

Chapter II

General Principles for Accommodation

Determining appropriate accommodations in a particular assessment situation requires information about the individual's disability, the nature of the qualifications being assessed and the type of assessment tool which will be used, whether it is a paper-and-pencil test, an interview, or an interactive exercise such as a simulation. There are a number of general principles which can serve as a guide in using these sets of information to determine accommodations. This chapter covers the key principles by which human resource consultants, managers and all other individuals responsible for assessing persons with disabilities should be guided in making decisions in specific cases.

Principle 1: Provide all candidates with an equal opportunity to fully demonstrate their qualifications

Every candidate in a selection process should have the opportunity to fully demonstrate his or her competence in the qualifications being assessed. This basic principle is designed to ensure merit in selection, and from it derives the rationale for accommodating the individual needs of candidates in an assessment context. When a disability hinders a candidate from fully demonstrating his or her qualifications using a particular assessment instrument, adjustments need to be made to the administration procedures or to the assessment instrument itself so that the candidate is in a position to fully demonstrate his or her qualifications.

Fairness in this context means being fair to *all* candidates in the process. Thus, accommodations should be designed so that persons with disabilities are neither at a disadvantage nor are advantaged relative to other candidates. This principle is sometimes referred to as the "fairness principle".

Principle 2: Consider each request for accommodation individually, using a case-by-case approach

A number of key elements must be taken into consideration when determining accommodations in any given assessment situation. For this reason, each request for accommodation must be considered individually.

First, **the nature and the extent of the individual's disability or functional impairment** must be taken into account. Generalizations should not be made about the functional limitations or accommodation needs of persons who have the same identified disability, for example "low vision" or "cerebral palsy". Differences may exist in the degree and type of functional limitations as well as adaptive strategies used. For example:

- S One partially sighted individual may require a large print format for written tests, whereas another person may require special lighting or may read test materials in standard print using a magnifying glass.
- S One person with cerebral palsy may have slower speech and require more time in an interview, whereas another may have no difficulty with speech and require no accommodations for an interview.

Second, the **type of qualification** which is being assessed, based on the job duties of the position, must be considered. This includes any requirement for job performance associated with speed. For example:

- S If *knowledge* is being assessed and the timing of the test is not considered critical, extending time limits could be an appropriate accommodation.
- S However, if the qualification is *ability to file documents quickly and accurately*, and speed is a critical factor on the job, time limits should not be increased.

Third, the **type of assessment instrument** must be considered. The kinds of accommodations which are necessary for a written test might be unnecessary for an interactive exercise. For example:

- S A candidate with vision loss may require an accommodation for a written test but no accommodation for an interview.
- S However, a person who is hard-of-hearing might need accommodation on an interactive exercise but not require accommodation on a written test, once the instructions have been thoroughly understood.

Principle 3: Do not alter the nature or level of the qualification being assessed

When modifications are made to the administration or content of an assessment instrument, the possibility exists that these modifications may affect what is being assessed. Since individuals with disabilities are not exempted from meeting **bona fide occupational requirements** (as described in Chapter I), in order for the candidate to demonstrate that he or she fully meets the qualifications of the position, accommodations provided in specific cases should not alter the nature or level of difficulty of the qualification being assessed.

The following example illustrates how certain accommodations, appropriate in some cases, may in other cases inappropriately alter the nature or the **level** of the qualification being assessed:

- S A blind candidate may be administered a *knowledge* test, administered in written form to other candidates, using tape-recorded questions, and may provide responses in an oral format, for example, by dictating into a tape recorder. This means of providing answers constitutes an appropriate accommodation because it does not affect the nature or level of the qualification being assessed. However, if *written communication skills* were being assessed, the same

candidate would *not* be permitted to provide his or her responses orally, since in that case the ability to communicate in writing would no longer be assessed. (An appropriate accommodation might be to allow the candidate to type responses using a personal computer, or voice dictation software, to provide his or her responses.)

