Disability Awareness Workshop: Helping Businesses Comply With the Americans With Disabilities Act of 1990

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This paper describes an interdisciplinary consulting program that assists the business community in complying with the Americans With Disabilities Act of 1990 (ADA) (Public Law 101-336). The program was developed and coordinated by the occupational therapy department of the Baylor Institute for Rehabilitation, Dallas, Texas.

Formation of the Program

Occupational therapists at our rehabilitation hospital were gratified when the ADA was signed into law. In discussing the law and its broad implications during a departmental meeting, we recognized an obligation to assist the local business and professional community in complying with the ADA. We also saw an opportunity to use our clinical expertise in a community-based program that would ultimately benefit many of our patients.

Under the law, persons with disabilities are ensured equal opportunity in employment and are provided with equal access in the workplace, in places where leisure activities are pursued, and in places where self-care tasks are performed. In our discussions, we realized that we could use our experience working with persons with disabilities and our expertise in task analysis, environmental assessment, and adaptive technology to help businesses comply with the ADA.

The concept of a community-based interdisciplinary ADA consulting program was brought to the director of occupational therapy, who assumed the role of working sponsor of the program (Pinchot, 1985). The program coordinator gathered information relating to the ADA from government agencies, disability advocacy groups, and business and legal professionals, and arranged a meeting with interested representatives of departments within the Baylor Health Care System who might provide either direct or supportive services. The departments initially involved were rehabilitation engineering (from Baylor Biomedical Services), physical therapy, administration, the corporate legal department, marketing, human resources, vocational services, and occupational therapy.

At the meeting, the representatives generated a list of potential services for the ADA consultant program. These services included providing disability awareness training; performing environmental and workstation assessment and modification; providing instruction in writing job descriptions and formulating job-specific employment tests; conducting in-services for physicians performing employment screening; and providing adaptive technology and vocational training. Development of all of these services required considerations of staffing, program priorities, and budget and time constraints.

Representatives from Baylor Biomedical Services reported that they planned to be present as exhibitors at the forthcoming national conference in Dallas of the President’s Committee for Employment of People With...
Disabilities. To take advantage of the exhibit booth, it seemed imperative that we have some parts of the interdisciplinary ADA consulting program in place by that date in order to begin marketing services under the name “Baylor Rehab ADA Consultants.”

Market Survey
We recognized that a survey of the local business community would be valuable in designing an effective consultation program. A four-page multiple-choice questionnaire was developed asking about the organization’s size and structure, number of employees, types of employees, and types of facilities; level of awareness of the ADA and kinds of preparations being made or planned for in complying with the law; and need for the services we were proposing.

Using the Dallas Business Journal 1991 Book of Lists (Carroll, 1990), which lists organizations under categories such as “Largest Cellular Service Providers,” “Fastest Growing Public Companies,” and “Largest Dallas Area Municipalities,” we selected the first 15 businesses from each category as the survey sample.

The questionnaire along with a cover letter explaining who we were and why we were conducting the survey was sent to 642 organizations. Because they were not addressed to any specific person or department within the organizations, we expected only 3% to 4% of the questionnaires to be returned. However, 11% (71) of the questionnaires were returned within the 2-week deadline. Forty-six respondents identified themselves, and these were primarily representatives from the organizations’ human resources department. The survey was limited in two ways. First, it was skewed in favor of large or successful corporations, which were more likely to be better informed and more prepared to comply with the ADA than small companies and also more likely to experience the initial effect of compliance with the law. Second, the cover letter did clarify that the responses would be used only for a mailing list and would not be coupled with survey responses or be given to activist disability groups planning to target noncompliant companies.

The results indicated a need for the proposed disability awareness workshops and revealed that the respondents most desired information on adaptive technology and disabling conditions.

Planning of the Workshop
A 2-day workshop format was chosen to cover all the material. Workshop components were designed to explore and challenge perceptions of persons with disabilities (Day 1) and to provide information needed to comply with Title I of the ADA at the workplace (Day 2). The workshop comprised a total of nine components, as described below.

Disability awareness activities. These interactive exercises allow participants to explore their attitudes about persons with disabilities, to experience to a small degree what it might be like to have a disability, to problem-solve reasonable accommodation solutions, and to learn techniques for integrating persons with disabilities into the workforce. The Tiltling at Windmills (Pimentel, Long, Whaley, & Weld, 1981) modules, purchased from the California Governor’s Committee on Employment of People With Disabilities, are among the modules used. At least four activities are scheduled during the 2-day workshop.

Overview of the ADA. The ADA is presented by a labor attorney in layman’s terms, with emphasis on Titles I and III, which cover employment and public accommodations. Terms such as person with a disability and reasonable accommodation are discussed. Written materials, including a copy of the employment regulations, supplement the 30-min presentation.

