

# Making Employment Fit: Accommodations and Other Dirty Words

AUTREAT PRESENTATION

June 28 – July 1, 2004

Joel Smith

# About Me

- 26 Years Old
- Live in the Rocky Mountains of the United States (over 2 km above sea level!)
- Work for a fairly large government agency
- Have held 8 full-time jobs since I was 16, many part-time jobs. Some were more successful than others
- First job was a supportive employment job funded by the government; Have worked outside of “supportive employment” for all other jobs
- Been on both sides of the employment fence – employer and employee. I am currently an employee
- Most of my experience is in an office environment

# The Problem

- Employment is designed for NTs
- We are not NTs!
- We have a disability
- *Normal* jobs just don't fit us!



# The Solution – Three Steps

- Getting the appropriate work
- Determining what changes are needed
- Getting the changes you need

# A Powerful Accommodation: The Right Job

- Will impact you more than any single accommodation alone
- Good jobs are hard to find, even for NTs
- But not every job is hell!
- Two positions with the exact same job description, in the same industry, and for similar types of companies may provide very different work experiences

# Where Will I Fit Best?

## Things to consider...

- Do you have the luxury of being selective?
- What field should you work in?
- What type of company?
- What does a good workgroup look like for you?
- What position do you want?

# What Field?

- Pick a perseveration you are good at if possible
- Fields which value work skills over people skills are typically better
- Employers care less about oddities in fast growing fields
- Computer field is good for some, but ACs can fit in almost any job

# What Kind of Company?

- Small companies may be more – or less – hesitant to offer accommodations
- Large companies know the law, which may not always be an advantage
- Companies with a “tradition” (not the same as “old”) may not be willing to bend rules
- Companies that see themselves as “progressive” or “best in the industry” are typically better (but what they see themselves as is different than what they try to project to others)
- Workgroup type and supervisor personality are typically more important for satisfaction than the type of company
- Self-employment may be an option



# What Kind of Workgroup?

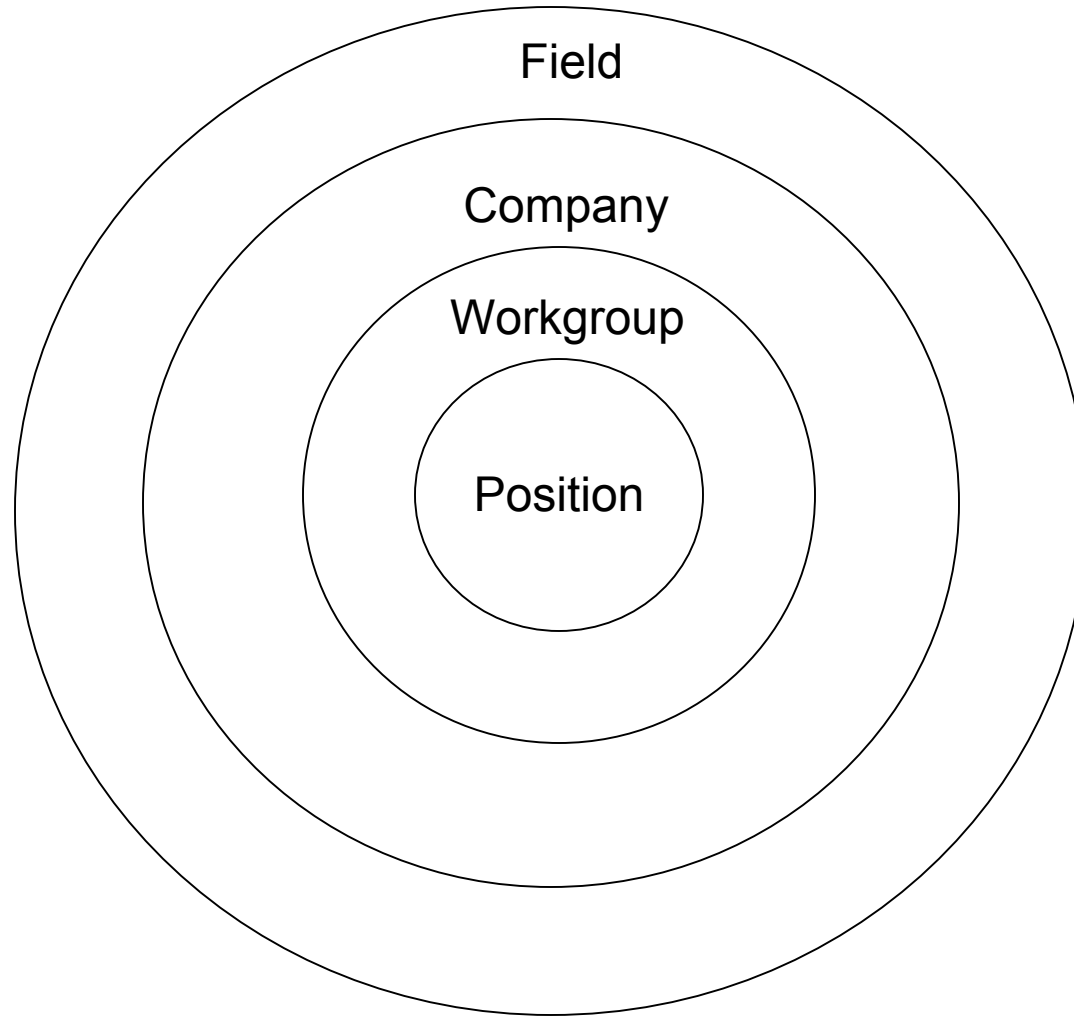
- Are they proud of the work they do, or are they proud of how similar (“efficient”) everyone is?
- Do they consider their group special compared to others or are they just a cog in the machine?
- Is it seen as special by the rest of the company?
- Will your ethics be compatible with theirs?
- Do they tolerate differences in personality and ability?
- What was last year’s turnover rate?
- Can you work for the supervisor? Will she be there in 2 months?

