

SUPPORTING EMPLOYEES WITH MENTAL HEALTH AND COGNITIVE CONDITIONS WHILE TELEWORKING

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Mental Health and Telework Accommodation Solutions

From the desk of Melanie Whetzel, M.A., CBIS, Principal Consultant, Team Lead

There are many pros and cons of teleworking, particularly for employees with disabilities. JAN consultants frequently hear from employees with mental health and cognitive conditions about how effective telework has been. Many are thriving in their home environments because they can control variables that they were unable to in the office like the distractions of lighting, noise, and in-person interruptions. Concentration and focus may have increased so that productivity has as well. Working from home also provides flexibility that employees might not have while working in an office. And lengthy commutes are nonexistent, providing more time and energy and causing much less stress just starting the day.

But we have also seen the opposite situation. Telework has exacerbated some employees' mental health and cognitive conditions and created job performance problems. Some who live alone may feel isolated, lonely, and unsupported, which could be barriers to productivity. Some may need structure and feedback that may not be present in the home environment. There are some with difficulties in focusing, concentrating, and managing time who have been unable to work effectively from home because they do not have a quiet, dedicated work area available.

When employees with disabilities have difficulty performing their jobs while teleworking, employers should engage in the interactive process to see whether accommodations might help the employees be more productive. We have even seen cases where teleworking employees have asked to return to the worksite so that they may be more productive. If employees are having difficulties, talk to them about it. Find out specifically what is working, what isn't, and what they might need to turn that around.

Employers, managers, and supervisors can do many things to support the productivity of employees who are working from home. The following tips may be helpful:

Communication is probably the most important aspect of telework. It is a crucial factor in the success of any workplace, but even more so with employees who are distanced physically and isolated from their managers and coworkers.

When employees are no longer in face-to-face environments with their employers, extra steps must be taken to ensure that communication remains open and thorough, and help employees feel more connected and informed. Where before the employer could just walk down the hall and speak with an employee, now it requires more of an intentional effort. Many employers have added phone calls to their schedules so they can keep in touch and check in with their employees. Video platforms are being used to schedule meetings where employees can get together with their coworkers. As an example, we're doing a twice-monthly Coffee Break meeting at JAN to keep us all connected while we are working from home. While some employees thrive with limited contact with their coworkers and teammates, many others experience isolation and benefit from scheduled contact.

Clear communication about expectations is important, especially for employees who may be having difficulties during this time due to mental health conditions or cognitive impairments, and the added stress



back to read and reread what they need to know and remember.

Early communication about changes that are going to take place is vital. Change is difficult for many of us but can be especially difficult for employees with disabilities. If employees can know as soon as possible when things are going to change, how they are going to change, and how specifically that change will affect them and their department, it can alleviate much stress and uncertainty.

Giving employees a way to express their concerns can create a more positive environment. This can be done in a video platform meeting or a townhall-like format where employees are encouraged to ask their managers questions. An employee hotline can also be helpful for employees to leave messages about their concerns, uncertainties, or commendations.

Asking employees what specific types of communication will work best for them is an excellent practice. Many employees with disabilities experience difficulty with communication in the workplace without the added layer of the pandemic. Many employees will ask for a change in supervisor only because the communication styles don't mesh. Although employers do not have to provide a change in supervisor, they should look at a change in supervisory method, which likely will include alternative communication methods. This could include adjusting communication styles, such as modifying how they communicate assignments, instructions, or training; more in-person interactions with conversation instead of emails; or fewer face-to-face contacts and more in writing. Providing an agenda before a meeting or a training could be effective in helping employees stay focused and keep up on the information being presented.

Video platform meeting fatigue and stress is another issue that employers, managers, and supervisors should address. Many employees are stressed with the increased use of technology, but employees with mental health conditions such as anxiety and social anxiety may have difficulties with the constant online meetings some employees are required to attend. Video platforms that require employees to be seen for extended periods of time can be stressful. Having to speak with everyone watching, maintaining eye contact for extended amounts of time, and just viewing others in such an up-close and personal way can produce anxiety for many employees. Allowing meetings to take place by conference calls or allowing employees to turn off their video and use only the audio are ways employers can help employees be more productive and stay calmer and more focused during online meetings.

Workspace setup is important to success. Encourage employees to set up their workspaces to support their working style. Establishing separate office and home environments can be helpful. Employees need to make sure that the office items stay in the office and household items don't migrate there. Do the work in the office, not in front of the TV for instance. Employees may be able to keep their desks and work areas neater in the office than they do at home. Messiness can cause distractions and lower focus and concentration. **Less clutter** usually means more productivity.

For executive functioning limitations such as memory, organization, and concentration, see JAN's [Accommodation Solutions: Executive Functioning Deficits](#).

There are many ways to support employees as they work from home during the pandemic or for a more long-term accommodation solution. We recommend employers keep an open mind in considering their employees' needs and look at an assortment of accommodations. A temporary or trial accommodation of telework can show just how effective it can be before long-term plans are made. And remember, employees who are teleworking may still need accommodations to successfully do their jobs. Communication is the key.

For more information or accommodation ideas, feel free to contact JAN.