

The LINK

Changing Lives.
Changing Communities.

A Publication of Disability Network Southwest Michigan

Disability & Employment Issue

This issue of The LINK is full of answers to the most frequently asked questions we get about finding and keeping a job.

Should I Tell My Boss I Have a Disability?

A: It depends. Do you need an accommodation to do your job?

The only reason you have to tell an employer about a disability is to get an accommodation.

A **job accommodation** is a reasonable adjustment to a job or work environment that makes it possible for an individual with a disability to perform job duties.



Accommodations may include specialized equipment or devices, work area changes, adjustments to work schedules or job duties, as well as a whole range of other creative solutions. Accommodations exist for all kinds of jobs and types of disabilities. An accommodation often simply means doing a job in a different way than other employees typically do it or using a tool other employees don't use. The important thing is getting the job done right; how it gets done can vary. A simple example is the task of remembering appointments. Some people use a paper calendar and look at it throughout the day; other people prefer an electronic device that beeps or vibrates to remind them about appointments. The important part of the job is to remember the appointment. HOW an employee remembers the appointment can be an accommodation.

If you do not need an accommodation to do your job, disclosing that you have a disability is optional. However, you are not protected under certain laws like the Americans with Disabilities Act if you have not disclosed your disability. It can be scary asking for an accommodation. Regardless of what the law says, the reality is that people have been treated differently if others know about a disability, but the choice is always yours.

Paul Ecklund, our Disability Rights Advocate, is happy to talk to you about your specific situation and help answer any questions you might have. Contact Paul at (269) 345-1516 or ecklundp@dnswm.org.

We educate and connect people with disabilities to resources while advocating social change.

This issue is available in alternative format upon request.

www.dnswm.org

Disability Network is the first stop for people with disabilities and their families in Southwest Michigan.

How Do I Request an Accommodation?

A: Just ask! That is easier said than done. The law says you do not need to make a request in writing or use any specific language. However, we recommend that if you make a verbal request, you follow up with a note or letter or even an email to be sure it is in writing. This protects you and reduces the possibility of your boss misunderstanding what you have asked for. If you need some help figuring out HOW to make a request, we'd be happy to talk to you! We can help you develop and practice your request, as well as give you a guide to do it in writing. Call us at (269) 345-1516 and ask for Paul or Michele, or if you live in Cass or Berrien Counties, call Joanne at (269) 982-7761.

Sometimes when people talk about their disability, they mention all the things that are hard to do or what they can't do. This can be important in some settings, but employers don't want to hear what you can't do. They want to know how you will be a good employee. When you are having trouble doing something at work because of a disability, be sure to talk about it in a solution-oriented way.



Which of these would YOU rather hear if you were the boss?

- Example 1: I have a brain injury and it's hard to remember all the things I need to do each day. That's why I forgot to call that client back.
- Example 2: I have a brain injury that makes it hard for me to remember verbal instructions; when I have written instructions I can complete tasks without leaving something out. I'm asking you to work with me and make a checklist of daily activities.

Example #1 isn't much of a request. It sounds like the employee is making excuses for not doing their job. It tells the boss that the employee is having some difficulty on the job but doesn't offer any solutions. It can seem like the employee is expecting the boss to come up with an accommodation idea.

Example #2 is solution oriented. It lets the boss know the employee has a disability, and the employee comes across as a problem-solver by offering a solution to keep the disability from having a negative impact on the job.



What If I Don't Know What Accommodation I Need?

A: What have you tried in the past? Was there a tool or strategy that you used at school or in a previous job that helped you? Many times a familiar strategy will work in a new situation. Sometimes new situations or new job duties come up and we are unsure what kind of accommodation we need. If you are unsure of what accommodation you need, take steps to find out right away. You can ask your employer to partner with you in this process. You can also call us if you need help.

A great resource for helping you figure out what accommodation you might need is **Job Accommodation Network (JAN)**. JAN offers free, expert, and confidential guidance on workplace accommodations and disability employment issues. They work toward practical solutions that benefit both employers and employees. JAN is available by phone or online at www.askjan.org or 1-800-526-7234 (Voice) & 1-877-781-9403 (TTY).

Will Working Affect My Social Security Disability Benefits?



A: It might. We want you to be educated and informed about how getting a job or increasing your earnings can affect your SSI, SSDI or other disability-related benefits.

The Social Security Administration has several special rules that make it possible for people with disabilities receiving Social Security or Supplemental Security Income (SSI) to work and still receive monthly payments and Medicare or Medicaid. Social Security calls these rules "**work incentives.**" These work incentives can be difficult to understand. Basic information can be found on the Social Security Administration's website www.ssa.gov. It is also important to remember that you are responsible for tracking and reporting your earnings to Social Security.

Our Social Security Disability Benefits Counselors, Pete Mulder and Crystal Haigh, can help answer questions about your specific situation. Contact them at (269) 345-1516.

New Social Security Disability Thresholds for 2013*

SSDI recipients will receive a 1.7% Cost of Living Adjustment (COLA) in 2013.

Substantial Gainful Activity (SGA)	2012	2013
Non-Blind	\$1,010/month	\$1,040/month
Blind	\$1,690/month	\$1,740/month
Trial Work Period (TWP)	2012	2013
	\$720/month	\$750/month

New SSI Benefit Levels for 2013*

SSI recipients will receive a 1.7% Cost of Living Adjustment (COLA) in 2013.

SSI Federal Payment Standard	2012	2013
Individual	\$698/month	\$710/month
Couple	\$1,048/month	\$1,066/month
SSI Resources Limit	2012	2013
Individual	\$2,000	\$2,000
Couple	\$3,000	\$3,000

*Source: www.ssa.gov

Will I Lose Medicaid If I Get a Job?

A: Maybe not! If you are eligible for a program called Freedom to Work (FTW) you may be able to keep your Medicaid benefits while you work.

When you go to work and earn money, you need to tell your Department of Human Services (DHS) worker. DHS determines eligibility for the Freedom to Work (FTW) program. In general, you may qualify for FTW if you currently have Medicaid, are determined to be "disabled" by Social Security Administration standards, and you go to work. Your DHS worker can look at the specific requirements in their benefits manual, BEM 174, to see if you qualify.



If you have questions about Freedom to Work Medicaid, give us a call at (269) 345-1516.

Can Assistive Technology Help Me Do My Job?

A: "Assistive technology" is just a fancy way of describing tools and gadgets that make tasks easier to do. Many people use assistive technology as accommodations at work to be effective at their job. For example, a vibrating watch can be set to vibrate every 15 minutes to help a person with Attention Deficit Disorder stop and check to be sure they are still on task. This might help them be more productive and organized. Anti-fatigue mats can be helpful for people with neuropathy due to diabetes stand for long periods of time. Many times an employer will cover the cost of these types of accommodations.

Assistive technology can be necessary and useful in all areas of life - not just at work. Sometimes the cost of assistive technology can make it hard for people to get the devices they need. The **Michigan Assistive Technology Loan Fund (ATLF)** is available to help you purchase tools and gadgets that you need in order to keep or increase your independence. Visit www.michiganloanfunds.org for more information, or call Lewis at Disability Network at (269) 345-1516.

To learn about other assistive technology resources visit our website or call us at (269) 345-1516 or (269) 985-0111.



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