

**MSWS: Episode 2 –
Special Accommodations: Helping Your Employees with MS and Chronic Disease**

- (On Screen Logo Animation) 00:00 (MSWS Multiple Sclerosis Work Space)
- (Announcer VO) 00:09 The following podcast is not designed to provide legal or HR advice but is intended to provide a general overview of the topic.
- (On Screen Title): 00:10 **Special Accommodations:
Helping Your Employees with MS and Chronic Disease**
- (Christine Porath) 00:16 Hi, I'm Christine Porath, a management professor at Georgetown University's McDonough School of Business. I study how to create respectful workplaces where people can thrive. I'm here with Steve Robins, co-founder of Spark Healthcare, a healthcare communications company based in Brooklyn, New York. And we have Kara Barton, a clinical social worker at the Keck Medical Center of University of Southern California and the Department of Neurology here on the phone.
- (On Screen Title) 00:16 Christine Porath, PhD
Professor
Georgetown University, McDonough School of Business
- (On-Screen Title) 00:27 Stephen Robins
Managing Partner & Co-Founder
SPARK Healthcare
- (On-Screen Title and Still Image) 00:35 On the phone:
Kara Barton, MSW, LCSW
Clinical Social Worker
Keck Medical Center, University of Southern California
- (Christine Porath) 00:43 Steve, could you tell us a little bit about yourself and your background?
- (Steve Robins) 00:46 Yeah, happy to. Thanks for the invite today. It's great to be here, Christine. Spark Healthcare is a public health company. We create educational programs on chronic diseases where we see unmet areas of need. In March of this year, as you may be aware, there was an article in the medical journal called *Neurology* about Multiple Sclerosis. And the headline was that MS has been under diagnosed significantly.
- (On-Screen Super) 01:09 Almost a million people in the US are living with Multiple Sclerosis (MS)
Substantially higher prevalence of MS than originally thought

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- (Steve Robins) 01:10 There are almost a million people walking around in the US with MS. And we thought that before the numbers were around 400,000. There is a substantially higher prevalence than we've been aware of for the past 30 years or so. Interestingly, MS is a disease that really impacts folks at the prime of their lives. In their 20s to 40s is the typical diagnosis, here again at the prime point of their career.
- (On-Screen Super) 01:29 MS impacts people in the prime of their lives and careers
Many are diagnosed between 20-40 years of age
- (Christine Porath) 01:35 Well, great. Well, thank you. And Kara, can you tell us a little bit of all of the wonderful work that you're doing counseling people on this as well as caregivers and your experiences with that?
- (Kara Barton) 01:48 Sure. Thank you so much for including me. This is really exciting to look at the other side of the situation from a corporate perspective. I work with patients who have chronic illness, neurological conditions. One of those groups is people with MS.
- (Christine Porath) 02:02 And so...Kara, one of the things I was really curious about is the idea of what do we mean when we talk about accommodations in the workplace? What does that look like?
- (Kara Barton) 02:14 Well, an accommodation refers to modifying the typical work environment in a manner that helps the person with a particular disability to remain as productive as possible in the workplace.
- (On-Screen Super) 02:14 An accommodation is modifying the work environment to help employees remain productive
- (Christine Porath) 02:25 Ok. And can you give an example or two of what these workplace modifications or accommodations might look like?
- (Kara Barton) 02:31 Sure. Accommodations can take many forms. And, they might include something as simple as providing a trackball mouse for someone who's a salaried office worker who has challenges manipulating a traditional mouse. Or relocating an employee with MS who has difficulty walking to an office that's closer to the restroom. For an hourly worker, that might mean a modified work schedule to accommodate medical appointments or job sharing or having them work at a time where they have the most energy and can be the most productive.
- (On-Screen Super) 02:34 Accommodation examples: track ball mouse, relocating an employee's office, modifying a work schedule

