid stereotypes and assumptions about the person and how he or she may act.
* Recognize but respect differences in people. A person may act differently and have problems interpreting social cues.
* Be patient. Allow the individual to think and answer questions.
* Know that stress can aggravate a situation, alleviating some of that stress may de-escalate the situation.
* In a crisis, stay calm and be supportive as you would with anyone else. Ask how you can help, and find out if there is a support person who can be sent for.

**Slide 19**

So a number of takeaways from this module include….

* Do not refer to or talk about a person’s disability at all unless it is crucial to the conversation.
* Do not make it your role to advocate for a person with a disability.
* Do not assume a person cannot function on his or her own, or perform a task.
* Do your part to dispel myths and stereotypes. Speak out when you hear others talk negatively about people with disabilities.
* Do insure your office spaces and business social event venues are accessible.
* Do realize and then let it be reflected in your behavior that people with disabilities are more like you then not.
* Do offer assistance in that rare instance when a person’s safety may be in jeopardy.

**Slide 20**

Now let me share a video that affirms much of what I said but from people with disabilities who live this experience. This video is provided as a linked resource along with this Just-in-Time Module.

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I hope that information I shared about disability awareness has increased your Comfort, Confidence and Competence in managing individuals with disabilities. Understanding disability and developing a more inclusive workforce may be the key to your company’s future success.

If you would like to talk about this issue or others towards developing that more inclusive workplace, feel free to contact the Job Accommodation Network.

At (800) 526-7234 for voice – or (877) 781-9403 TTY.  Or visit our comprehensive website at AskJAN.org Or via email @ jan@askjan.org Or(304) 216-8189 text.  Or if you are using Skype, you can put us in your Skype at janconsultants one word. Or we are available through various social networking tools.

I hope this has been valuable and thank you for listening.