When applying this principle, it should be stressed that the qualification assessed must be a **bona fide occupational requirement** for accomplishing the work of the position. Once the manager has confirmed that the qualification is essential to job performance, the selection board must further ensure that the demands of the assessment instrument do not exceed those of the job. The following example illustrates how this type of problem may occur and be resolved:

- S A deaf candidate with low literacy (reading) skills is to take a written knowledge test in a competition for a clerical position. When determining the accommodations to be provided to this candidate, the selection board realizes that the reading skills required on the knowledge test exceed those normally required on the job. They decide that the test is inappropriate, and another test with an appropriate level of reading is substituted and used for all candidates.

Principle 4: Alternate methods or sources of information must provide comparable information

In most cases, accommodations take the form of adjustments to the administration of the assessment instrument which is being utilized, or the use of an alternate format of the same instrument. However, in exceptional circumstances, the original assessment tools may not permit a fair assessment of the abilities of a particular candidate. In such cases, it may be appropriate to utilize either an alternate method of assessment or an alternate source of information regarding the candidate's qualifications in order to obtain more accurate information on which to evaluate the candidate's abilities. When alternate methods or sources are used, they must be justified on this basis. However, care must be used to ensure that this information and the information collected on other candidates in the selection process is **comparable**, in order that all candidates may be rated and their abilities compared accurately. The judgement of the persons determining the alternate methods and sources and of those comparing the information to assess the qualifications is very important.

The following example illustrates circumstances in which alternate methods and alternate sources of information may be appropriate:

- S The *ability to communicate orally* of a deaf individual who uses American Sign Language (ASL) must be assessed for a competition to which he has applied. The selection board decides that in this case, the ability should be interpreted as ability to communicate on the job.

It further determines that on-the-job communication skills would not be adequately assessed by an oral interview using an interpreter of American Sign Language, since this is not typical of the way he normally communicates in work situations. Instead, they opt to give the candidate the interview questions, which consist of short job-related situational questions, and allow him to respond using written notes and short memos, which is the way he normally carries out his interactions with other staff when on the job. This constitutes an **alternate method** of assessing the ability to communicate on the job.

Principle 5: Base accommodations on complete and up-to-date information on the candidate's disability and functional limitations

The provision of appropriate accommodations requires complete and current information on the candidate's disability. Without adequate information about the disability, neither the department nor the candidate can be confident that appropriate accommodations are being provided.

Unless the disability is both evident and longstanding, with limitations which are clearly understood, it is recommended that departments obtain documentation from a qualified health professional to support the request for accommodation. The documentation must be **complete** – adequate to determine the accommodation required – and **current** – recent enough to ensure that it accurately describes how the disability currently effects the individual's ability to function. A **qualified health professional** is one who has both appropriate professional training or certification and knowledge of the particulars of the individual in question.

While it is essential that adequate and accurate information about a disability be obtained to provide appropriate accommodations, it must also be remembered that the candidate is not obliged—and should not be asked—to provide irrelevant information that is not required.

Standards for what is required in the documentation may be found in Chapter III. More specific guidelines on information requirements for documentation and the specialists appropriate for various types of disabilities, are contained in Chapter V.

Principle 6: Communications concerning accommodations must be timely

Timeliness is an essential component of fairness in the communications that occur between the department and the candidate. First, departments must inform candidates at the outset of a competitive process that accommodations are available for persons with disabilities, based on their needs. Secondly, it is the responsibility of candidates in competitive processes to make known their need for accommodation, as well as to provide requested information or documentation supporting their request, in a timely manner. Departments need adequate time to thoroughly assess the candidate's needs, consider the requirements of the position, and consult as required to determine appropriate accommodations.

Finally, it is essential that departments inform candidates of proposed accommodations well in advance of the assessment date. Candidates need to be informed of and provided feedback on the proposed accommodations before being assessed. Not only may candidates have questions about the assessment process, but they may have further input on their needs in relation to the proposed accommodations.

Suggested procedures for handling the issues surrounding the need for timeliness may be found in Chapter IV, Procedures for Determining Accommodations.