

Worker who stutters wants promotion to job that requires public speaking: Now what?

The problem: A stellar employee seeks a promotion to a job that demands a fair amount of speaking in front of groups large and small. The trouble is, she stutters. Your first thought: This will not work out. What do you tell her?

The case:

No one in the department was faster or more accurate than Irene when it came to flying fingers on a keyboard. But she also knew a lot more about computers than just the keyboard. When other typists developed problems, they usually found the answer with Irene's help.

Irene was thrilled when her boss was promoted. She had more seniority than anyone else in the department, so she thought that her boss's job would be hers. Then, Irene's boss called her into the office and told her the new manager would be transferring in from another department.

Irene started to speak but, as was usually the case when she was nervous or upset, began to stutter. When the manager finally understood what Irene was trying to say, she reacted sympathetically. "I know you have the technical skills to do the job," she said. "But what about the communication skills?"

"I, I, I don't have pro, pro, problems talking with other typists. You, you know I he-he-help them whenever you're not around."

"The typists know you and they're aware of your stuttering problem," the manager said. "But in my job, you would have to deal with other programmers, department heads, and, sometimes, customers. We simply wouldn't be doing you a favor by promoting you into a job you couldn't handle."

The answer:

If Irene decided to file an Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) lawsuit, it's doubtful the company would be able to prove the disability would prevent her from performing the job. If the position had been for a telephone operator or a news anchor, a bona fide occupational qualification (BFOQ) might exist. But preventing a person from advancement because of a stuttering problem is part of what the ADA is designed to change.

"Reasonable accommodation" means more than widening aisles or installing special equipment. A little patience in dealing with a person with a disability certainly qualifies as a form of accommodation. It's not just a question of law, but of practicality. It makes good sense for companies to advance employees like Irene.