



Working Effectively with People with Learning Disabilities

What is a Learning Disability?

The National Joint Committee on Learning Disabilities describes the term “learning disability” as a general term referring to a heterogeneous group of disorders manifested by significant disabilities in the acquisition and use of listening, spelling, reading, writing, reasoning, or mathematical skills. These disorders are intrinsic to the individual, presumed to be caused by central nervous system dysfunction, and they exist throughout the person’s life. A learning disability is not a disorder that an individual “grows out of.” It is a permanent disorder that has a significant effect on learning but is not an indicator of intelligence. An individual with a learning disability may develop compensatory skills that help them to overcome the disability.

Problems in self-regulatory behaviors, social perceptions, and social integration may exist with learning disabilities but do not, by themselves, constitute learning disabilities. Although learning disabilities may occur concomitantly with other disabilities, they are not the result of those conditions or influences.

Learning disabilities affect some 10% of the American workforce. As a result, many persons applying for work or currently employed by an employer will have learning disabilities. These individuals are often intelligent, creative and productive.

Learning disabilities can sometimes cause inconsistent work performance and may require reasonable accommodation. Some learning disabilities may have a global effect on functioning in the workplace. Other individuals may only need a reasonable accommodation for a specific task.

Some common learning disability terminology is listed below:

Dyslexia – Difficulty with language processing, which, in turn, affects reading, writing and spelling.

Dyspraxia – Difficulty with writing, fine motor skills and coordination.



Dysgraphia – Difficulty with writing, spelling, and writing composition.

Auditory Discrimination – Difficulty in perceiving differences between speech sounds and sequencing these sounds into meaningful words, which affects reading and spoken language.

Visual Discrimination – Difficulty in noticing important details and assigning meaning to what is seen, which is critical to reading and writing.

What is the Impact of the Americans with Disabilities Act on People with Learning Disabilities?

The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) prohibits discrimination against people with disabilities. The term disability under the ADA is defined as:

- A physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more of the major life activities of such individual,
- A record of such impairment, or
- Being regarded as having such an impairment.

“Substantially limits” means that the person is unable to perform, or is significantly limited in the ability to perform an activity as compared with an average person in the general population. “Major life activities” refers to functions such as caring for oneself, performing manual tasks, walking, seeing, hearing, speaking, breathing, learning, and working.

Learning disabilities are considered physical or mental impairments. The term “Specific Learning Disabilities” is cited in the regulations of the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC), which enforces the ADA, implementing the employment provisions of the ADA (29 C.F.R. Part 1630).

Whether the ADA would protect a person with a learning disability from discrimination depends on whether the disability substantially limits a major life activity. For example, an employee whose auditory perception difficulties causes her to be unable to gain information from a staff meeting likely would have an ADA disability, especially where most employees would have little or no difficulty gaining relevant information from the meeting. By contrast, the inability to take excellent notes of a highly detailed, eight-hour technical discussion would not



constitute a substantial impairment because the average person would also not be able to do this.

As the definition of disability makes plain, an employer also may not discriminate against an individual with a record of a disability or against someone perceived as being disabled. For example, job applicants who have been through special education may not be discriminated against based on a school record of a disability. Similarly, employers also may not discriminate against applicants with learning disabilities because of a perception or fear that they cannot read.

An individual's limitations must be caused by a learning disability. Thus, an employee who is unable to read or write because he or she was never taught these skills, and not because of a learning disability, would not be an individual with a disability under the ADA.

Causes of Learning Disabilities

A learning disability is a developmental disorder that is present from birth, although it may go undetected until later in life. While genetic predisposition, perinatal injury, and various neurological or other medical conditions may be associated with the development of learning disabilities, the presence of such conditions does not invariably predict an eventual learning disability.

Some individuals with learning disabilities have no familial, medical, or environmental history that would predict a learning disorder.

