Employers' guide to assistive technology and young onset dementia

Why retain an employee with young onset dementia?

Alzheimer's disease, the most common form of young onset dementia, is considered a disability and is therefore covered under the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). Therefore, as a covered condition the employer has an obligation to conduct an interview with the employee to discuss any reasonable accommodations the employer may be able to make so that the employee can keep his or her position. Retaining an employee with young onset dementia can be beneficial to the employer as well as the employee. Employees with young onset dementia can remain as valuable, experienced and beneficial employees. Often in the early stages of the disease process the person with young onset dementia is high functioning and retains sufficient skills and abilities garnered from years of employment experience. Typically young onset dementia in the early stage affects recent memories far more than memories from the past. While the employee may have difficulty remembering new things or may need memory aids to track time and tasks, the ability to reason and make good decisions often does not decline in the early stages of the disease process. Employees with young onset dementia can often remain as experienced assets to an employer. In many cases, assistive technology (AT) can maintain or improve an employee's success on the job, so that the employee can remain a valuable asset.

What is assistive technology?

Any product or piece of equipment used to maintain or improve the functional capabilities of people with disabilities is an assistive technology (AT) device.

Incorporating assistive technology for employees with dementia into the workplace

Assistive technology can be useful for employees who are experiencing the earliest stages of dementia. This pamphlet will help guide you though the process of determining when and under what circumstances technology can be helpful. It will also give you some ideas of what types of technology are available and have been utilized effectively by employees with early stage dementia.

Determining if assistive technology might be useful

The Alzheimer's & Dementia Alliance of Wisconsin convened a group of people with young onset dementia who were either still working or who had to leave their employment because of their

dementia and asked them what types of employment supports would be most helpful. From those meetings we were able to identify some specific forms of technological support that employers may wish to utilize.

Dementia affects employees differently and each case should be handled according to the remaining abilities and current deficits of the individual. Prior use and comfort level with technology should also be taken into account. The result of these assessments will determine whether and what type of AT should be considered. For example, if an employee is having trouble keeping track of tasks, and is not very computer savvy, you would be less apt to use a computerized task sheet and more apt to try a voice message organizer.

Dementia can make employees wary of trying new things, adapting to changing situations or learning new skills, so it's important to find a product that really suits their situation, their likes and dislikes. To overcome their challenges, you may find it helpful to consider the following:

- There is a higher chance of success if you can introduce assistive technology when the dementia is still at an early stage, so that the employee can gradually get used to the new way of doing things.
- Aim to find solutions that can be integrated into the employee's normal routine without being noticed or with the minimum disruption. Involve the employee in decisions about which product or solution to use, and take their opinions on board.
- Ask the employee to do a self evaluation of what he feels he is having more difficulty with and what he feels is still working well.
- Ask the employee what types of technology he or she has used in the past, and ask the employee to identify their comfort level with using new or different technology.
- Ask the employee's immediate supervisor for input regarding what is working well for the employee and the areas in which the employee is having problems. The employee and the supervisor need to come to agreement regarding the same, as well as the type of AT and/or other accommodations to be implemented.
- The employee and the supervisor need to come to agreement regarding the abilities and deficits.
- For most employees, having a designated employee "partner" who can assist the employee in learning how to effectively use the technology can be helpful. The partner, considered a 'natural support' should be one who demonstrates some understanding of dementia and mentoring, is patient and has good communication skills. If using this method, periodic evaluation is important.
- With the involvement of the employee, identify several types of technologies to try.
- Initiate a trial of the technology. Make sure the trial period is of sufficient length to give the employee a good opportunity to learn to use it and build it into his or her work routine.
- Frequent ongoing evaluations of a supportive nature are essential when using AT. The employee's immediate supervisor will have to be involved. We recommend reviewing the situation twice monthly during the trial period and if things are going well monthly evaluations should be sufficient.
- At the end of the trial period, evaluate the effectiveness of the technology. Keep in mind that when an employee has early dementia, cognitive abilities can fluctuate throughout the day and also from day to day.
- The effective technology can be continued until it is no longer proving to be effective, at which point a reassessment would be needed and alternate accommodations identified.

Examples of assistive technology for use in task completion and time management

- Computer software can be used to create individualized task sheets.
- Voice recognition software can be utilized for employees with dementia who may have difficulty typing but know what they want to say and can communicate well verbally. This software takes the spoken word and transcribes it into the document.
- Electronic task organizers, much like paper task organizers, can be used for time and task management.
- Voice message organizers can have directions pre-recorded into the timer, and then set to play at designated times.
- Recording devices, such as StepPad, can record step-by-step directions. Devices like this work in the same way as a tape recorder with rewind, play and fast forward features.
- Two way walkie talkies can be used to cue an employee with dementia to begin or complete a task or to check in with the employee to see how they are doing on a specific task.
- Personal pagers with auditory or vibrating alarms can be used to remind an employee with dementia that it is time to begin or complete a task.
- Timers can be utilized with audible signal options to help the employee with dementia manage their time.
- The "Three Event Talking & Recording Clock." device announces remaining time or elapsed time.
- A clock showing the day of the week can help employees who get confused with what day it is.
- Large wall calendars can be helpful for employees with dementia. These can help the employee keep track of the day of the week and specific tasks that need to be completed on specific days.

Some specific things employers should keep in mind when using technology to accommodate people with young onset dementia:

- Each employee is unique. What works for one employee will not necessarily work for another.
- No one product will work in all situations.
- What works today may not work tomorrow. Periodic reviews may be necessary.

For additional information, please contact Rob Gundermann at the Alzheimer's & Dementia Alliance of Wisconsin at 608.232.3408 or toll free at 888.308.6251.

Helpful resources:

The Alzheimer's & Dementia Alliance of Wisconsin
http://www.alzwisc.org
The Wisconsin Alzheimer's Disease Research Center at the University of Wisconsin
http://wcmp.wisc.edu/
Access to Independence, Inc

http://www.accesstoind.org/
WorkSource Wisconsin
http://www.worksourcewi.com/
Your local Aging and Disability Resource Center
http://www.dhs.wisconsin.gov/ltcare/adrc/
Alzheimer's Association
http://www.alz.org
Wisconsin Assistive Technology Resource Center
www.wiatrc.org
WisTech and WisLoan programs
www.dhs.wisconsin.gov/disabilities/wistech

Places to find assistive and adaptive technology:
http://www.agelessdesign.com/
http://www.alzstore.com/
http://www.enablemart.com/

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For further information please contact the Alzheimer's & Dementia Alliance at 608-232-3400 or toll free at 888-308-6251