The Role of the Supervisor in Successful Adjustment to Work with a Disabling Condition: Issues for Disability Policy and Practice

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Results from an investigation of the role of supervisors in the process of adjusting to work with a disabling condition are presented. Workers with disabling conditions were interviewed about the responsiveness of their workplaces to their needs. Analyses showed that successful adjustment to work was related to the ability to complete job requirements, get along with others at work, see a future at work and feel good about work. Many supervisory behaviors were associated with these factors including the extent to which supervisors treat workers fairly, allow workers to participate in decisions related to their work and utilize the workers' skills. Implications for the development of workplace policy and disability management efforts are discussed.

KEY WORDS: disability; policy; supervisor; Americans with Disabilities Act.

INTRODUCTION

Few would argue with the assumption that supervisors play a key role in the return to work and job maintenance of workers with disabling conditions. Supervisors are often in the best position to identify problems at work as a consequence of the disability, offer support to the worker, develop appropriate accommodations, monitor and evaluate their effectiveness, and educate others in the department about the impact of the disability on the flow of work or relationships. Despite the recognized prominence of supervisors in the process of helping workers with disabilities adjust to work and maintain work little information is available about how supervisors might be most effective in their efforts. The purpose of this paper is to explore the repercussions of different supervisory behaviors on adjustment to work with a disabling condition and identify the individual or workplace characteristics that affect this be-

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havior. This information has implications for disability policy, Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) implementation, and the development of training and education initiatives for supervisors involved in disability management efforts.

THE EMERGING ROLE OF SUPERVISORS IN DISABILITY MANAGEMENT

Developments in the employment of people with disabilities have expanded the role and responsibilities of supervisors in maintaining employees at work, in participating in a full scale disability management program to contain costs and in opening the door to new hires. The American with Disabilities Act of 1991 mandates that employers provide reasonable accommodation to otherwise qualified workers with disabling conditions except under conditions of undue hardship (1). Many workers with a disabling condition, for example, who experience the onset or worsening of illness or disability while on the job are, prima facie, "otherwise qualified." Since prior to the onset of the disabling condition these workers were fulfilling the requirements of the job, the employer, in these instances, is obligated to assist return to work or job maintenance.

Supervisors have educational, supportive, and administrative functions (2). Employers have begun to recognize supervisors' natural tie to help fulfill the mandates of the ADA. They are most familiar with the requirements of a job, how the job might be partitioned, and the effects of job accommodations on departmental functioning. Supervisors are also instrumental in communicating with both workers with disabilities and co-workers about return to work and job maintenance issues.

Supervisors are essential to a comprehensive disability management effort (3). The supervisor is part of a team, along with persons in medical, personnel, and benefit departments, the EEO, the EAP, union representatives, and others who ensure the effectiveness of a disability management effort. Escalating health care costs and expanding employee health care needs provide additional reasons that employers turn to disability management.

Finally, the role of supervisors in the successful employment of people with disabilities is expanded by the evolving understanding of the need to achieve competitive employment for certain people with disabilities (4,5). This new approach relies upon the natural supports of the supervisor and co-workers in the work system rather than outside professionals to help integrate and maintain people with disabilities at work. Supervisors offer training, monitor performance to help identify problems and provide the social support that is crucial to successful adjustment. This assistance fulfills the recognized need for ongoing support (6). Although a job coach from outside the workplace can meet this function initially, as he or she withdraws from the workplace the ongoing attention is lost.

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN SUPERVISORY BEHAVIOR AND SUCCESSFUL ADJUSTMENT TO WORK WITH A DISABILITY

Although experience tells us that supervisors are central to successful return to work and job maintenance of people with disabilities, there are few systematic