

SG ENABLE ONLINE HRM SERIES FOR EMPLOYERS

CAREER ADVANCEMENT & RETENTION OF EMPLOYEES WITH DISABILITIES

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1) INTRODUCTION



This guide assists employers and supervisors to plan for the career advancement and retention of employees with disabilities in their organisations.

Advancement relates to several aspects. Firstly, it considers the stereotypes and barriers employees with disabilities face when trying to progress within an organisation and how these issues can be addressed. Secondly, it suggests that employees with disabilities ought to be given fair and equitable opportunities to further develop their skills and progress in their careers, along with equitable compensation and benefits. Lastly, it addresses the role of supervisors and how they can help in the career planning and professional advancement of employees with disabilities.

Retention helps organisations look into accommodating employees with acquired disabilities. If organisations do not have existing policies on disclosure of disabilities or return-to-work policies for employees with acquired disabilities, they may consider providing for these inclusions. Acquired disabilities refer to those acquired as a result of an accident or illness. Some examples of acquired disabilities include permanent damage to vision, hearing, physical or cognitive ability.

Providing Equitable Opportunities for Progression

After organisations have hired and integrated employees with disabilities, they may proceed to look into professional advancement of their employees and opportunities for career progression. In a report on employee intentions conducted in 2015 by Singapore-based Michael Page¹, it was found that respondents viewed growth opportunities as an important factor in retention, even over factors such as salary increment.

In a study by the Diversity & Inclusion in Asia Network (DIAN)², 61% of company representatives stated that not all people have equal opportunities to progress in their career, and 68% believe that unconscious bias does or might exist within their company's talent management processes. The lack of equal opportunities and presence of unconscious bias would also affect employees with disabilities.

Therefore, it is crucial for organisations to look into growth opportunities and career advancement for all employees, including employees with disabilities. By comparing the career progression of employees with disabilities with their peers without disabilities, organisations can observe if there is any differences which may be due to stereotypes or biases. With an awareness of these biases, organisations can more objectively assess the abilities of employees and determine if they are able to take on higher level or additional job roles.

Importance of Employee Retention

Another aspect that companies may want to look into is retention. Employee turnover is costly and includes components such as hiring, on-boarding, training as well as learning and development³. There are also other hidden costs involved, such as an increased workload for other team members when the position is vacant.

Retention also looks into how organisations re-integrate employees with acquired disabilities. While employers may be unsure or have concerns as to how they can ease the transition process for such employees to return to work, it is important for organisations to have a support structure in place. With an ageing population, the likelihood of working with employees with acquired disabilities is likely to increase. Therefore, organisations may want to consider incorporating organisational policies relating to disability disclosure and return-to-work for employees with disabilities.

This guide highlights and discusses the factors affecting the advancement and retention of employees with disabilities as well as provides suggestions to address these concerns.



STEREOTYPES AND APPROACHES IN ADDRESSING THEM

2) STEREOTYPES AND APPROACHES IN ADDRESSING THEM

Stereotypes that Limit Equitable Opportunities

Labelling or stereotyping may lead to bias and unfair judgment of employees' performance⁴. Like their peers without disabilities, persons with disabilities are unique and have different strengths and weaknesses.

A 2009 US research study on Workplace Disparities and Corporate Culture⁵ found that employees with disabilities were paid less and held less desirable jobs than their peers without disabilities. Employees with disabilities are often found in entry-level or unskilled jobs with low earning potential. Often, this results from assumptions about the skills and productivity of persons with disabilities, and a belief that they may be unable to do certain tasks. These assumptions may arise due to a lack of understanding or exposure to disability, which in turn limits the chances of career advancement or work experience opportunities for employees with disabilities.

Employers may hold a stereotype that certain types of jobs are considered most appropriate for people with certain types of disabilities. For example, in many countries, people who have visual impairment were channelled into jobs such as telephone operators. While these jobs may present excellent and appropriate job opportunities, this does not mean that everyone with a visual disability would be adept at it or be interested in the job. Persons with disabilities have career aspirations and should not be limited to specific job types. The consideration of candidates for job opportunities should be based on their interests, and demonstrated competencies and abilities, instead of perceived limitations. Stereotyping not only impedes persons with disabilities from realising their potential but it also limits talent optimisation within the organisation.