Potential Functional Limitations Caused by Learning Disabilities

Workers with learning disabilities may have difficulties with:

- Processing auditory material (e.g., receiving oral directions and other communication issues).
- Writing, including: issues with spelling, grammar, and/or sentence structure; expressing information in a written format; and/or legible handwriting.
- Reasoning ability regarding the comprehension of new information, quantitative information, or complex verbal information.
- Reading speed or reading comprehension.

Workplace Accommodations for Individuals with Learning Disabilities



Reasonable accommodations are by definition individualized in order to meet the needs of the specific applicant or employee. Some accommodations may include:

- Alternate print formats
- Reduced-distraction work environments
- Computer technology for written work
- Reading materials presented in auditory formats
- Extended time to learn job tasks or to perform work
- Instructions presented both in written and oral formats
- Allowing the employee to tape-record information
- Clearly defined job requirements, including the dates when projects assignments are due; advance notice of any changes
- Providing handouts and visual aids
- Using more than one way to demonstrate or explain information
- Breaking information into small steps when teaching many new tasks in one lesson (state objectives, review previous lesson, summarize periodically)
- Allowing time for clarification of directions and essential information
- Providing assistance with the proofreading of written work
- Allowing the use of spell check and grammar-assistive devices.

When in doubt about possible accommodations, ask the employee what would be helpful. In addition, remember to observe confidentiality. For example, avoid pointing out the employee or the alternative arrangements to the rest of the work group.

Resources

Assistive Technology Partners
601 E. 18th Ave., Suite 130
Denver, CO 80203
303/315-1280 Main
800/255-3477 within Colorado
303/837-8964 TTY
303/837-1208 FAX
www.assistivetechpartners.org

Colorado Department of Education
201 E. Colfax Ave.
Denver, CO 80203
303/866-6600

International Dyslexia Association
Chester Building
8600 LaSalle Road, Suite 382
Baltimore, MD 21286-2044
410/296-0232
www.interdys.org



Assistive Technology Partners

SCHOOL OF MEDICINE

UNIVERSITY OF COLORADO ANSCHUTZ MEDICAL CAMPUS

Job Accommodation Network (JAN)
West Virginia University
P.O. Box 6080
Morgantown, WV 26506-6080
800/526-7234
www.jan.wvu.edu

Learning Disabilities Association of
America
4156 Library Road
Pittsburgh, PA 15234-1349
412/341-1515 Voice
412/344-0224 FAX
www.ldanat.org

National Center for Law and Learning
Disabilities
P.O. Box 368
Cabin John, MD 20818
301/469-8308

National Center for Learning
Disabilities
381 Park Avenue South, Suite 1401
New York, NY 10016
212/545-7510
www.LD.org

Office of Disability Employment
Policy – U.S. Department of Labor
1331 F Street NW, Suite 300
Washington, DC 20004
202/376-6200 Voice
202/376-6205 TTY
202/376-6219 FAX
www.dol.gov/dol/odep

Rocky Mountain Disability and
Business Technical Assistance
Center
3630 Sinton Road, #103
Colorado Springs, CO 80907
800/949-4232 Voice/TTY
719/444-0269 FAX
www.ada-infonet.org

SWAAAC
601 E. 18th Ave. Suite 130
Denver, CO 80203
303/315-1276 Main
800/255-3477 within Colorado
303/837-8964 TTY
303/837-1208 FAX
www.uchsc.edu/atp

U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity
Commission (EEOC)
800/669- EEOC Voice
800/800-3302 TTY
www.eeoc.gov



Assistive Technology Partners

SCHOOL OF MEDICINE

UNIVERSITY OF COLORADO ANSCHUTZ MEDICAL CAMPUS

**For more information contact:
Assistive Technology Partners
601 East 18th Avenue, Suite 130
Denver, CO 80203**

**303.315.1280 office
303.837.1208 fax
303.837.3477 TTY
800.255.3477 toll free**

**generalinfo@at-partners.org
www.assistivetechologypartners.org**

This publication may be reproduced without the written permission of ATP
provided that the source is appropriately credited.