

Accommodation in the Workplace: A Conversational Multi-Module Guide for HR Professionals



Imagine you're the HR lead at a busy Ottawa tech firm. Late one afternoon, a long-time developer emails you: her chronic migraines have flared, and she can't focus in the open-plan office—but she's determined to keep contributing. At the same time, your warehouse supervisor needs to adjust John's shift hours so he can pick up his elderly mother from her dialysis appointments. And down the hall, a new employee asks if she can wear her hijab in the manufacturing area, even though safety policies ban workers from wearing loose fitting garments that can get ensnared in the moving parts of machinery.

These aren't edge cases??—they're everyday moments when your team's legal duty and your organization's culture collide. Under federal and provincial human-rights laws, you must make accommodations for disabilities, religion, family status, and other protected characteristics. However, such accommodations must be "reasonable"; you don't have to make accommodations that would impose "undue hardship." Although the rule sounds straightforward enough on paper, in the real world workplace in which HR directors operate drawing the line between "reasonable accommodation" and "undue hardship" is anything but easy.

Adding to the pressure is what's at stake. The decisions you make are subject to second guessing by courts, arbitrators and tribunals. And if it turns out that the requested accommodation you rejected as an undue hardship was actually reasonable, you and your company can get into a lot of trouble.

That's why HR Insider created this six-module guide: **Accommodation in the Workplace—What's Required, What's Too Much**. We'll walk you through:

- **Module One:** Why Accommodation Matters—legal duty, business benefits, and inclusion impact
- **Module Two:** Building Your Framework—intake processes, interactive dialogue, and solution hierarchies
- **Module Three:** The Undue Hardship Roadmap—a clear federal/provincial chart and how to evaluate costs, safety, and operational impact
- **Module Four:** Common Traps—six pitfalls that turn good intentions into legal

headaches

- **Module Five:** Best-Practice Processes—step-by-step from request to resolution, plus documentation and confidentiality tips
- **Module Six:** Continuous Improvement—metrics, audits, policy refreshes, and fostering an inclusive culture

By the end, you'll have a clear, practical playbook for handling every accommodation request—balancing your legal obligations, budget realities, and commitment to a truly inclusive workplace. Let's get started with Module One!

- **Module One**
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- **Module Three**
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- **Module One**

Module One: Foundations of Reasonable Accommodation—Purpose, Scope & Principles

When Nadia, a software developer in Ottawa, disclosed her chronic migraine condition, she worried about being seen as “difficult.” Instead, her company's proactive accommodation—allowing flexible start times and granting noise-canceling headphones—kept her on the team and performing at her best. That's the power of workplace accommodation done right.

1. The Core Purpose

- **Ensuring Equal Opportunity:** Accommodation removes barriers so employees with protected characteristics (disability, religion, family status, etc.) can perform essential job functions.
- **Fulfilling Legal Duty:** Under federal and provincial human-rights laws, employers must make “reasonable accommodations” to the point of **undue hardship**.
- **Cultivating Inclusion:** Beyond compliance, accommodations signal that your organization values diverse contributions, boosting morale and retention.

2. Scope of Protected Grounds

Accommodation obligations arise under grounds such as:

- **Disability:** Physical, mental health, chronic conditions, learning disabilities.

- **Religion:** Observance of holy days, dress and grooming practices.
- **Family Status:** Caregiving responsibilities for children, elders, or disabled dependents.
- **Sex and Gender Identity:** Pregnancy, childbirth, and gender-transition supports.

3. Guiding Principles

1. **Individualized Assessment:** No “one-size” solutions—every employee has unique needs and you must assess the needs and capabilities of the particular individual requesting the accommodation.
2. **Interactive Process:** A timely, two-way dialog to explore the employee’s needs and solutions available, if any, to meet them.
3. **Reasonable:** Employers need not provide accommodations that, after carefully considering all of the circumstances involved, they determine are not reasonable and would impose undue hardship. The fact that a requested accommodation would impose cost or inconvenience isn’t enough to make it undue hardship. The cost or inconvenience must also be undue. Examples of accommodations that would impose undue hardship include those that would:
 - * Put the safety and health of other employees at unreasonable risk—such as exempting a Sikh employee from a no-beards respirator policy when that individual is in charge of monitoring atmospheric conditions inside a hazardous confined space and who thus must be fully protected from respiratory hazards to protect the crew working inside the space;
 - Impose undue and unreasonable costs on the company—such as installing a special elevator in a small office building for the sake of a single mobility impaired employee;
 - Require you to violate the rights of another employee—such as by barring a visually impaired employee from bringing a guide dog to work to accommodate a co-worker’s pet allergy;

In a legal proceeding, employers have the burden of proving by objective evidence that the accommodation they rejected is an undue hardship. Objective evidence includes, but is not limited to:

- financial statements and budgets
 - scientific data, information and data resulting from empirical studies
 - expert opinion
 - detailed information about the activity and the requested accommodation
 - information about the conditions surrounding the activity and their effects on the person or group with a disability or other protected characteristic.
1. (see Module Three).
 2. **Confidentiality & Respect:** Medical or personal information must be kept private and shared only on a need-to-know basis.

