



# ON THE JOB

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## **A. INTRODUCTION**

You've passed the test! Now you have a job. When that happens, the focus of your life will change. You are no longer faced with the problems of finding a job. Now you are faced with the questions 1) how can I advance in my chosen career and 2] how can I prevent or minimize problems in the workplace which might cost me the job I worked so hard to get? These are issues for every person in the workforce and every individual with disabilities, but they are particularly challenging for an individual with attention deficit disorder or a specific learning disability, since these impairments often present problems in social adaptability, as well as in doing certain job tasks, and thus make the workplace that much more challenging.

This article is divided into two parts: getting ahead while on the job and how to handle trouble when it starts.

## **B. GETTING AHEAD**

### **1. ADVANCEMENT ISSUES**

Job advancement is challenging for everyone but the challenge is particularly difficult for people with disabilities. Today's trends, such as lessening the number of middle managers, the devaluation of loyalty, and downsizing, make advancement difficult for everyone. It is wise to start thinking about promotion potential when you interview for or accept the job.

During the discussion, find a way to mention your interest in the future. You may want to ask, "Where does this job lead?" and "What happened to the person who held this position?"

If it is a generic position within the company, ask, "What jobs do the people in this position do after five years?" This shows the employer that you intend to stay with the company and may break the stereotype that a person with a disability wants to stay in the same job forever.

Assess your future boss. If he or she appears to be moving up, you may move up with your manager. Ask them how they got to where they are today.

When discussing reasonable accommodation, make every effort to keep all of the responsibilities that are part of the job, particularly those that will help you advance.

For example, a manager may hire a person with a learning disability and remove team management elements from the position, because he or she believes a person with this disability has social skills deficits. Supervision and leadership lead to advancement. For this reason, if you have disclosed your disability, ask the manager to describe the accommodations the firm will provide and assure that they will not hamper your advancement in the future.

## 2. BE AN EXCELLENT EMPLOYEE

Once you are hired, you need to be an excellent employee. Most successful people with disabilities report that they are treated in a manner similar to that of other minorities. It is necessary for them to be significantly better than their peers in order to keep their jobs. Advancement, however, requires more than doing a good job.

Volunteer to perform work that expands your responsibilities. If something needs to be done that is a higher level than your present job, do it even if it takes extra time. Network within the company to become aware of needs and openings as they arise. Be sure that your boss and top management are aware of your activities. This can be achieved through discussions and memos.

Remember, appearing to do a good job is as important as actually doing a good job. The impression that you are making is as important as what you are actually doing.

Unfortunately, disabilities can get in the way of your supervisor seeing you for what you are. Therefore, you may need to make some extra effort to have your competence recognized.

Conversely, others may have such low expectations, that everything you do well is considered "amazing." You will need to do everything possible to counteract this prejudice.

One way to develop a positive image is to gain visibility outside the company. Consider joining a professional association, networking with colleagues, volunteering for projects, writing articles and running for office within an organization.

Richard Pimentel, senior vice president, Windmills Training Group, who has trained thousands of employers regarding the hiring and recruiting of people with disabilities, points out that supervisors are often hesitant to give feedback to people with disabilities.

"Suppose two employees are painting widgets," he suggests. "Instead of painting them red, they paint them yellow. Now, Mary is non-disabled and Tom is blind. So, the boss goes to Mary and says, 'Hey, Mary, you're painting the widgets the wrong color! Paint them red. RED. You got that?'

"But, why is Tom painting the widgets yellow? Because he's disabled. The boss is afraid to tell Tom to paint the widgets red. So, he tells everyone else how incompetent Tom is and that disabled people won't work out."

To counteract this problem, Pimentel says that people with disabilities need to request effective reality checks. "Make an appointment with your boss," he advises. "Ask him or her how you are doing. Ask, 'How is my production? How can I improve? How can I get along better with you?'" Listen to the response and act on the advice.

After a year or more on the job, Pimentel recommends making a plan with your supervisor for promotion. He suggests that you say, "I'm interested in a promotion. What is your understanding of what's possible? What do I need to do? Can you introduce me to people?"

You and your supervisor can modify your job to give you the experience you need for promotion. You will have to ask your supervisor about the promotion, perhaps because someone told them when you were hired that you would stay where you are. You can be promoted, but it's a lot of work.

### 3. UP THE LADDER

Here are some things you can do at the entry level which can help with promotion.