Possible Approaches in Addressing Stereotypes

Disability Inclusiveness Training for Supervisors and Co-Workers

To better prepare staff for working with employees with disabilities, organisations may consider sending relevant staff, such as human resource managers, supervisors and co-workers to attend disability inclusiveness training workshops. Such training would help supervisors and staff gain a better understanding of different types of disability and the corresponding etiquette or ways of interacting with employees with disabilities. This would also help employers in their consideration process for the allocation of job responsibilities to employees with disabilities.

SG Enable conducts the "Introduction to Disability Management" workshop for employers. This workshop offers a basic understanding of disability etiquette and practical tips for integrating persons with disabilities into the workplace. For more information, please click here.

Establishing Developmental Opportunities for Employees with Disabilities

Another way for organisations to address stereotypes would be to involve the employees with disabilities in discussions and feedback sessions about their longer-term employment and career goals. Organisations could check whether employees are coping well with their work and if they can achieve the work objectives. This would allow employers to better understand the developmental areas the employees with disabilities are looking for and align their career advancement plans accordingly. By providing clarity on work objectives and deliverables, both parties would be able to agree on the key performance indicators and goals.

Ideally, the career development focus areas of employees with disabilities should correspond with the identified longer-term employment and career objectives. This means that supervisors and employers should preferably be exploring with employees on how they can become equipped with the necessary skillsets to move to their next level of job responsibilities. As with other employees, organisations should consider sending their employees with disabilities to attend professional training courses and provide them with mentoring, exposure or even informal training. Through the discussions and feedback sessions, employers would be able to objectively assess the capabilities and potential of the employees, while employees would have the assurance that they are being provided with developmental opportunities.



BARRIERS FACED BY EMPLOYEES WITH DISABILITIES AND APPROACHES IN ADDRESSING THEM

3) BARRIERS FACED BY EMPLOYEES WITH DISABILITIES AND APPROACHES IN ADDRESSING THEM

Disabilities could range from mild to moderate in severity. This means that even for different individuals with the same disability type, they may face different challenges or barriers. Some barriers such as physical barriers could be identified more easily. Others are less obvious and may require a more deliberative and nuanced effort to overcome them. The following paragraphs illustrate a range of barriers.

Self-Limiting Behaviors

Employees with disabilities may have self-limiting behaviors, such as lack of confidence, resistance to change or feelings of inadequacies. This may be due to them having fewer prior opportunities that build self-confidence. They may also feel limited by the perceptions that others have of them, which may result in self-doubt. When offered career advancement opportunities, employees with disabilities may be resistant towards taking on additional or greater job responsibilities due to their uncertainty in their abilities.

Communication Barriers

Employees with disabilities may choose to remain silent about difficulties faced at work as they may feel doing so would result in negative perceptions of their capabilities. As a result, supervisors may not be aware that the employees are having problems at work.

Employees with hearing impairment, intellectual disabilities or autism spectrum disorder may find it more difficult to communicate with their supervisors or co-workers. For employees with disabilities who are non-verbal, colleagues may find it challenging to interact with them and would have to find alternative ways to communicate effectively. This barrier in communication may also result in the lack of team inclusion, with employees with disabilities being excluded from social gatherings or informal training opportunities from co-workers.

Barriers In Accessing Information

Access to information may also be a barrier for employees with disabilities.



Employees with Visual Impairment

Employees with complete vision loss and who use screen reader software require high readability and good formatting of information. Readability, in this context, refers to the presence of alternative text to explain visual representations such as pictures and graphs, or the content structure in mediums such as websites, which help the screen reader software make sense of the information.





Employees with Hearing Impairment

Employees with hearing impairment may not be able to fully capture all of the discussion pointers raised during presentations and meetings. When using multimedia content like video clips, they may not be able to fully understand the context or information within the videos if there is no closed captioning.