4. Expanded Case Story: Migraines in the Call Center

When Nadia’s migraines flared unpredictably, her performance dipped. Rather than issuing warnings, her manager initiated an accommodation meeting. Over three sessions they developed a plan:

- **Flexible scheduling** (later start times on bad days)
- **Silent workstations** away from open-plan noise
- **Short “recovery breaks”** to rest in a dim room
- **Remote-work option** during peak symptom periods

Within two months, Nadia’s attendance stabilized, and her quality metrics returned to

target. Her commitment—and the company’s flexibility—reinforced that accommodation benefits both parties.

• Module Two

Module Two: Crafting an Accommodation Framework—Processes & Practices

An effective accommodation framework embeds clear processes and roles into everyday operations.

1. Intake & Interactive Dialogue

- **Initiation:** Employee submits accommodation request—via form, email, or HR portal. No medical note required at first.
- **Dialogue Phase:** Within 5 business days, HR meets to discuss: the limitation, the job duties impacted, and potential adjustments.
- **Information Gathering:** With consent, request functional information from health-care provider—what tasks can/can’t be performed, duration, and review date.
- **Duty to Cooperate:** Accommodations is a two-way process in which both sides must cooperate—you don’t have to make accommodations for employees who don’t meet their duty to cooperate.

2. Exploring Accommodation Options

Use the **hierarchy of accommodation I NEVER HEARD OF THIS. DID YOU MAKE IT UP???** What constitutes a reasonable accommodation depends on the situation. Common examples include:

1. **Adjust Work Schedules:** Flexible hours, remote work, break modifications.
2. **Modify Job Duties:** Reassign non-essential tasks or redistribute workload among team.
3. **Change Work Environment:** Ergonomic equipment, private office spaces, reduced sensory stimuli.
4. **Provide Assistive Technologies:** Screen readers, voice dictation, specialized software.
5. **Reassignment:** If no other options succeed, consider a transfer to a vacant, suitable role.

Document all options considered, including those declined and why you rejected them—these records will be crucial if the employee files a legal action against you.

3. Approval & Implementation

- **Formal Accommodation Plan SOUNDS LIKE OVERKILL:** Outline the agreed adjustments, review dates, and responsible individuals.
- **Manager & IT Involvement:** Equip managers to implement changes; involve IT/Facilities early for equipment or space modifications.
- **Training & Communication:** Educate supervisors and team members (on a need-to-know basis) about changes and any new workflows.

4. Follow-Up & Review

- **Scheduled Check-Ins:** At least monthly during the first 3 months to assess effectiveness.
- **Monitor & Adjust:** Ensure the accommodation is effective and make any adjustments

or corrections necessary.

- **End Date or Renewal:** For temporary conditions, specify a review date; for permanent disabilities, plan periodic reviews (e.g., annually).

• Module Three

Module Three: Reasonable Accommodations vs. Undue Hardship Distinction Roadmap

Jurisdiction	Governing Law / Policy	Duty to Accommodate	Undue Hardship Factors	Documentation & Review
Federal	Canadian Human Rights Act; Treasury Board Policy	Must accommodate all protected grounds to point of undue hardship	Cost, health & safety risk, genuine operational impact	Keep request records; review at least annually
Ontario	Human Rights Code s.17; AODA (for accessibility)	Duty to accommodate disability, religion, etc.; accessible formats for disabled persons	Cost relative to size, health & safety, impact on collective rights	Written accommodation plan; 3-year retention
Quebec	Charter of Human Rights; Act Respecting Labour	Individualized assessment; non-discriminatory practices	Financial costs, external funding, safety risks	Interactive process logs; 5-year records
Alberta	Human Rights Act s.7; OHS Code	Must adjust policies & environment for disability, religion, family status	Financial & health-safety limits; undue hardship threshold high	Document decisions; review upon request
BC	Human Rights Code; Accessible BC Act	Duty to prevent discrimination by accommodating disabilities	Cost, outside funding, disruption magnitude	Records for 2 years; periodic accessibility audits
Manitoba	Human Rights Code; Workplace Safety & Health Regs	Accommodate disability & family status; safe workplace	Cost, workplace health/safety, genuine hardship test	Maintain separate accommodation files
Saskatchewan	Human Rights Code; OHS Regs s.32	Must accommodate protected grounds; safe work environment	Cost, safety, operational exigency	Retain records 2–3 years; review annually

Jurisdiction	Governing Law / Policy	Duty to Accommodate	Undue Hardship Factors	Documentation & Review
Atlantic Provinces (NS, PEI, NL)	Human Rights Acts	Duty to accommodate disability, religion, family status	Similar hardship factors across provinces	Documentation per provincial guidelines
Territories (YT, NWT, NU)	Human Rights Acts & OHS Regs	Reasonable accommodations required for protected grounds	Cost, safety, operational impact	Written process; review at least biennially

• Module Four

Module Four: Common Traps–Six Pitfalls in Accommodation

1. Preconception Over Documentation

- **Pitfall:** Assuming you know the solution before asking the employee, then forcing a one-size fix.
- **Avoidance:** Always begin with open-ended questions and document options discussed.

