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Lying to her coworkers would have meant added stress. That's how Jeane Kropp looked at the situation six years ago, when she found out she had MS. Instead of trying to cover up all the extra doctor appointments, she told her employer right away.

Kropp is director of brand strategy at [Hiebing](#), a brand development and marketing firm based in Madison, Wisconsin. She'd been there just over a year when she was diagnosed.

Kropp said she got no shortage of advice to keep the diagnosis to herself. But that felt wrong.

"If they were trusting me enough to hire me, then I had to trust them enough to figure out how to deal with this together," she said.

Kropp was fortunate. She worked in a company where flex time was inherent and client service was already a team-based effort. "What I had seen from Hiebing is that they tried to deal with whatever may come with different life circumstances," Kropp recalled.

More good fortune: So far Kropp's illness has had only minimal impact on her work schedule. Although she travels for work, she's less inclined to fly out at 6 a.m. or take the redeye back anymore. And because she's sensitive to heat—like an overly warm conference room—some of her team members are called on to pinch hit from time to time.

"It has asked some flexibility of my folks, but it's always been taken on graciously," she said.

It's that kind of team-based atmosphere that means schedules can remain rather "fluid" at Hiebing, despite the high-demand client service atmosphere. One coworker comes in around 9 or 9:30 every morning after helping his wife open their restaurant. Another has a hard stop at 4:30 in the afternoon for child care responsibilities.

"If something comes in that is going to go into the evening or weekend hours, you'll probably have more volunteers than you need," Kropp said. One person covers an evening, while someone else takes over a morning commitment. "We're empowered to negotiate those things within our teams."

Business ROI

For companies that already flex, adapting to the needs of someone with a disability is natural. But for those that operate under more rigid schedules—accommodating an employee can be the difference between keeping or losing good talent. Plus, it's the law.

"The general requirement is for an employer with 15 or more employees to provide reasonable accommodation to an applicant or employee," says Shelley Kaplan, manager for ADA services with [Springboard Consulting](#) LLC, a company that specializes in marketing to and employing people with disabilities.

Reasonable accommodation could mean widening a door, allowing a modified work schedule, or supporting telework.

But Kaplan and her colleagues are quick to point out that workplaces should be more than accommodating. It's in their best interest to be proactively supportive.

"People with disabilities are the largest growing minority in America today—about 18 to 20 percent of us right now," said Kaplan. She cited an aging workforce and returning veterans as examples of a disabled workforce.

Nadine Vogel, president of Springboard, says employing, recruiting, and marketing to people with disabilities is a business imperative. She cites loyalty and innovation among the key advantages. Costs, it would seem, are a non-issue.



Cubicle Flag

From the great ideas department, comes this one from Micah Vono, ...

“The average cost of an accommodation in the U.S. is less than \$366,” Vogel said. “People with a disability average better than average attendance. Add to that people with disabilities become extremely innovative—because they’ve had to be to succeed.”

Culture Matters

Still, becoming an employer of choice for people with disabilities has more to do with a company’s culture than its hiring policies.

Kropp knows more people who’ve opted not to disclose their illness at work than who have actually had a bad experience. “They fear they would be looked at as a constant liability...or that they would be more scrutinized for any time out of the office,” she says. The fear is that disclosure, as Kropp puts it, would “create a sort of lame duck scenario.”

Vogel recommends disability and etiquette training to help people on both sides of the table overcome their fears and misconceptions. It’s the kind of thing that might help other people like Kropp have the confidence to step up and ask for help accommodating an illness.

And it might keep a few more talented individuals plugged into your workforce in the process.

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