- **Cultivate a positive self-image.** Many people with disabilities feel "grateful to have a job." Remember that your employer should be happy to have you on the job.

- **Avoid unrealistic expectations.** Some people with disabilities have experienced unrealistic positive feedback throughout childhood in the special education system. Unrealistic expectations can not be sustained in most jobs. Getting a job is exciting. But some people with disabilities (particularly attention deficit disorder) may have a tendency

to entertain unrealistic expectations. A security guard may see himself as doing the work of "Dirty Harry." A paralegal may see herself as a Supreme Court Justice in the making. Unrealistic expectations of these types frequently lead to arrogance and a feeling that the job is a dead end, when a more balanced perspective would lead to the conclusion that the work is interesting and rewarding in itself.

- **Avoid arrogance.** Unrealistic expectations can lead to a poor attitude in another way. Some individuals with learning disabilities and attention deficit disorder accept jobs alongside people with lesser educational backgrounds. If you feel that you are better than others on your job or that your job is below you, you should 1] remind yourself that all work is valuable and 2] monitor your behavior so that any initial negative feelings you may have do not show.

- **Your manager is not your parent.** Remember that managers are managers, not parents or teachers. They are willing to be helpful but do not have any responsibility for your personal life. They will not necessarily compliment you for a job well done. They frequently have limited time to teach you.

- **Extra hours can help you advance.** Extra hours can help you advance, if you spend the extra time fulfilling duties that are at a higher level than your current job. Many successful individuals with learning disabilities and/or attention deficit disorder report that long hours were a common experience for them.

- **Your advancement is important.** Your work towards a promotion helps all employees with learning disabilities and attention deficit disorder.

- **You are engaged in a learning process.** The learning process you engage in while working towards a promotion is as important as receiving the promotion. Keeping this in mind enables you to relax about seeking a promotion. People who have spent their childhoods under strong stress often become overly determined and undermine their own progress.

- **The challenge of success.** People with disabilities have a particularly difficult time receiving promotions. However, through choosing a job with the potential for advancement, assuring that reasonable accommodation does not remove challenges, working hard, being visible, communicating well with the supervisor and others on the job, and developing self-confidence, it is still possible to climb the ladder of success.

- **Select a positive role model.** As you move up, the techniques of success change. It is essential to study the expected behaviors of the top people and emulate them. Some of the above advice will always be helpful, but other parts may change.

- **Don't forget self-employment.** Some individuals (with or without disabilities and with or without accommodations) are not most highly productive working for other people. If advancement is denied you, and you have fairly considered the strategies suggested in this book, plus others you have developed for yourself, it may be that self-employment is the key to success. If you reach this conclusion, this century appears to have been made for you. The revolution in information technology and has made possible an entirely new approach to working. Large organizations are hiring less people and subcontracting out tasks. Many people operate successful and profitable service businesses from their homes. Clerical assistance is often provided by others who work out of their homes and are linked by telephone, fax machine and modem. The day of the rugged individualist has been re-invented!

### **C. IF THERE'S TROUBLE**

This is a book about success in the work place, and so it seems almost out of place to talk about trouble - what might go wrong. But the hard fact is that at some time or other virtually every individual, with or without a disability, will experience a set-back in his or her career, whether it is a failure to obtain a desired promotion, a demotion, lay-off, or termination. How you handle a set-back can be more important than how you handle success.

This issue can be particularly important for individuals with learning disabilities and attention deficit disorder, because those disabilities are often accompanied by deficits in socialization which make job trouble harder to foresee, more startling when it occurs, and more challenging to the individual's self-esteem than it would be for others who do not have these disabilities.

One story will serve as an example. PB was a writer for a newspaper in a major city. His writing skills were excellent, but he also was an individual with attention deficit disorder. As a result of his impairment, he frequently forgot the security pass he was required to display when entering his firm's building on the weekends. There were a number of complaints about his failure to display the pass. Matters came to a head one weekend. Confronted with an important deadline, PB rushed to work, again forgetting his pass. He was absorbed in the process of mentally composing his story as he rushed through the lobby of his building and "blew past" the security desk without, of course, displaying his pass. The guard, whom PB knew by sight (and who knew PB by sight) refused to allow him entry. Startled, PB said: "You know who I am, and I'm in a hurry - I've got a deadline." When the guard continued to refuse, PB insulted him, boarded the elevator and went to his office to work on his story. The guard, by this time furious at PB's insults, called his superiors who contacted PB's employer. The

employer, confronted with repeated prior security breaches, and a (by now) inflammatory incident, fired PB on the spot. Outraged, PB explained: "But I was only doing my job!." In PB's mind, the security incidents were like so many speeding tickets - unfortunate, but unrelated to his work. To the employer, they were breaches of company rules which required that employees - in addition to performing their functions- must also be "good citizens" - i.e. punctual, courteous, and orderly in their workplace behavior.

