

Companies' delicate talks about dementia

The Associated Press

CHICAGO — Faced with an aging American workforce, companies are increasingly navigating delicate conversations with employees grappling with cognitive declines, experts say.

Workers experiencing early stages of dementia may struggle with tasks they had completed without difficulty. Historically punctual employees may forget about scheduled meetings. And those who have traveled to the same office day after day, sometimes for years on end, may begin to lose their way during their morning commutes.

"I've talked to a number of families where a person didn't realize they had the disease and they didn't know what was going on. And they got fired for performance issues before anyone knew what the diagnosis was," says Ruth Drew, the director of information and support services at the nonprofit Alzheimer's Association. Drew also oversees the organization's 24-hour help hotline.

The Bureau of Labor Statistics estimates the number of U.S. workers between the ages of 65 and 74 will balloon 55 percent between 2014 and 2024, with 86 percent growth for the working population over 75.

It's that 65-and-up age group that's most likely to face dementia diagnoses, though early-onset symptoms can afflict younger people. And even though studies show the rate of dementia diagnoses has actually fallen in recent years, the sheer number of older U.S. workers expected to remain in the workforce has increasingly left employees and employers wrestling with the prospect of dementia in the office.

"And it's not just managing missed deadlines. It's about managing their frustration with everything that's changing," says Sarah Wood, director of global work-life services at Workplace Options, a North Carolina-based consultation and training organization. "If this person has been a dependable employee for 40 years and is now missing meetings, they'll be beating themselves up over this."

The Americans with Disabilities Act, which guarantees certain rights and workplace accommodation, covers individuals with Alzheimer's diagnoses and certain other forms of dementia depending on the employee's position and level of impairment.

"The trick is figuring out what tasks they can still perform and what they can still do safely to continue to contribute," Wood says.

Possible accommodations might include issuing written instructions rather than verbal commands, or reassigning a heavy machine operator or employee to a desk job, says David Fram, director of Americans with Disabilities Act and equal



AP / KEVIN WOLF

Mary Radnofsky, in the early stages of dementia, prepares to move to a home more suitable for her declining health.

opportunity services at the nonprofit National Employment Law Institute. He notes that employers cannot simply fire an employee solely because of a disability or dementia diagnosis if that person can still perform certain job requirements.

"The next question is whether they're qualified for their job. And that's the tougher point, depending on how advanced [the dementia] is," he says. "People have to do the essential functions of the job."

This creates a delicate balance between employer and employee. For some, disclosing dementia to an employer could open the door to workplace adjustments. For others, there's fear of stigmatization or even termination.

After initially being misdiagnosed, Mary Radnofsky, 60, a former professor now living in the Washington, D.C., metropolitan area, learned she had a rare form of leukoencephalopathy, which caused minor strokes, seizures and cognitive impairment.

Her worsening condition led her to step away from her teaching career at the University of Hawaii in 2011, even before her official diagnosis.

"Apparently I 'looked' healthy both on paper and in person, had a very good education and was 'too young' to have dementia," she says.

Early dementia symptoms often mirror other ailments that may impair cognitive function, or even other types of dementia.

Geriatrician Al Power suggests that the United States is "still in denial in terms of public policy" related to the aging workforce and supporting employees with dementia. And that, he says, has placed a "greater burden on society."

"I don't think people have gotten their heads around how to respond to this rapidly aging population," he says. "We should have been planning for this 30 years ago."

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