# Is the Position a Good Fit?

- Are you 1 of 20 doing the same job, or is the position unique?
- Is it compatible with you?
- Will you get bored with it?
- Are you good at the tasks required?
- Are your perseverations going to help or hurt you?
- Will you be perceived as a highly valuable employee or as a disposable employee?
- Is it easy to show progress objectively?

# Circles of Influence

(The Mandatory Concentric Circle Diagram)



# Interview Tips

- Think carefully about disclosing your Autism, now may not be the time!
- Think carefully about “acting” (eye contact, social small-talk, etc)
- Bring something with you that proves you can do the job; Physical evidence means more than simply telling them you can do the job!
- Don’t talk about salary or benefits at this point, you do that after an offer is made (you don’t want them to exclude you before they can offer a job)
- Look “professional” (suits, nice shoes, etc)
- Show an interest in the position

# Interview *THEM!*

- Ask about company culture
- Find out about a few of your teammate's personalities
- What gives someone's opinion weight in this company?  
Years of employment? Technical skill? Social ability?
- What does a typical day look like here?
- How do they evaluate employees?
- Look around the work site if possible. Are employees clones of each other or does the office space hint at unique individuals? Can you work there?

# Other Job-Seeking Tips

- If you don't get an interview, it may be time to pester them
- Always send a thank you note after an interview even if you don't want the job! You can use this as a time to fix mistakes you made in the interview
- Don't disclose your disability to HR/Personnel or a secretary during pre-offer phase – if you are planning on disclosing, disclose directly to your future boss!
- Consider taking a less-than-ideal job if it gets you closer to your ideal job
- Your employer likes you best after he has given you an offer but before you accept it. Use this!
- Recognize good fortune

# Now that you have the job...

- What can be done to make the job better?
  - Are there things I can change to make it better?
  - Are there things that my boss can change?
  - Are there things that my coworkers can change?
- How do I actually make these changes?

# What do I mean by “Accommodations?”

Changes to the workplace environment or the job itself to allow someone with a disability – such as autism – to do the job.

Accommodations do not need to be called accommodations for them to be effective!

They may not look like ramps or Braille signs, but may be very unique to the employee.



# What changes do you need?

- Be creative!
- Prioritize:
  - Think of the “must haves”
  - Think of the little things that, alone, don’t mean much but, together, may mean a lot
  - Think of the “would be nice” things – you may have nothing to lose asking for them
- Figure out where you are willing to accept compromise
- Don’t forget accommodations you can provide yourself!