This case need never have happened. If PB had taken a broader view of his duties, and considered compliance with security procedures as part of his job, he would have been as conscientious about carrying his pass and cooperating with the security procedures as he was about his deadlines. He might have obtained as an accommodation, the employer's agreement that he undertake his weekend work at home or that he have a special arrangement with security personnel - the right to obtain a temporary visitor's security pass for gaining entry to the building in place of returning to his home to get his regularly issued pass, for example. Today, security rules are extremely important because of the threat of terrorism.

This article discusses **damage control** - what you should do to avoid trouble or to minimize trouble once it erupts. If PB had politely gone home to get his pass, he might have been chewed out for being late and he might even have endangered his deadline, but the odds are that he would not have been fired. His employer would still have the services of a top-notch writer; he would still be employed by that newspaper.

We are basing the following recommendations on the optimistic premise that individuals (both employers and employees) acting in good faith can solve most problems through honest and open discussion. That premise is not universally a valid one. Not every employee has the self-knowledge, self-discipline and drive to handle serious strains on the working relationship. Not every employer will have the insight, compassion and commitment to individuals with disabilities to make a potentially difficult situation better. As a result, many employment relationships go beyond the point of no return before they can be salvaged. When that happens, the employee has little choice but to rethink his or her job strategies, re-evaluate his strengths and weaknesses, locate another job, or (in appropriate cases) assert his or her legal rights. However, not all problems need to become insoluble. Here are some thoughts on strategies that might prove helpful.

## 1. SOCIAL REQUIREMENTS OF JOBS

Most people, when they think of job "requirements" consider only the academic qualifications, required on-the-job experience, and competence in the work itself required of the employee. However, a job also has "silent" requirements - ones that "go without saying" to most of us. The

"silent requirements" of jobs include 1] cooperativeness in the work situation, both with fellow employees and supervisors 2] compliance with "good citizenship" rules, e.g. being on time; no unauthorized absences; no smoking, etc. and 3] a record of "off the job conduct" which is reasonably free from convictions for offenses whose commission may affect job performance. Moreover, these "silent requirements" become increasingly important as the seniority and pay of the positions increase.

## 2. SIGNS OF TROUBLE

There's an excellent cartoon about a trial you should consider. The Judge has turned to the jury and has asked whether the jury has reached a verdict. 'The jury Foreman (who is tying a hangman's knot) replies that it has. The humor lies in the fact that the Foreman's answer is unnecessary. He has made it clear through his conduct that 1] a decision has been reached and 2] it is a guilty verdict.

Some signs of trouble in the workplace are almost as obvious. Others are subtle. Here are some of them.

- Negative Comments From Co-Workers and Supervisors

Trouble can begin with negative comments from co-workers and supervisors. Snide or sarcastic comments about lateness, disorganization or sloppiness in your work can be evidence of a growing perception that your job performance is not "up to the company's standards." If you do not understand a comment, write it down. For example, one boss said to an employee with learning disabilities, "Finally, you made it here on time. I'm glad to see you." The employee was lucky. A co-worker explained, "He's trying to tell you not to be late again." If these perceptions have any basis in fact, and the comments are repeated, it may be time for you to meet with your supervisor and request an informal review of your job performance to date. This technique can defuse a situation before it becomes ugly.

- Informal "Chats" About "Good Citizenship"

Frequently, a decision to withhold pay increases, deny promotion or fire someone is arrived at over a period of time. When things are going wrong, sometimes, a supervisor will have a "chat" with an employee about the standards of performance required by the company. Frequently the supervisor is not comfortable with a direct statement such as, "You're frequently late, and I'm going to have to do something about it." Such confrontations may trigger responses such as, "It's not my fault. It's all the traffic I have to go through." As a result, a supervisor's first approach to the problem may be indirect, in the hopes that you will "get the hint." Discussions of this type might include statements like, "We here at X Corp. pride ourselves on being on time and ready for work." If you have such a conversation, don't assume that the supervisor is simply passing on information about company attitudes for no reason. He or she is either 1] correct in the perception that your lateness has been a problem or 2]

incorrect. In either event, the supervisor's concerns should be addressed. It may be helpful to ask, "Do you feel I'm not meeting the standards? Could you tell me how I fall short?"

