

Workplace Accommodations

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Workplace Accommodations: The Basics

What are workplace accommodations?

Workplace accommodations refer to a range of changes that can make a positive difference for employees with arthritis, joint pain, back pain, and other types of health conditions.

Workplace accommodations can mean small adjustments like setting up the employee's desk and chair so they are ergonomically correct (e.g., chair seat and armrest height, monitor height, etc.), or moving the employee's parking spot closer to the workplace entrance. They can also include more significant accommodations such as changes to duties, job modifications, or alternate positions or FTEs.

These changes can be formal or informal, and temporary or permanent.

Why are workplace accommodations important?

Workplace accommodations provide many benefits:

- Help keep employees healthy and productive at work
- Eliminate the cost of having to find and train a qualified employee
- Benefit all employees, not only those who ask for them
- Many are cost-effective
- Help build loyalty and job satisfaction

Did you know?

Most Canadian employers may qualify for funding to cover the cost of technological devices and other accommodations.

As an employer you *are required* to reasonably accommodate your employees. Legally, employers have a duty to accommodate. You also need to be aware of and respect your employees' right to privacy.

Where to start?

You can do many things to support employees without requiring a formal request for an accommodation. For example, providing flexibility and autonomy gives employees more opportunities to make changes without having to ask for a formal accommodation. For an employee with a chronic condition like arthritis, this may mean taking five 3-minute micro breaks instead of one 15-minute break to help with stiffness and fatigue. It could also mean employees adjust their order of tasks to prevent overuse of a painful joint. Work disability can occur early in the disease progression for employees with rheumatoid arthritis (RA) or other forms of inflammatory arthritis. Therefore, to prevent work disability or other work disruptions (e.g., increased sick time, absenteeism, presenteeism) **prevention needs to occur as early as possible.**

Read on for more detailed information on workplace accommodations:

Examples of Workplace Accommodations

Appropriate accommodations depend on the employee, their job activities, and their limitations. Employees may need adjustments to their working environment, working hours, or the job itself.

Here are several ideas for accommodations for employees with arthritis, joint pain, and back pain:

- Modifications that maintain productivity
 - Trading or sharing tasks instead of offloading or reducing tasks
 - Providing flexibility in the way work is organized (e.g., the order tasks need to be done; increasing the variety of tasks)
 - Increasing flexibility in working hours (e.g., adjusting start time or working from home)
 - Allowing additional breaks or more frequent micro-breaks
 - Providing more flexibility and autonomy in general

Example of a successful accommodation:

An employee having trouble standing for long periods of time was given an anti-fatigue mat to help when standing and a stool that could be adjusted to standing height if they needed to sit.

- Changes to the workspace
 - Ergonomic changes to a workstation, such as adjusting chair arm rests or monitor level to recommended positions
 - Providing equipment or technological and assistive devices (e.g., standing desks, carts)
 - Improvements to access (e.g., parking, classroom/office location, position of light switches, automatic doors)
- More significant accommodations
 - Changing job responsibilities
 - Modifying work tools (e.g., tools to help with grasping)
 - Allocating a steady stream of work so the employee can pace work and avoid last minute deadlines
 - Transferring to another position temporarily or permanently

Ergonomics in accommodations

The goal of ergonomics is to create a balance at work between the demands of the job and the abilities of the employee. When job demands and worker capabilities are in balance, there is less risk of the job worsening symptoms of arthritis (e.g., flare-ups, pain, and fatigue). Understanding job demands, their impact on employees, and employees' capabilities and limitations, leads to more effective ergonomic accommodations.

Examples of job demands

- Prolonged sitting
- Repetitive motions, lifting heavy objects
- Awkward postures, static postures
- Pushing, pulling, and carrying
- Workplace stress

Examples of employee limitations

- Stiffness when sitting for prolonged periods
- Pain while typing
- Unable to lift arms above the head
- Fatigue

Impact of Workplace Accommodations

Appropriate workplace accommodations -along with an understanding employer- are key for better work and personal outcomes for people with arthritis, joint pain, and back pain. Accommodating employees has benefits for the employee, the employer, and the labour market.

Employee benefits

- Improved work related outcomes
- Healthier people
- Increased loyalty
- Increased productivity and employee motivation
- Less employee absenteeism and presenteeism

Absenteeism

The time missed from work due to health reasons

Presenteeism

The loss of work productivity among workers who are present at work, but limited in some aspect of job performance by a health problem

Employer/organization benefits

- Retention of qualified and experienced employees living with arthritis, joint pain, and back pain
- A wellness culture at work
- A positive workplace morale

Labour market benefits

- Reduced economic loss to the Canadian economy
- A stronger Canadian workforce

Duty to accommodate

Workplace accommodations are also important because employers have a legal **duty to accommodate** up to the point of **undue hardship**.

Undue hardship

“Undue hardship occurs if accommodation would create onerous conditions for an employer or service provider, for example, intolerable financial costs or serious disruption to business.”

– Alberta Human Rights Commission, 2017

What is considered undue hardship? Undue hardship can mean different things in different contexts. For instance, providing flexible hours may be manageable for a company with 250 employees, but might put considerable strain on a company with 25 employees. Providing an accommodation up to the point of undue hardship does not require displacing other employees from their positions, creating new positions, or creating situations that place employees or clients at risk.