# My Changes

- A private, semi-quiet office
- Headphone-earplugs (see above!)
- Exercise ball instead of a chair
- Informal social translator and person-recognizer
- Use of speech devices (including use of an old PC saved from surplus)
- Instant messaging within workgroup
- Extensive use of email in workgroup
- Limited (2 days/week) telecommuting
- Stimtoys strategically placed in my office and in common areas
- Formal job modification (no in-person identity proofing)
- Flexible hours

# My Changes, Continued

- Being asked by project manager for status reports and hours worked rather than expecting me to remember to submit them
- Permission to leave meetings which do not have agendas
- Use of pencil instead of pen for handwriting
- Large whiteboard in office
- Blanket in office
- Key coworkers trained to recognize start of overload
- High quality monitor (no flicker)
- Ability to close door and “send calls”
- Hotel room for long nights on the job

# Other Possible Changes

- Different way of being assigned work
- Modification to employee evaluation system
- Personal assistant (bill paying, errands, shopping, etc)
- Being excused from mandatory social gatherings
- Use of different medium for intra-office communication
- Building modifications for physical accessibility
- Removal of interruptions (intercom, radio, etc)
- Help with paperwork
- Additional vacation, sick-time, or unpaid leave
- Part-time instead of full-time
- Rigid hours (instead of flexible hours)
- Alternative meal arrangements

# More Possible Changes

- Replacing lighting
- Different door chime or bell
- Strict anti-harassment policy
- Team assignment changes
- Major office renovation (give everyone offices!)
- Easy-to-access fridge
- Nametags at meetings
- Assistance finding offices, buildings, etc.
- Training key employees on response to overload, seizures, meltdowns, etc.
- Assignment of a work-partner
- Removal of “dotted-line” management

# Yet More Changes

- Reduced travel
- More or less formal job description
- Assignment to a less distracting area
- “Traditional” accommodations such as job coach
- Understanding of travel delays (public transit)
- Contracting instead of employment
- Handling email from the public instead of phone calls

# Hard to Get Accommodations

Some accommodations are very hard to get in most workplaces. Often these are the accommodations most desired by autistics.

- How do you request these?
- What are common problems?
- What are the alternatives?

# Private Office

- Can be hard to get even if productivity is well above other workers
- Often seen as a privilege or status symbol
- Are there alternatives that would also work? (Flexible hours? Earplugs? Quiet? A different cubicle?)
- Is there an undesirable (to others) office?
- Does your company have a better location where you could work?
- Are there people you could share an office with?
- If you don't get it, ask to work from home if practical
- Consider a lateral job transition if that will allow a private office



# Working From Home

- Beware of scams! Almost no entry-level work-from-home jobs exist
- Sales can often be done at home (know the difference between commission and salary, and be able to spot pyramid schemes)
- Almost everyone wants this. Few employers are comfortable giving it
- Employers are scared that they won't be able to manage you
- How are you going to get questions answered? Go to meetings?
- Don't mention "child care" when talking about working from home, even if it is one of your reasons

# Working From Home

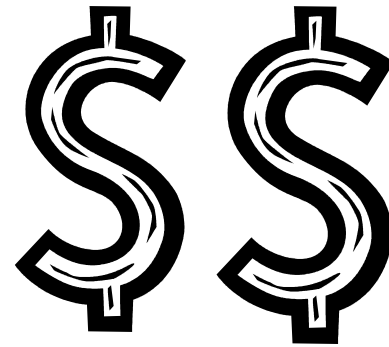
- Suggest a trial
- Consider limited telecommuting
- Ask your employer to consider it as a reward for performance, maybe instead of a raise or other perk
- Work your butt off at home!
- Contact your home office often during a normal day
- Be able to demonstrate productivity
- Be honest with yourself: Will you do other things at home? Can your job really be done at home?
- Is work your only social outlet? Do you care?
- Can't get it? Use the rejection to ask for a private office!

# Some common problems with requesting accommodations

- Why is there resistance to accommodations?
- How would I hinder my chances of getting an accommodation?
- What about the law?
- My boss or coworkers are uncomfortable around me!
- I don't have a diagnosis!

# Why Don't Employers Like Accommodations?

- It's a "bad word" to many employers
- Seen as:
  - Expensive
  - Special Privileges
  - Less Productivity
  - Just another thing people sue over
- Employers fear that granting one employee accommodations will cause others to request them
- We've went through all this work and you want to tell us that our workplace is inaccessible?!



# Why People Don't Get Accommodations

- They don't ask!
- Are willing to accept only one (or few) accommodations
- Asking for something seen as a privilege or status symbol
- Employer feels "trapped" by request
- It would be a large expense
- They ask after a problem has occurred

# The Law

- Invoking The Law (ADA in the US, other laws elsewhere) to force employers to do something may not be in your best interest
- Despite what the law may say, an employer can fire you for making a legal fuss. He will just find something you don't do right
- If you sue (or threaten to sue) an employer, your life will be hell. This violates a social rule...
- Lawsuits are best used when you don't plan on staying in the company yet you feel an ethical obligation to help other disabled people
- It may be more pragmatic to find a new job

# A Warning about Human Resources

- Might also be called “Personnel” or something similar
- **HR IS NOT ON YOUR SIDE!** They are there to support the company, **NOT YOU!**
- You should almost always approach your boss before you even think of going to HR
- In large companies, your boss may refer you to HR when you ask for an accommodation, telecommuting, or something similar. Even so, ask your boss first!
- Beware of retaliation for escalating a problem to HR, the Union, an ombudsman, or similar
- Your boss has much more to gain – or lose – in accommodation decisions; You are just another employee to HR. Your problem is also your boss’s.