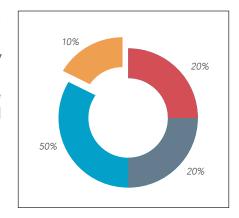


Closed captioning displays the audio portion of a television programme, video, movie or computer presentation as text on the screen.



Employees with Intellectual Disabilities and Autism Spectrum Disorder

Employees with intellectual disabilities or autism spectrum disorder may have difficulties in absorbing large amount of information. They may find it easier to absorb the information if it is broken up and represented in other visual forms like infographics, pictorial representations or simplified diagrams.



Q ENABLING FACT

More details on how information can be made accessible for persons with disabilities can be found in our Assistive Technology and e-Accessibility Guide.

Transitional Barriers

Acquired disabilities may affect the senses, dexterity, mobility, cognition or other functions. As such, employees with acquired disabilities may have difficulties fulfilling job functions that they were performing previously. In addition to having to cope with the changes in lifestyle, such as having to use mobility aids, they may also have difficulties managing the psychological and emotional impact of acquiring a disability.

With an ageing population, employers will likely see an increase in the number of employees with acquired disabilities. Employers would have to better prepare themselves to work with employees in overcoming these transitional barriers.

Possible Approaches in Addressing Barriers



For employees who are facing issues such as self-limiting behaviors or transitional barriers, employer may consider sending them for suitable training courses to equip them with the necessary skillsets to perform the job, or for career advancement. Employees with disabilities should be given the same training and development opportunities as their peers without disabilities.

Some employees with disabilities would require accommodations during training. These accommodations may include the provision of training in alternative formats, e.g. notes printed with bigger font size for employees with low vision, or providing a sign language interpreter for employees with hearing impairment. Employers may check with training providers if they are able to provide such accommodations.



Natural support refers to persons within the organisation who provide assistance, feedback, contact or companionship to employees with disabilities. Organisations could look to build natural support by assigning buddies to employees with disabilities. In addition, the organisation could look into including employees with disabilities in company activities such as team bonding, celebratory events and informal employee gatherings.



Another form of natural support is to provide mentoring or mentorship opportunities. To help employees with disabilities gain confidence and understand the skillsets required for progression, organisations may assign them mentors who are experienced to provide guidance. Through the sharing of resources and expertise, mentors can help employees with disabilities gain different perspectives and help them progress towards their career goals.

Employees with acquired disabilities returning to work may have difficulties adjusting to new roles due to differences in job scope, processes and working styles of their new team members. A mentor could help in overcoming some of these transitional barriers by providing support and encouragement. Mentors should be aware of organisational dynamics and structure, and to provide coaching in aspects ranging from networking and management skills to the development of competencies or technical knowledge.

When assigning mentors, it is important to verify if both the mentors and mentees are aware of their roles and commitment. At the same time, it is also good to assess their comfort level with each other. It may be useful to equip mentors with disability awareness knowledge before assigning them to employees with disabilities. Organisations can also consider engaging experienced employees with disabilities to be mentors to new employees with disabilities.



Organisations can enlist the help of job coaches or employment support specialists to support employees with disabilities. Job coaches can support employees who are learning about the new job, taking on new tasks or going through job redesign. The job coaches will be able to assess employees' capabilities, identify challenges they face and develop plans to overcome such challenges.

A transitional plan for employees with disabilities may include providing training opportunities or having a gradual increase in workload that will allow them to adjust and cope. In addition, the job coach will also be able to explore strategies to help the employee learn new job tasks and better interact with co-workers to ensure that the employee is able to perform independently before gradually reducing job support.

Q ENABLING FACT

For more information regarding job placement and job support services, please email employment@sgenable.sg.



THE ROLE OF THE SUPERVISOR

4) THE ROLE OF THE SUPERVISOR



Understanding the Role of the Supervisor

Studies have shown that the extent to which employees are committed to the organisation and put effort into their jobs is dependent on how they are viewed by their supervisors and managers. An organisation that is committed to making disability inclusion a priority is likely to have a much more positive impact on the experiences of its employees with disabilities. As such, in addition to explaining the rationale for ensuring that inclusiveness is supported at all levels of the organisation, supervisors must be aligned to those inclusion values as well.

