

Sounding Board

The call for cognitive ramps

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The paradigm shift initiated decades ago by the disability rights movement has made adjusting the environment to make it accessible commonplace. We are all so familiar with accommodations for physical disabilities that it no longer piques anyone to see larger, accessible bathrooms, guide-dogs, assistive listening systems, or wheelchair ramps almost anywhere. Although the battle is far from over, those with physical disabilities have made tremendous strides to be seen as substantial, influential members of society. However, people with cognitive disabilities e.g. intellectual disabilities, learning disabilities, head traumas etc. are still being underserved where persons with physical disabilities have become accepted in areas such as employment [1]. According to a recent study, only 44% of adults with cognitive disabilities aged 21–64 are in the labor force, as compared to the 83% of working-age adults without disabilities who are in the labor force [2].

The significance of integrating those with cognitive disabilities into the workplace should be indisputable from a human rights perspective. However, because of a prevailing stigma many do not realize the benefits of incorporating such employees into the workforce. Individuals with cognitive disabilities can be just as

committed to their jobs as anybody else, perform their assigned tasks meticulously and responsibly. They can also create interpersonal relationships with coworkers and overall bring significant value to any team just as a non-disabled employee.

Regrettably, because of the aforementioned stigma, there is a rift between what those with cognitive disabilities are *expected* to do, and what they *can* do by providing some external adaptations.

The general public is more than familiar with physical ramps, which function to alter the environment in a small, but significant way to ensure accessibility to physical locations. As well, colloquial use of the term “social ramp” has begun in the realm of autism to refer to the need to change the environment to facilitate greater social accessibility for those facing these challenges [3]. We would like to suggest a world where *cognitive ramps* are just as commonplace.

Based on the model of cognitive accessibility, a *cognitive ramp* can be defined as a modification of pace, complexity or literacy level intended to bridge a gap in accessibility to information, processes, or environments for people with varying cognitive skills. Regarding job accommodations, these *cognitive ramps* can be broadly categorized as: adjustment of the physical environment, changes in job function or in execution, changes in procedures and policies, or adjustment of information such as translation into plain language, or substituting pictorial signs for written text.

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Modifications should start at the initial stage of filling a vacancy where a potential employee may need help filling out forms, or more time to answer interview questions. Once in the workplace, a person with a cognitive disability may require an alternative means of conveying or organizing information such as breaking down a task into sub-tasks and setting reminders. The employer and the individual's coworkers may need to explain instructions more than once using simple language, and clarify words which may not have been understood. En masse, these suggestions are not novel and groundbreaking so much as they are common sense arrangements to ensure vocational participation for a significant group of potential workers.

Cognitive ramps have the potential to do as much for individuals with cognitive disabilities as physical ramps have done for those with physical disabilities in the workplace and elsewhere. Appropriate voca-

tional accommodation may be low or no cost to the employer and ensures a supportive, individualized environment in which the worker with a cognitive disability can reach his or her full employment potential.

References

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