2. Delaying the Interactive Process

- **Pitfall:** Waiting weeks for medical notes before talking with the employee.
- **Avoidance:** Start the dialogue immediately; medical info can follow.

3. Confidentiality Breaches

- **Pitfall:** Discussing an employee's disability in team meetings.
- **Avoidance:** Limit information sharing to those who need to implement accommodations.

4. Over-Accommodating (and Causing Undue Hardship)

- **Pitfall:** Buying \$15,000 machinery for one employee without exploring lower-cost or shared solutions.
- **Avoidance:** Follow the hierarchy; investigate external funding before major expenses.

5. Ignoring Collective-Agreement or Union Constraints

- **Pitfall:** Reassigning duties that breach seniority or bumping rights, triggering grievances.
- **Avoidance:** Engage union reps early; ensure solutions comply with collective terms.

6. No Review Mechanism

- **Pitfall:** Implementing a plan and never revisiting it—leading to outdated or ineffective measures.

Avoidance: Schedule formal reviews (e.g., quarterly) and allow employees to request adjustments.

• Module Five

Module Five: Process Best Practices–From Request to Resolution

1. Intake & Initial Meeting

- **Accessible Request Channels:** Online forms, email, or verbal requests documented by HR.
- **Timely Acknowledgment:** Confirm receipt within 2 business days.
- **First Meeting Agenda:** Clarify the employee's needs, explain next steps, and set timelines.

2. Medical & Functional Assessment

- **Targeted Medical Information:** Request only what's necessary: functional abilities and limitations.
- **Role Analysis:** Match duties to abilities—identify essential functions and those that can be modified.

3. Developing the Accommodation Plan

- **Multidisciplinary Team:** Include HR, direct manager, health & safety, and, with consent, medical or return-to-work specialists.
- **Written Agreement:** Outline adjustments, duration (temporary vs. permanent), review dates, and responsibilities.

4. Implementation & Communication

- **Manager Briefing:** Ensure supervisors understand changes and any new workflows—without revealing private details.
- **IT/Facilities Coordination:** Schedule equipment delivery, software installations, or workspace modifications.

5. Monitoring & Adjustment

- **Check-In Schedule:** Regular touchpoints—e.g., weekly for the first month, then monthly.
- **Employee Feedback Loop:** Encourage candid feedback—what's working, what's missing.
- **Documentation Updates:** Record any plan changes, new limitations, or end-of-term reviews.

• Module Six

Module Six: Continuous Improvement—Metrics, Audits & Culture

1. Key Metrics

- **Accommodation Requests by Type:** Disability, religion, family status—spot trends.
- **Time-to-Resolution:** Average days from request to implementation.
- **Closure Rate:** % of requests fully accommodated versus those stopped at undue hardship.
- **Employee Satisfaction:** Survey accommodated employees on perceived support and effectiveness.

2. Audit & Review Cycle

- **Annual Program Audit:** HR audits a sample of accommodation files for compliance with policy and regulatory requirements.

- **Undue Hardship Reviews:** HR and Finance jointly review major-cost accommodations to reassess ongoing viability and explore cost-sharing options.

3. Policy & Training Updates

- **Regular Policy Refresh:** Update definitions, procedures, and undue-hardship thresholds based on audit findings and legislative changes.
- **Manager Workshops:** Annual training on the interactive process, unconscious bias in accommodation decisions, and confidentiality obligations.

4. Fostering an Inclusive Culture

- **Awareness Campaigns:** Promote success stories of accommodations enabling employee contributions.
- **Employee Resource Groups (ERGs):** Create forums for employees with shared needs (e.g., caregivers, disabilities) to voice suggestions.
- **Leadership Commitment:** Executives publicly endorse accommodation efforts, allocating resources and modeling inclusive behavior.

Additional Resources

[Accommodations Policy](#)

[Accommodation Policy](#)

[Workplace Accommodation: Not Just A One-Way Obligation For Employers](#)

[Best Practices in Employee Accommodations](#)

[A Manager's Guide to Reasonable Accommodation](#)

WHY THIS GUIDE?

Human tone: Written like a chat over coffee, not a courtroom sermon.

Legal clarity: Key legislative references are embedded for quick scanning.

Actionable insights: Stories, examples, and clear next steps.