Supervisors need to be able to understand and assess the needs of employees with disabilities, such as requests for accommodations that would help them perform their job roles better. In addition, they should be aware of the presence of bias in the performance management and evaluation process and seek to be equitable and fair in their assessment of their employees.

To ensure supervisors support inclusive practices, organisations should encourage supervisors by training and rewarding them for effectively modelling appropriate behaviour towards employees with disabilities. Supervisors should be recognised for their efforts in being inclusive and for empowering and encouraging employees with disabilities to take on growth opportunities.



Communicating Effectively with Staff

In a study conducted by Cornell University in 2013, it was found that employees with disabilities are at least 60% more likely to disclose their disability to their supervisor than to the Human Resource (HR) department. Supervisors who maintain open communications will make it easier for staff to share issues and concerns. Supervisors may wish to periodically check in with employees with disabilities to ensure that their needs and requests for accommodations are met. It is important for the supervisor to communicate to team members that accommodations are not special privileges. Instead, accommodations such as flexi-work hours are available to all employees.





Setting Performance Goals and Incorporating Recognition

In setting performance goals for employees with disabilities, supervisors may want to discuss the specific tasks and objectives to be achieved. Such goals would help employees have a better understanding of what they need to accomplish, and supervisors can be assured that goals are aligned with organisational priorities. At the same time, employees should be given the opportunity to voice their concerns.

Supervisors can also recognise the efforts of employees in promoting inclusive practices such as co-workers who volunteer to be a buddy or mentor of employees with disabilities. This will ensure recognition for the contributions of co-workers and that the organisation is able to adapt its culture and practices to become more supportive and inclusive.





Career Advancement and Management of Expectations

It is important for the supervisor to discuss with the employees with disabilities their progress in their work, job expectations and career aspirations. By doing so, supervisors are able to better understand the career path the employees aspire towards. This would then allow supervisors to identify training and developmental opportunities that would aid in the progression of the staff. If there are areas that the employee needs to work on, the supervisor could also highlight these areas and offer guidance on how the employee can improve on these areas.

For employees with acquired disabilities, their career aspirations or direction may deviate from their earlier plans. The expectations of the employee with acquired disabilities can be a delicate issue that the supervisor has to manage sensitively. Supervisors can discuss with the employee to examine whether specific job roles are suitable as well as identify opportunities for career advancement. To support any transitions such as job reassignment or redesign, having a short job trial for the employee may be beneficial for them to better understand the job nature. At the same time, supervisors will be able to objectively assess their suitability for the role and whether they can work out plans to improve their performance.



CONSIDERATIONS IN PERFORMANCE MANAGEMENT FOR EMPLOYEES WITH DISABILITIES

5) CONSIDERATIONS IN PERFORMANCE MANAGEMENT FOR EMPLOYEES WITH DISABILITIES



Performance Standards And Accommodations

Understanding performance standards allows employees to understand the specific expectations for their job role as well as the requirements of the corresponding competencies and actions. Employers should apply the same quantitative and qualitative performance standards to all workers in evaluating employee effectiveness⁹.

Employers may want to look into providing reasonable accommodations if necessary for employees to achieve the required performance standard¹⁰. For example, an employee without disability may request flexi-time^{11,12} in order to meet family commitments. Similarly, employees with disabilities may require accommodations in order to perform on an equitable basis as others. An employee with a disability may need the same accommodation for flexi-time to address the need to travel during non-peak hours on public transportation. By providing accommodations, the productivity of all employees in the organisation could be enhanced.



Performance Ratings and Evaluation

Performance ratings measure the productivity of the employees and benchmarking is a basis of comparing their performance to a norm. Some employers may find this difficult, particularly if employees with disabilities have job roles that have been redesigned. However, the process of ensuring comparability across redesigned job roles is similar to how different roles are being benchmarked across different departments.