When deciding if an accommodation is reasonable, take into account factors such as the appropriateness of the accommodation and how much an accommodation may impact the organization (i.e., cost, feasibility, size of the organization, etc.).

To substantiate a claim of undue hardship, an employer or service provider must show that they would experience more than a minor inconvenience. In most cases, accommodations are simple and affordable, and do not create undue hardship.

Where to Start?

Reflect on your workplace self-assessment score. What did you learn when you completed the Workplace Self-Assessment Tool? Are you familiar with accommodating employees in general or specifically those with arthritis, joint pain, and back pain?

Review the accommodation process.

Do employees in your workplace know how to request an accommodation? Process mapping and communication highlight how knowing the process for requesting an accommodation helps employees feel comfortable starting the process if they need to. Explore if your organization has a designated person or team to address accommodation issues, a formal decision making process for accommodations, and/or a centralized accommodation fund.

Consider supporting wellness.

If your workplace supports wellness, employees may already have the flexibility and autonomy to adjust their work life to help manage arthritis, joint pain, and back pain. This means you may not receive a request for a formal accommodation. **Even with strong support for wellness, employees with arthritis, joint pain, and back pain, may still chose not to disclose.**

Did you know?

Employees with inflammatory arthritis saw as much as a 50% decrease in job loss after two “job retention” visits with a vocational rehabilitation counsellor. (Allaire, 2003)

Steps you can take to prepare to accommodate employees with arthritis, joint pain, and back pain:

- Learn what arthritis, joint pain, and back pain are and what accommodations are helpful.
- Consider the resources available to you and your employee, e.g., vocational rehabilitation counsellor, ergonomic specialist, The Job Accommodation Network (JAN).
- Review the process for requesting an accommodation and ask yourself the following questions: Does the process work? Do people know about it? Is there anything we should improve?
- Is your medical documentation form easy for health care providers to complete? Does it include enough detail to understand an employee's restrictions as well as what is needed to appropriately accommodate them? If not, see the Supporting Employee Success tool in the Tools and Resources section for some ideas.

Health care providers who directly deal with employment issues:

- Vocational Rehabilitation Counsellors (VRC) evaluate the work situation, identify problems, suggest accommodations, provide career planning, and suggest resources to help both the employee and the employers.
- Ergonomists contribute to the design and evaluation of systems to make them compatible with peoples' needs, abilities, and limitations.
- Occupational Therapists (OTs) are also trained to do workplace ergonomic assessments. While ergonomists have more of a system level focus, OTs focus more on person level solutions.

Who is involved in the accommodation process?

Finding a suitable accommodation primarily involves you and your employee. Other people who may be involved include HR, the employee's union (if applicable), and workplace health and safety representatives who can assist in finding your employee an appropriate accommodation.

Collaborative communication, consultation, and the involvement of all relevant decision-makers helps to ensure the employee is appropriately accommodated.

The employee's role in the accommodation process

Your employee is a key player throughout the accommodation process. The employee needs to:

- **Request the accommodation.** It is helpful if they come prepared with some suggestions for accommodations that will help them. This can include ideas for accommodations, costs associated, and the minimum accommodation needed.
- **Obtain sufficient medical information** to support their need for an accommodation.
- **Talk to you** about any concerns with the suggested accommodations.
- **Agree on a communication plan**, including who and how much they would like to tell about their arthritis, joint pain, or back pain and how to check-in with them.
- **Let you know if there are any changes** in their functional capacity and if there have been any amendments to the recommendations from their medical team.

The employer's role during the accommodation process

The best way to identify and have clarity around the roles when an accommodation is requested is to have a process that outlines your role, your employee's role, and the roles of anyone else who may be involved. Below are some examples of what you may need to do when an employee requests an accommodation:

- **Connect with the employee** and appropriate health and safety or ability advisor to review options for accommodation.
- **Develop an accommodation plan.**
- **Communicate** with all involved parties (e.g., HR, the union, the benefit provider, ability advisors, etc.).
- **Educate other employees about the accommodation** and the "duty to accommodate" while still being respectful of your employee's privacy.
 - Remember, the employee doesn't need to disclose their medical condition, only their limitations.
- **Monitor the accommodation.** If necessary, meet with your employee and the accommodation team if there are issues or concerns that cannot be resolved.

Communicating with co-workers. As an employer, you may have gone to great lengths to ensure that your workplace accommodates employees living with arthritis, joint pain, and back pain. However, it is important to remember that it is also your responsibility to ensure that your other employees are also accommodating. Co-workers may not know that their colleague has a medical condition, or may know, but not understand, the impact it can have. Therefore, they might think that they have to pick up the slack for them (which may or may not be true) or that their colleague is receiving special treatment. A potential, unintended consequence of accommodating an employee with health concerns is the response of other employees. How and what to communicate with others needs to be considered and planned for from the beginning. The Communication theme on this website has suggestions for communicating with co-workers.

For more information about workplace accommodation they are important for employees with arthritis, joint pain, and back pain, visit our online *Tools and Resources* for articles and links:

<http://makingitworkforemployers.ca/tools-and-resources/>