

Job Design for the Hidden Disabled Professional

Daniel R. Kuespert, PhD, CSP

Johns Hopkins University

Baltimore, MD, USA

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Outline



Disabilities are often invisible

Hidden disabilities can pose OSH issues

Choose *adaptation* over *accommodation*

Guidelines for safely adapting chemical jobs



Disabilities can be hidden

Or partly invisible

What's *disabled*?—ADA

A person with

- A physical or mental impairment
- Substantially limiting life activities

A person with a **history** of impairment, or

A person **perceived** as impaired

What's *disabled*?—Practical

A person whose capabilities are different from those you expect of a fully *abled* individual.

What are hidden disabilities?

Situational

Intermittent

Controlled

Completely invisible

People actively hide disabilities

Privacy

Cultural stigma

Fear of discrimination, microaggressions

Self-stigma



Hidden disabilities can
pose OSH issues

Surmountable or insurmountable

Safety issues: sources

From the disability itself

From comorbid conditions

From the effects of treatment

From environmental interactions

Physical

Multiple sclerosis

Risk of dropping reagent bottles

Chondromalacia

Unable to stand long periods or
lift heavy loads

Intellectual

Dyslexia

Can't read labels

Autism

Environmentally sensitive

Psychological

Borderline personality disorder

Anger issues

Bipolar disorder

Medication-related fatigue



Choose ethics

Over “reasonable accommodation”

Right ≠ compliant

Disability is a protected class in the US

Reasonable accommodations required

Protection is limited

Law is inherently reactive

Do what's **right** before what's **compliant**

What is *right* here?

Human rights/Respect for Persons

Everyone has the right to work, to free choice of employment, to just and favourable conditions of work and to protection against unemployment.

UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Art. 23, 1948.

Beneficence/nonmalificience

Persons are treated in an ethical manner not only by respecting their decisions and protecting them from harm, but also by making efforts to secure their well-being.

The Belmont Report, US Dept. HEW, 1979.

Carefully questioning assumptions

Is the key to safe, ethical job design.



Safe adaptation of chemical jobs

Principles (I)

Focus on the job, not any particular person

Do not rely on workers being fully abled

There are multiple solutions to each problem

Principles (II)

Adapt, don't "reasonably accommodate"

Sometimes you have to say **no**

Encourage disclosure, **but don't expect it**

Use a “broad focus”

Think *results*, not *process*.

Frame things *functionally*

Not “Are you dyslexic?”

Better: “Do you need assistance reading this SDS?”

Lesson learned:

Focus on the **results** needed, not **how** they are achieved.



Does that job *really* need to do that?

Are there alternatives?

Lesson learned:
If there are alternatives, why aren't you using them?



Different \neq *wrong*

Does this person really need to do that?

If not, why is it considered part of the job?

If so, can somebody else do it more safely?

Low-vision bench chemist

Needs to: See his work (<10 cm; obvious eye risk)

The “best how”: Work in hood or glove box

Lesson learned:

Insurmountable limitations often aren't.

Adapt, don't "reasonably accommodate"

RAs are employer's choice

Better to work with the disabled person

Don't assume/overestimate effects of disability

Work with the Occ. Health physician too

Some adaptations due to treatment

When to say no

Sometimes, “don’t do that job” is appropriate

Persons with epilepsy shouldn’t use corrosives

Yes, but...

There are workarounds.

And some of them aren’t “reasonable.”

Lesson learned:

Look **carefully** before saying **no**.



Encourage disclosure

Make it psychologically-safe to disclose

How to encourage disclosure

Ask directly

- Communicate what disability is

- Say why you're asking

- Say what you'll do with the information

- Tell them **what's in it for them**

- Provide multiple avenues

Thank them and be discreet

Don't expect disclosure

30% of employees have a disability

A small fraction disclose it

Over 60% of disabilities are invisible

Many experience exclusions like **misjudgement**

“Need to know” approach

Guns don't kill people.
The mentally ill do.
—Ann Coulter



**"I feel fearful of being
around people with mood
disorders."**

37%
Agree



**"People diagnosed with a
mood disorder could just
'snap out of it' if they tried."**

27%
Agree

Conclusion

Lots of people have hidden disabilities

These disabilities can have OSH implications

Choose right over mere compliance

Adapt the job, don't just "accommodate"

Encourage disclosure, but don't expect it

Thank you for **listening!**

Daniel R. Kuespert, PhD, CSP
Laboratory Safety Advocate
Johns Hopkins University
3400 N Charles St, Ames Hall 241
Baltimore, MD 21218
410-516-5525 vox
dkuespert@jhu.edu or dkuespert@pm.me



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