The presence of bias can affect the performance ratings and supervisors' evaluation of employees with disabilities. Supervisors have to be aware of both positive and negative bias. Negative bias, such as perceived limitations about certain disability types, may result in employees with disabilities being deemed as suitable only for specific job roles. On the other hand, there have been research studies showing that employees with disabilities may receive equal or higher ratings on job performance, productivity and dependability as opposed to co-workers when it is not deserved. The research suggested that employers may have a tendency to inflate the performance scores of employees with disabilities. Supervisors need to be aware of this possible tendency and manage it appropriately. A possible way to ensure objectivity would be to look at whether a different performance rating would be accorded if the work were to be done by a co-worker without disability.

If an employee with acquired disabilities is unable to perform certain job tasks, supervisors should review the job scope with the employee. This would allow the supervisor to better understand how job redesign can be conducted or if there are any accommodations that would allow the employee with acquired disabilities to perform the job at an optimal level. At the same time, supervisors should also bear in mind that accommodations should not impact the performance ratings of employees, including employees with disabilities.



Disability Disclosure

Policies on disclosure of disabilities should be similar to other policies within the organisation, such as illness disclosure¹³. Employees and supervisors should be made aware of the process and how the organisation can assist both the supervisors and employees. Having clarity on disability disclosure policies will also help organisations retain employees, as employees will have a better idea of what to expect from the organisation in certain situations. The organisation can assure employees that the information disclosed will be kept confidential and work together with the employee on identifying the next steps after disclosure. Some of these next steps could include evaluating the suitability of the existing job role with the employee, or working on a transition plan with the employee to look into possible changes in job roles or scope.



Fair and Equitable Opportunities

Employees should be given equitable access to job advancement. As such, the performance management of all employees should be fair and equitable. The assessment of employees with disabilities for matters pertaining to applications for transfers or promotions should be based on the competencies the employees have displayed along with their suitability for the role. If they are moving on to new job roles, their current supervisors can share about their understanding of the employee, highlighting the strengths and motivations of the employee to their new supervisor. Supervisors should be encouraged to be fair and open minded in their appraisal of employees with disabilities.

Fair and equitable opportunities will lead to an inclusive workplace, allowing employees to see themselves as valued members in the organisation.



COMPENSATION AND BENEFITS

6) COMPENSATION AND BENEFITS

The principle of fairness should also apply to the compensation and benefits of employees with disabilities. If they are performing the same job tasks, employees with disabilities should receive the same compensation and benefits as their peers. Organisations can make use of existing compensation data to examine whether there is bias in salary structures by conducting reviews for pay in similar position categories.

Compensation

One approach organisations can adopt in addressing pay equities would be to make use of benchmarking. Benchmarking allows for calibration of employees' performance to ensure compensation commensurates with performance and job role/size. Benchmarking could be done internally or externally.

External Benchmarking

Organisations can:

- ✓ Look into salary benchmarks of similar companies within the market
- ✓ Obtain data from reports collated by HR companies on compensation and benefits
- ✓ Aggregate these findings and determine whether the organisation's compensation policy is in line with the market level
- ✓ Analyse the desired market positioning of the organisation and whether the compensation structure is aligned with this positioning
- ✓ Look into adjusting compensation packages in accordance to the organisation's pay philosophy and salary scale benchmarks

Internal Benchmarking

If external benchmarks are unavailable or inapplicable for the given job role, organisations can:

- ✓ Examine the compensation of employees with disabilities relative to their peers in similar positions or job roles
- ✓ Determine the level of compensation based on the specific job roles or descriptions
- ✓ Look into whether compensation is structured well enough to incentivise growth
- Determine how compensation can be structured in future to competitively retain employees

Benefits

Employees with disabilities should be accorded benefits that their peers without disabilities have access to (e.g. health care coverage, insurance and flexible working arrangements). Organisations may have to check with their insurance companies on whether employees with disabilities are included with equitable benefits within the organisation's insurance policies.

Q ENABLING FACT

To find out more about compensation and benefits for employees with disabilities, employers can register for the Career Advancement & Retention Workshop that SG Enable conducts for employers. Please email capabilitydevelopment@sgenable.sg.