- Less Desirable Assignments

Some supervisors, faced with a perception that an employee's performance is substandard, may react by assigning individuals to less desirable work, either in the hope that they will become dissatisfied with the job and leave, or in the belief that the desirable work (and the potential for advancement) should go to more deserving workers. If this happens, don't "blow your top." Perform the work required for a period of time to the extent necessary. Show your dedication to the company in as many ways as you can. Then ask to meet with your supervisor and explore the possibility of re-assignment after you have shown that the company's needs come first. However, less desirable assignments are often a sign that the job relationship has been irreparably damaged and so even these strategies may not work.

- Extra Work and Weekend Work

Other supervisors, faced with a perception that an employee's performance is substandard, may react by assigning individuals to extra work and weekend work. The previous comments apply to this situation also. Do not argue that you have worked hard all week and are unwilling to accept the work.

- Complaints About "Overly Rigid " Adherence to Rules

Some individuals with attention deficit disorder and learning disabilities work so hard at complying with the rules that they become overly invested in following them. Seeing other employees and management ignore these rules can be infuriating. It is always inappropriate to comment on anyone else's following or not following the rules. Your major job is monitoring your own behavior. Gauge the level of strictness with which your company rules are enforced. Watch what people do, not what the policy manuals say. Does everyone come in at the starting time? When do they usually leave? What about reports? One woman was the only person in her office who filled out meeting reports, which were technically required. She spent her time doing a job which was in fact unnecessary. Another individual, for example, endangered his job by leaving work at the precise moment his watch displayed the designated quitting time, regardless of what other activities were taking place. A supervisor, confronted with the departure of an employee at 5:00 P.M. in the middle of a conversation is unlikely to take a charitable view of the matter.

- Transferring Your Work to Others

Sometimes a supervisor will transfer portions of an employee's work to others rather than face the prospect of correcting the employee if he perceives the confrontation will be uncomfortable, or if he perceives that he is not "getting through" to the employee. Again, a combination of initial willing acceptance, followed by an informal job evaluation review with the supervisor and a request for correction of the situation are the best remedies. However, work re-assignment is often a sign that the job relationship has been irreparably damaged and so even these strategies may not work. (It is sadly true that a few employers are willing to undertake far more extensive job restructuring efforts in order to eliminate an employee than to accommodate him.)

- Negative Performance Evaluations

No one can miss the significance of a negative performance evaluation. These are best handled by an honest and direct discussion of your deficiencies and a request for guidance. Do not respond simply by arguing that "Everyone is late." or that "Ms. X has the same quality of work as I do, but you never complain about her." Agree that you understand the serious nature of the supervisor's concern (even if you disagree with it) and enlist him or her as a partner in correcting matters.

- Promotion of Others with Less Seniority

Another sign can be the promotion of individuals with less seniority. If this is repeated, and you receive no promotion, it is again time for an informal performance review.

- Arguments with Supervisors

Be careful when you disagree with your supervisor. If he or she is wrong, your task is education of the supervisor and correction of the situation through the techniques we have discussed. If the supervisor is right, you need to correct the situation and let the company know you are doing so, cheerfully. Above all else, do not begin to call in sick or refuse assignments as a means of avoiding working for someone who is distasteful to you. No one, with or without a disability has the right to refuse work or to refuse to work for a particular supervisor. Do not argue that other employees have engaged in conduct worse than that which your supervisor is discussing. It is like telling a police officer that he shouldn't give you a speeding ticket because another motorist was going even faster than you were. If, however, the work situation has truly become intolerable, you may need to look for another job.

### 3. OUTSIDE HELP

It is essential to gain perspective. Try to have some mentors outside of the job with whom you can discuss work events. After any event that

bothers you, reflect on it and write it down. Note down who was present and what was actually said. Then remember non-verbal communication. Often, non-verbal communication creates a feeling which is different from the words actually used. Note your feelings about the meeting, even if they result in a picture of the meeting which is different from the words actually used.