Disabling conditions and their effects. A staff physician who specializes in rehabilitation medicine discusses physically disabling conditions listed in a glossary in the workshop notebook. A psychiatrist who is the director of addictive diseases at an affiliated hospital discusses mental and substance-abuse disabilities listed in the glossary. Both physicians are knowledgeable about the ADA and emphasize possible work-related requirements for a person with a disability (e.g., the need for rest breaks or workstation modifications). As they describe disabling conditions, it becomes apparent that the symptoms and degree of impact among persons are so varied that it would be erroneous to view a person solely in terms of his or her disability. This point is discussed after the presentations.

Employee-employer panels. A panel of four persons with different disabilities discuss their work experiences, including the job interview, the kinds of work they do, the accommodations made for them, the costs of the accommodations and who paid for them, and the response of supervisors and co-workers to their being hired. A panel of four employers who have had experience with disabled employees then discuss the same issues from their perspective. Time is allowed for questions and discussion. These real-life reports have proved to be an effective attitudinal learning tool. Workshop participants universally report that their perceptions of persons with disabilities and the job capabilities they possess have been altered. Participants also say that they view hiring a disabled person more positively as a result of the panel presentations.

Environmental assessment and job-site analysis. The vocational services program specialist, who is an occupational therapist, discusses techniques for modifying a facility or a workstation to make it accessible to employees with disabilities and provides guidance on how to do this in a cost-effective manner. Participants identify satis-
factory solutions to problems illustrated in slides. This component does not go into specific architectural specifications of the ADA, because workshop participants are human resources personnel rather than facilities managers.

**Job-specific preplacement evaluation.** A preplacement evaluation program used at an affiliated hospital is described by the physical therapist in charge of the program. It uses task analysis to identify typical performance techniques of particular jobs that require the transferring or transporting of large heavy objects, then specifically matches the performance techniques (e.g., lifting 30 lb in a frontal plane to the testing instrument). Only job-specific tests are allowed under the ADA.

**Creation of job descriptions that identify essential elements.** A task-analysis approach to writing job descriptions is presented by the vocational services program specialist. The specialist discusses a checklist approach to identifying essential and marginal elements of a job and emphasizes the importance of concentrating on job tasks and on the work environment. Participants are advised to eliminate references on the job description to personal capabilities or performance techniques, such as “Must have good vision,” or “Must climb ladders,” which might serve to discriminate against persons with disabilities. A reasonable accommodation, such as providing adaptive devices or restructuring the job, might allow a person with a disability to perform the work required. Participants write and then discuss a sample job description.

**Vocations testing, training, and transition.** Reasonable accommodations, such as job assignment, restructuring, or rescheduling and job coaching are discussed. Participants are provided with information about supportive employment and other programs, and a resource list of government and private agencies is provided.

**Technology lab.** Participants are taken to the biomedical services facility affiliate, where rehabilitation engineers demonstrate adaptive technology, including augmentative communication, computer access, environmental control, and positioning devices, and provide information on costs and funding sources. The engineers emphasize that they work closely with rehabilitation therapists, who can perform a task analysis and performance assessment when necessary to help the employee and employee identify appropriate adaptive technology. Videos are shown of persons using both simple and complex adaptive technology on the job. Participants are then invited to try out the devices.

Five workshops were scheduled at once. This permitted us to market them as a group, thereby decreasing printing and mailing costs, as funds were limited. It also allowed flexibility for potential participants and for organizers. If a workshop was filled, we could suggest another; if a workshop had only a few registrants, we could cancel it.

To advertise the workshop program, a brochure was designed, printed, and mailed to over 1,000 persons, including the human resources personnel who responded to the market survey. Additionally, an ad was placed in a weekly business journal.

With the use of names recommended by the task force and others, workshop presenters and panelists were secured. We wanted persons on the worker panel to represent a variety of disabilities and persons on the employer panel to represent both large and small corporations. Persons on the employee panel represented the full spectrum of disabilities, including sensory disabilities, physical disabilities, mental disabilities, and substance abuse. A drafting instructor who uses four prostheses as a result of bilateral below-the-elbow and bilateral below-the-knee amputations spoke eloquently about discrimination in employment: “On the phone, computer design companies were enthusiastic about my credentials, but when I came in for an interview, all they saw were these hooks, and the job was suddenly unavailable.” An insurance case manager who has a facial disfigurement discussed her technique for getting through the disability barrier: “I speakassertively about my capabilities, use a lot of humor, and dress like a million bucks!” A middle manager who has a bipolar mental condition told of how he accommodates his yearly bout of severe depression by keeping 2 weeks of his sick leave and vacation time in reserve.

The persons who filled the eight panelist slots for each workshop have been extremely supportive of program goals, generous in contributing their time, and open in sharing their experiences with workshop participants. The compensation they receive is a workshop notebook, lunch, and a parking coupon, but they report that the intangible rewards of participating on the panel are quite satisfying. Final duties for the workshop were to gather materials for the notebook for each participant and to arrange for meals, refreshments, audio-visual equipment, parking, and bus transportation.