SUPPORTING EMPLOYEES WITH ACQUIRED DISABILITIES

7) SUPPORTING EMPLOYEES WITH ACQUIRED DISABILITIES

Return-to-Work Policies

It is important for organisations to have a return-to-work policy for employees with acquired disabilities as this allows for early intervention and aids the employees in their reintegration into the workplace¹⁴. In some instances, employees may not be suitable for their previous job roles due to physical limitations like strength and stamina. Other employees may be able to return to their previous jobs but may require a longer adjustment period to adapt gradually to the rigour and intensity of the workload.

There are various ways organisations can help employees with acquired disabilities to adapt to their job roles:

- Allow for an adjustment period in the workload
- Allow for flexible working hours or part-time work initially before transiting into full time employment
- Redesign the job to allow for reassignment, depending on the needs of the employees

For employees with acquired disabilities who are able to perform the job role but find it difficult to cope with the workload, an adjustment period could be implemented. This adjustment period allows them to get accustomed to the workload, while looking at the need for accommodations or effectiveness of existing accommodations. Employees can also review their performance with supervisors to determine if the length of the adjustment period is appropriate and whether they are able to perform the job tasks required. Similarly, for employees who are able to perform the job roles but unable to take the working hours, organisations can look into flexible or part-time working arrangements for them. This will help them to improve on their work stamina, before the number of hours can be gradually increased to full-time.

If employees are unable to perform the job role they were holding previously, job redesign could be done to replace the tasks they have difficulty with or to assign them to a new role. The job redesign can be in the form of replacing certain tasks that may be difficult for the employee, e.g. replacing physically demanding tasks with administrative tasks. Alternatively, employers could look into existing job vacancies and discuss with the employee to determine the best job fit. If further assistance is required, employers may also wish to engage the help of job coaches to facilitate job redesign and assist with integration of the employees into the new job roles or tasks.

Employers can take a proactive approach in maintaining open communication with employees with acquired disabilities. Training or accommodation may be required to help them perform the job well.

Benefits of Having Effective Return-to-Work Policies

Having effective return-to-work policies will ensure that employees can have open discussions with the supervisors or other relevant parties within the organisation about their situation and determine whether a change in job role is necessary. If a change in job role is required, organisations can look at existing vacancies or redesigning job roles so as to tap on the skillsets and abilities of the employees with disabilities.

Return to work policies can also be cost effective for the organisation since it often costs less to train or redesign a job for an existing employee than hiring and training a new employee. Other benefits include improving employee engagement and morale, which may lead to increased productivity and reduced absenteeism. All employees will feel more assured that, should injuries or accidents befall them, their organisations have policies and strategies to help them return to work.



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CONCLUSION

When organisations hire and work with employees with disabilities in career advancement and retention, considerations include:

- Identifying and addressing preconceived notions or stereotypes towards disability
- Providing developmental opportunities within the organisation such as trainings, mentorship and job rotation
- Practising fairness in performance standards, ratings and compensation and benefits
- Having disability disclosure and return-to-work policies

Inclusiveness is a progressive journey for organisations. It includes developing employees with disabilities to advance and thrive in their careers which will further benefit the organisation.

To help employers and organisations make that journey, SG Enable has rolled out a Workplace Disability Inclusive Index that allows employers to conduct a self-assessment of their organisational policies and practices towards inclusive hiring of employees with disabilities. It helps employers identify areas for improvement while providing practical tips and useful resources for employers.

QENABLING FACT

For more information about the Workplace Disability Inclusive Index, please visit http://employment.sgenable.sg/employers/get-assessed/.

SG Enable also has a series of workshops to help employers build capabilities.

For more in depth information, you may wish to attend SG Enable High Impact Retention & Employment (HIRE) Workshop series.

Recruitment & Hiring of Persons with Disabilities Career
Advancement
& Retention of
Persons with
Disabilities

Job Accommodation & Workplace Accessibility Enhancing
Employment
through
Assistive
Technology &
e-Accessibility

Introduction to Disability Management

Please refer to

http://employment.sgenable.sg/training/training-programmes/ for the training courses for different stakeholders and https://employment.sgenable.sg/employers/get-trained/ for more information on employers training.

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