Describe the meeting to your mentors and ask their opinions. Enlist all members of your social network who know about your disability and are supportive. The social side of work is a serious challenge for people with learning disabilities and attention deficit disorder. You deserve and should seek out a support team to provide coaching and advice. Ask your parents and friends. Stay in touch with college counselors and professors - they may be willing to advise you on occasion. Contact your local Learning Disabilities Association of America chapter and see if one of the members would be willing to mentor you. When you ask for help, ask for it in a time-limited way, e.g., "Would you be willing to meet with me for one hour a month/quarter and help me with work related issues?" Then prepare for the meeting and use the mentor's time well.

Cultivate relationships with co-workers and managers who are not your direct supervisor. Consider talking to co-workers about these difficulties and asking their assessment. People who leave your workplace are extremely valuable as mentors. They know the "cast of characters" and may be willing to talk freely with you.

#### 4. TALKING WITH THE SUPERVISOR

There is an art to talking with your supervisor. Here are a few points to bear in mind.

- In asking your supervisor for feedback, be sensitive. Your supervisor may not be able to explain exactly what the problem is. He or she may just have a strong negative feeling, without being able to articulate it. This is an extremely awkward situation for both of you, because the negative reactions may be due to your behavior or may be prejudice on the supervisor's part.

- People with ADD/LD sometimes have visible signs of their central nervous system dysfunction which cause others to be uneasy in their presence. They may occur in discussions with your supervisor, co-workers and others. These signs may result from their need consciously to monitor their physical movements, an activity which others perform "without thinking." Active monitoring requires attention as does the social content of the meeting. Together, the active monitoring and the social tracking demands overload the individual's capacity for sustained attention. As a result, the individual with these disabilities either 1] loses part of the conversation or 2] loses track of his or her physical movements. Examples of such visible signs include: fidgeting, holding

the head at an angle, staring, blinking too much, asymmetrical facial movements, moving in jerks rather than smoothly, sitting in a ramrod straight, "at attention" posture. It is worth tremendous effort and discipline to control these "soft neurological signs." Some individuals have found that videotaping a "rehearsal" of a meeting is helpful in this regard. Unfortunately, it may not be possible to control them, and prejudice may be the result. People may feel uneasy when they first meet you and not know why. You may be denied the benefit of the doubt. In this case, try not to internalize the negative non-verbal messages that you may receive on occasion.

- Some strategies for the problem of a supervisor who has trouble explaining his negative feelings are as follows: 1] write a note to your supervisor asking for a meeting and give him time to reflect 2] after you have heard your supervisor out, ask for time to think about your response and check his/her feedback with others 3] make it easy for your supervisor to talk to you. Say, "Nobody's performance is perfect. What are things I can do to be excellent?"

- If you have auditory/perceptual problems, you may need to request written guidance. This is an option if you tend to "blow up" when you are criticized verbally. Unfortunately, your supervisor may be afraid to point out anything in writing due to today's litigious climate. Also, in most organizations, written negative feedback is the start to disciplinary action. Some things to say are, "Would it be possible for you to jot down some notes informally about things I could do better? After I review it, we can throw it out." You might also say, "I need your guidance but its tough for me to hear it and may be tough for you to say it. Is there any possibility you can write down some ways I could do better?"

## 5. TERMINATION

Sometimes trouble cannot be avoided. If you are terminated from your employment, endure the ordeal with style. You may be remembered favorably for the grace with which you left the company. Remember, you may have to list this employment on a future job application form. If he is asked, an employer can say, "Yes, " X worked here, and we were sorry it didn't work out. She has many admirable skills, but the match wasn't quite right." The employer can also say, "Yes, X worked here, and we had to fire her. She was never on time, she was constantly disorganized and when she did deign to put in an appearance, her work was poor." Which would you prefer? Your conduct will decide which one is used. The name of the game (even in your final moments with the company) is **damage control**.

One final thought. If you have not disclosed your disability and you believe your difficulties with the job result from that disability, you may wish to consider identifying your disability and requesting reasonable accommodation. This is unlikely to prevent termination, but it is necessary if you intend to contest the decision to terminate your employment through a grievance procedure or litigation. It may also be useful in negotiating a face saving resignation as an alternative to termination, and it may limit the extent to which the employer will subsequently "badmouth" you.

#### D. SUMMARY

None of these strategies guarantees success. However, using one or more with which you are comfortable will greatly increase the chances for success. As in everything else, polite persistence will eventually bring success.

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