

Reasonable Accommodation Case Study – Alaska Airlines

Effective Accommodation Strategies

Alaska Airlines was founded in Anchorage in 1932 and expanded to 22 aircraft operating within the state by 1934. In the late 70s, the airline began expansion to the lower Western states and by 1987 had acquired Horizon Air and Jet America bolstering its North South route structure and complementing the seasonal nature of travel to Alaska.

Today Alaska Airlines has grown from a small regional airline to a route system spanning more than 40 cities and three countries. It currently carries more than 12 million customers per year and has consistently earned best airline recognition from magazines such as Travel and Leisure and Condé Nast Traveler.

Disability Services Management Personnel Interviewed: Ms. Donna Egeland, Manager, Workers' Compensation, Disability Accommodations; Ms. Voshte Demmert, Disability Accommodations Supervisor; Ms. Sandy Voigt, Workers' Compensation Specialist

Personnel involved in the Disability Services Management program include the manager who specializes in educational programming to include the Americans with Disabilities Act and managing the Workers' Compensation program, an accommodations specialist, a workers' compensation specialist, and considerable time investment from a Family Medical Leave Act specialist (technically assigned to Employee Benefits). For purposes of workers' compensation coverage, Alaska Airlines is obviously insured in all states. It is self-insured in Washington and Alaska. The company self selects its vocational rehabilitation counselors in providing workers' compensation case management / rehabilitation services in the state of Washington. In Alaska, employees with disability are matched by a random assignment process to vocational service agents. However, Alaska Airlines has hired professional rehabilitation counselors to monitor progress and intervention with the workers' compensation service agents who have been assigned its employees.

Procedurally, an employee who has a disability and desires a disability accommodation receives a formal disability accommodation request form from an accommodations specialist. The specialist reviews a standard checklist to ensure that the necessary medical information is there, that the individual has a qualifying disability, and other informational points needed to provide the necessary accommodation is present. Ongoing contact is maintained with the employee after receipt of the accommodation request. The accommodation specialist meets with the employee and generally a union representation (five unions are represented throughout Alaska Airlines). In a second meeting, a frontline manager or line supervisor is brought in to further discuss accommodation options. It should be noted that the accommodation specialist handles a caseload of 35-40 accommodation requests at any one time. Every accommodation request is reviewed with the Job Accommodation Network (JAN) at the West Virginia Rehabilitation Research and Training Center in order to explore all available options. JAN is funded by the U.S.

Dept. of Labor, Office of Disability Employment Policy. Most requests for accommodations are currently coming from reservations specialists (probably due to postural and ergonomic demands), customer service agents (due to physical demands of baggage transition--although this is decreasing because many physical activities have been assumed by the governmental security agency), and ramp service agents.

It should be noted that once the accommodation request is entered into the database, meetings with supervision and employees are continuous until an accommodation is made or another action needs to be taken. Reassignment is also a possibility and each person requiring reassignment is sent a list of all lateral jobs in the company and requested to check those jobs which they have an interest. Some individuals are sent to Alaska Airline's Career Assessment unit for vocational assessment, this can be outsourced if necessary. Job analyses have been done for each physically demanding job by an external rehabilitation counseling company. Following career assessment, retraining may be an option in areas such as customer service specialist, flight attendant, or reservations. For a worker with disability onset, there is an aggressive effort made to maintain the individual on a job in their own work unit or in the company. If accommodations cannot be made, an individual may go on sick leave, followed by short term disability, in conjunction with an extended medical leave (based on the Railway Labor Act collective bargaining agreement, for a period of 4-10 years). While on medical leave, although not on salary, they maintain their seniority and potential for rehire.

External consultation is quite common, particularly in relation to utilization of an ergonomics specialist. There has also been an effort to provide career mobility for personnel such as reservation agents with blindness. External contractors specializing in blindness have been utilized in order to brainstorm/improve accommodations that would enable upward mobility for individuals with significant sight impairments. Since the accommodations specialist position was created approximately two years ago, people are being referred more efficiently and job site intervention is occurring more rapidly. A significant effort is also being made to positively resolve the status of those remaining on the medical leave list.

Before accommodation offers are made in writing, the employee is informed about the accommodation options being offered. The effort is to maintain clear and open communication with personnel and union representatives. There is a constant effort to both accommodate workers with disabilities while still requiring accountability for the same essential functional demands of the job as with other employees. Claims staffing is done in person or by conference calls to appropriate frontline management representative(s), the accommodations specialist, Family Medical Leave Act expert, and the workers' compensation specialist. There has also been an effort to increase disability accommodation training, workers' compensation procedures, the Family Medical Leave Act, and other relevant topics for supervisory personnel at all Alaska Airlines sites by the manager of the Disability Accommodations Department.

Unique Best Practices

- The creation of the accommodations specialist appears optimal, providing both more immediate intervention and streamlined referral procedures.
- Employees are more empowered by having an accommodations request sheet and appreciate the responsiveness and follow up from the Disability Accommodations unit.
- The use of W.Va. University Job Accommodation Network as a standard of intervention practice on each accommodation case is laudatory, as is detailed documentation of these efforts.
- This unit is very effective given the complex extended medical leave procedures that exist in the airline industry and the fact that in the past, workers with disabilities have gotten lost in the medical leave process for extended time periods. A definitive effort is being made to clarify every individual's viable work status and improve engagement with the company.
- From a policy perspective, there appears to be a concerted effort at Alaska Airlines to be accessible and accommodating, while yet being candid as to the need for basic productivity needs of the company and essential job functions that must be performed. Alaska Airlines received the 2001 Outstanding Employer Award from the International Association of Rehabilitation Professionals (IARP) in recognition of the airline's proactive employment programs for workers injured on the job and with disabilities.

McMahon, B., Wehman, P., Brooke, V., Habeck, R., Green, H., and Fraser, R. (2004). *Business, Disability and Employment: Corporate Models of Success. A Collection of Successful Approaches Reported from 20 Employers.* Richmond: Virginia Commonwealth University, Rehabilitation Research and Training Center on Workplace Supports and Job Retention.