Job Design for the Hidden Disabled Professional

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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.

Beneficience/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.

Carefully questioning assumptions

Is the key to safe, ethical job design.
Safe adaptation of chemical jobs
Principles

Focus on the job, not any particular person
Do not rely on workers being fully abled
There are multiple solutions to each problem
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 ≠ 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

“People diagnosed with a mood disorder could just ‘snap out of it’ if they tried.”
27% Agree

“I feel fearful of being around people with mood disorders.”
37% Agree

The Harris Poll/National Alliance on Mental Illness, Mood Disorder Survey, June 2021.
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!

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