



13.1 Workplace Accommodation Essentials



Providing workplace accommodations may seem like a daunting task, particularly for those running a small business or who are building a startup with limited funds. However, most accommodations cost little to no money and in many cases, just require a little creativity and flexibility from both the employer and the team member requiring supports.

In Tool 3.2 Legal Issues, we cover the definitions of the Duty to Accommodate and in Tool 3.3 the importance of understanding Undue Hardship, but what is a reasonable accommodation?

Reasonable Accommodations

While the need for accommodations can vary depending on the person's abilities, workplace setting, and/or requirements of their role, providing reasonable accommodations typically means a slight modification to the environment or way in which a task is performed in order to give the employee an equal opportunity to fulfil the core functions of their duties, while not causing undue hardship to the employer.

Did you know?

Not every person with a disability needs an accommodation. In fact, employers can benefit from the specific skills of qualified people with disabilities without needing to make extensive modifications to the physical workplace or the overall work environment.

Types of Accommodations

When most people think of workplace accommodations, it is easy to jump to ones that impact the physical environment (elevators, ramps or the removal/widening of doors); however, structural changes are only one part of the equation, and often not required at all. The 4 main types of accommodations are:

- 1. Flexibility / Policy Changes:** These include modifying work hours, the location of duties, and how tasks are expected to be completed to fit the needs of the individual. Often these changes cost \$0 to implement.

- 2. Personal Supports:** These accommodations may be subsidized by government programs. (e.g. job coaches, guide dogs/service animals, personal assistants, or support workers.)
- 3. Equipment:** There are programs to cover most costs for equipment accommodations. (e.g. Technical devices, alternative work materials, communication aids, or ergonomic workstations.)
- 4. Structural Modifications:** These are commonly funded through grants since they can often be the most expensive. (e.g. Hand rails, ramps, widened doorways, or increased accessibility to common facilities.)

Understanding the Costs of Accommodations

A Job Accommodation Network (JAN) study found that “56% of accommodations cost absolutely nothing to implement **\$0**, while the rest of the accommodations made had a typical cost of only \$500.”¹

Flexibility / Policy Changes

Cost to Employer: \$0

These are the most common accommodations requested and include:

How work is performed (e.g., allowing cashiers to sit or stand)

When work is performed (e.g., flexible scheduling, compressed work week)

Where work is performed (e.g., remote work locations, whether full-time, part-time, or occasional)

Personal Supports

Cost to Employer: \$0

These types of supports are usually in place before an individual with a disability is seeking employment. If the individual is utilizing a personal assistant or care worker, they will likely be with the employee for the duration of the workday. If this is the case, providing them access to all the spaces this employee is expected to be in is vital. Guide dogs and service animals are professionally trained work animals that are matched to clients' needs based on walking speed and home/work environments. Non-profit organizations gather donations to provide these dogs for free to families (since it can take up to 2 years and \$35,000 to train each dog).

Equipment and Alternate Materials

Cost to Employer: \$0 - \$1500 (Grants may be available)

Most equipment requests include the purchase of things like desk lamps for task lighting, specialized software for getting specific work done, and/or ergonomic office chairs or desks for long stints at the computer with adjustable desk heights to accommodate either sitting or standing. However, with a lot of employers today having staff work remotely, they may already have this equipment for use at home.

Provide large print and photos in documentation and signage (both internally for staff and externally for customers) with alternate print sizes of at least 18pt font for printed materials and

signage with at least a 72pt font. These sizes are easier to read, especially using sans-serif font types (e.g. Verdana, Arial.) If you're an Office 365 user, there are also several new accessibility features including automatic live-captioning and accessible presentation templates in PowerPoint. This is ideal for individuals with low-vision and will also accommodate employees and customers who may be deaf or hard of hearing. Adding photos to digital documents (with Alt text) and other visual cues will also make it easier for employees or customers who would benefit from the use of picture symbols instead of letters and numbers.²

Structural Modifications

Cost to Employer: \$0 - \$10,000+ (Grants may be available)

Although structural modifications tend to be the most expensive, a lot of the costs can be circumvented with thoughtful planning and the support of an accessibility professional. If a business is leasing a space, it is worth talking to the building owner about the addition of ramps, elevators and power-assisted doors due to the long-term benefits to both employees and customers. Canadian organizations like StopGap Foundation³ may be an option for businesses looking for a subsidized ramping solution or the Enabling Accessibility Fund Grant⁴ may be more suitable for larger projects.

When in Doubt, Ask the Person

No matter what accommodation may be required, no employer is expected to be an expert or to know all the needs of their employees. The best thing that can be done is simply asking each person if there are accommodations in the workplace that they require to support them in doing their job. This may not be something they can answer when they first start their role, so you may want to check back every 3 – 6 months to see if their needs have changed.

Sources:

¹ Job Accommodation Network. (2021, October 21). Accommodation and Compliance: Low Cost, High Impact. Retrieved from <https://www.shrm.org/hr-today/news/hr-magazine/documents/lowcosthighimpact.pdf>

² Microsoft. (2020, February 13). Creating Accessible Workplaces in 2020. Retrieved from <https://news.microsoft.com/en-ca/2020/02/13/creating-accessible-workplaces-in-2020/>

³ Stopgap.ca - Request a Ramp. Retrieved from <https://stopgap.ca/get-involved/request-a-ramp/>

⁴ Government of Canada. (2021, June 25). About Enabling Accessibility Fund. Retrieved from <https://www.canada.ca/en/employment-social-development/programs/enabling-accessibility-fund.html>

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