# Uncomfortable Coworkers/Boss

- Most people are uncomfortable around unfamiliar disabilities
- They are afraid of saying or doing the wrong thing – disability etiquette is complex
- Let your coworkers know what is acceptable and what isn't, in as clear of a way as possible
- Let them know that, for minor etiquette issues, you understand they don't know how to interact and that you want them to try to do their best and be willing to accept suggestions from you
- If minor mistakes are made, don't make them into major problems, and don't embarrass people – gently correct
- Intentionally interact with others



# What if I don't have a diagnosis?

- Try to avoid official channels (HR, etc). Work it out with your boss.
- Inform them, if asked, that you prefer not to discuss your medical records except with your doctor, family, and very close friends. Don't lie. Don't volunteer either.
- Emphasize that you can do the job better with these changes, don't focus on the fact he needs to do it because you are disabled!
- Be sure of yourself before asking. "I have problems with answering the telephone." Not, "I think I might have autism, but I'm not sure..."
- Mention that you can provide references of people who can explain how the change works, and how it won't hinder productivity.

# Tactics & Strategies

- Think through asking for an accommodation in advance.
- Know your problem, and hold firm on this!
- Know how you are going to ask
- Rehearse foreseeable responses
- Know where you can compromise and where you cannot
- Use the mode of communication which is most comfortable and accurate for you
- Use “keywords” such as “disability” if it will help.
- Don’t use keywords that reference the law!
- “Autism” isn’t as useful as mentioning specifically what you have trouble with. “I have trouble with telephone calls” is much more useful than “I have autism”. If you mention autism, use it to introduce your specific needs.

# The Direct Approach

- Use when you think there is a high chance of getting what you want – or – when the result of a *no* is bearable
- Mention your need
- Mention one or two solutions
- Work with your boss to find what you need
- If done “face-to-face” schedule time in advance. “I need 20 minutes of your time sometime this week to discuss a personnel issue.”
- Give your boss time to respond – “I don’t need an answer today, I understand you need to think through the problem.”
- Don’t demand. Simply explain the problem and possible solutions.

# What Nobody Else Wants

- Is there a task that no one else likes to do, but which is tolerable to you?
- Can also work with “less desirable” workspace that may be great for you
- For customer-oriented work, is there a customer no one else gets along with?
- Your coworkers or boss may be willing to exchange the things you don't like for the things they don't like!
- You can also give up a something others want that doesn't mean much to you, but might mean something to your boss or coworkers – bargaining power
- One man's trash, another's treasure

# Bait & Switch

- Use when you need an accommodation, but think boss may be *slightly* hesitant
- Mention your good performance
- Ask for an accommodation that would be more than you need, but would also be good to have
- If rejected, say you understand that he is limited on what he can do. Then ask if he would be willing to compromise...and give the lesser accommodation you actually wanted in the first place

# I just want to be more productive...

- Use when you are asking for accommodations which your boss may doubt address a disability
- Use when your boss is resistant towards accommodations for disabled people
- Explain how the company gains (cost/benefit analysis) by providing the change

# Change it for everyone!

- May be best in environments where uniformity is important to management
- Use when you need a change that would increase your entire workgroup's productivity if they all have it
- Enlist the support of other coworkers
- Explain the cost/benefits to your boss
- Bring evidence if you can

# Do It Yourself

- Sometimes you don't need permission or other people's money
- If management refuses an accommodation on basis of cost, but you can afford it yourself, it might be in your best interest to pay for it – regardless of your boss's legal responsibility



# A Little Bit At A Time

- Ask for either the easiest to get accommodations or the most important accommodations first
- Don't ask for 200 accommodations all at once!

# This May Not Work

- These strategies must be modified to work for each individual.
- Be creative!
- Be realistic – will anyone give that accommodation? Will that change really solve all your problems?
- Some people might not be able to work. That's okay, it's not necessarily a moral failure!

# Questions