All aspects of the survey as well as marketing, planning, and coordinating the workshop were the responsibility of the occupational therapy program coordinator.

**Program Outcome**

**Attendance**

Although registration for the first workshop was so low that cancellation was considered, it was carried out as a learning experience. Empty seats were filled with interested occupational therapy staff members. Registration at the other four workshops was lower than expected, ranging from 10 to 17 participants at each workshop. One reason for the low turnout was competition with similar workshops. Dallas is a prime market for national ADA training seminars because of its location. Workshops were also being offered by the Texas Rehabilitation Commission, which developed a comprehensive ADA pro-
gram, and another local rehabilitation hospital. Many
large corporations have contracted with national trainers
or with local law firms for on-site training of their human
resources personnel and executives. Business and educa-
tional organizations, such as the Job Service Employer
Committee and the Dallas Association of Businesses,
have sponsored workshops or provided ADA training for
their membership. The market survey indicated that
nearly half of Dallas metropolitan area respondents had
already attended a formal program to learn about ADA
legislation. A later ad and the enclosure sent with a sec-
ond mailing of our brochure emphasized that more edu-
cation, such as that provided in our workshops, was
needed.

Another reason for the low registration may have
been the 2-day time commitment or the cost of $200 or
both. Either of these may preclude registration by an
otherwise interested person. Our market survey indicat-
ed that respondents expected to pay $50 to $100 for a
half-day workshop; the survey did not address the option
of a 2-day workshop. A subsequent workshop that we
have designed for labor and corporate attorneys will last 1
day and cost under $100. Another workshop for persons
with disabilities is being developed in coordination with
local disability advocacy groups, and there will be no
charge for this workshop.

Third, business persons may have been wary of a
workshop offered by a rehabilitation hospital and titled,
"Achieving Disability Awareness." They may have as-
sumed that the information provided by professionals
who identify themselves as advocates of persons with
disabilities would be biased toward advocacy without
equal consideration of the business perspective. Addi-
tionally, they may have feared that the workshop would
emphasize interactive sensitivity training elements
(which can be emotionally threatening to participants) at
the expense of information elements.

A fourth reason for low registration has to do with
the human tendency to procrastinate. When several
workshop dates are offered, a potential registrant may be
inclined to procrastinate in registering or to lay the bro-
cchure aside until it is too late to register. The fifth work-
shop had the maximum of 25 participants and there was a
waiting list. Financially, the workshop series neither
made nor lost money.

Participants’ Feedback and Program Visibility

By measures other than attendance, the workshop pro-
gram was successful. Several of Dallas’s largest corpora-
tions were represented. All participants rated the work-
shop as excellent. Their added comments confirmed that
we were achieving our primary education goals of chal-
lenging perceptions about persons with disabilities and
providing solutions for implementing the ADA. Feedback
indicated that participants were particularly interested in
information on disabling conditions and were fascinated
by adaptive technology, such as voice-activated computer
systems. They stated that their previously held percep-
tions of certain conditions (e.g., mental illness, blindness)
were modified. Additionally, their fears about the high
costs of accommodating employees with disabilities in
the workplace either in terms of time or money were
diluted. Hearing about other employers’ experiences
with disabled employees and hearing how panelists with
disabilities performed their jobs were also seen as helpful
experiences.

Additionally, the workshops provided visibility for
the other consulting services available in our ADA pro-
gram. Some businesses have sought these consulting
services for their corporations or have recommended
them to other businesses. These additional services avail-
able through the Baylor Rehab ADA Consultants program
are as follows:

- On-site disability awareness training.
- Assessment and modification for public accom-
modation.
- Assessment and modification of individual work-
stations.
- Adaptive technology.
- Vocational testing, training, and transition.
- Task analysis of specific job categories to identify
and provide valid preplacement tests.

Networking

Getting information and resources for the program and
securing workshop presenters and panelists has led to
contact with a wide variety of organizations and individ-
uals. Working relationships have been formed with many
of them. For example, we participated in conferences
about the ADA sponsored by other organizations; we
work with the Dallas Mayor’s Committee for Employment
of People With Disabilities; and we have provided re-
source information to the Job Accommodations Network,
to the National Association of Rehabilitation Hospitals,
and to individual occupational therapists organizing simi-
lar programs at their respective facilities. Several employ-
ers have invited us to submit a bid for services. In in-
stances where an invitation to bid has requested services
that we are unable to provide, we have contracted with an
outside consultant. Likewise, we have been invited to
participate on a contract basis in bids made to corpora-
tions by other consultants.

Conclusion

The ability to assess the need for a service and to develop
a program to meet that need is part of an occupational
therapist’s skills. In developing programs that help busi-
nesses implement the ADA, we also help persons with
disabilities assume the role of worker—a role that is rightfully theirs. ▲

References