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- (Christine Porath) 03:05 Ok so are people with MS by definition disabled and therefore automatically entitled to accommodations in the workplace or not?
- (Kara Barton) 03:12 There's so many keywords in there, disabled, automatic and entitled. No. There's nothing automatic or broad about saying that somebody with MS is definitely disabled. So much about having MS is invisible to the naked eye. And so... It's really about the person themselves who feels that something's going on in their body and whether they feel like they need to have a change and accommodation in order to stay in the workplace. And... they're protected by the Americans with Disabilities Act. That's usually called the ADA.
- (On-Screen Super) 03:17 An MS diagnosis does not mean a person is “disabled”
- (On-Screen Super) 03:38 An employee with MS can and should ask about special accommodations needed
Protected by Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA)
- (On-Screen Super) 05:04 Visit ms-workspace.com for more resources and information.
- (On-Screen Super) 05:23 Important to continually revisit the need for accommodations
- (Steve Robins) 03:54 Just curious, Kara, when an employee becomes or gets a diagnosis for MS, is it common to be able to go to your employer on their website or in the employee handbook or during orientation and get a sense for what the accommodations might be that are available to you so you don't have to disclose the disease perhaps for those folk who are uncomfortable doing so?
- (Kara Barton) 04:19 Each workplace environment has different protocol. That would be up to each employee to understand the nature of their own work environment and for the corporations or employers to consider what they want to present to their employees to make an environment more user-friendly for people who have MS and invisible disabilities, whether they want to feel safe allowing their employees to disclose. That would be a personal decision for each environment.
- (On-Screen Super) 04:21 Every work environment is unique
Important to create a supportive environment for people with chronic diseases like MS
- (On-Screen Title and Still Image): 04:38 On the phone:
Kara Barton, MSW, LCSW

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Clinical Social Worker
Keck Medical Center, University of Southern California

- (Christine Porath) 04:56 So...What should an employer/HR Professional do if they suspect that they may have an employee with MS?
- (Kara Barton) 05:08 Well, the main thing an employer can do is to create an environment or a corporate culture in which people feel comfortable discussing health-related issues and other important topics that are perceived as being sort of taboo in the workplace. But other than that, it's really up to the employee as to whether they want to raise the issue.
- (On-Screen Super) 05:08 Consider creating a culture where people feel comfortable discussing health-related issues
Responsibility is on employee to disclose disease and raise issues
- (Kara Barton) 05:27 There are legal reasons why an employer shouldn't bring it up themselves, suspecting things or you know hearing through the grapevine that something's going on. The question is really up to the person with the diagnosis of MS to speak to the employer. A lot of people are scared about that because they know that their livelihood is on the line.
- (On Screen Title): 05:27 Christine Porath, PhD
Professor
Georgetown University, McDonough School of Business
- (Steve Robins) 05:46 Yeah, I've heard this. The opposite is also true. I should say the employer side has a similar concern. A personal friend is a very senior HR person. She's the SVP of global talent for a corporation which I won't name, but there are 40,000 employees. She mentioned to me on this topic that she is reticent to make any comment to an employee if they sneeze in a meeting or if they look somewhat pale for fear of that coming back around somehow in a litigious situation where that employee may feel discriminated against.
- (On-Screen Title): 05:46 Stephen Robins
Managing Partner & Co-Founder
SPARK Healthcare
- (Steve Robins) 06:21 This topic of health seems to be taboo both on the HR side of the house as well as with the employees, which is very unfortunate. It creates a culture of fear or secrecy, which it sounds like is very counterproductive around public health.

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- (Christine Porath) 06:35 And again for all, and regardless of whether employees have chronic illnesses or not, it benefits leaders and managers to really try to create this safe space. You know, the interesting thing from my perspective is a lot of times this amounts to very small actions that leaders and managers take. They come across as really valuing someone by saying, "Hello," by asking how they're doing, by smiling, by, "How can I help?" Just generally, you know, not anything specific.
- (On-Screen Super) 06:52 Small actions from leaders and managers can make a big impact
- (Christine Porath) 07:05 I think that that's really what we want to coach managers and leaders on is to care about these touch points that don't take too long throughout their day. Just to be more mindful.
- (Steve Robins) 07:14 Little things-
- (Christine Porath) 07:15 Yeah! Little things go a long way.
- (Steve Robins) 07:16 ... can have huge impacts.
- (Christine Porath) 07:19 So. And Kara, you obviously coach these folks a lot. Are there some specifics that you recommend on the employee or the HR side of things that would help create this safe space?
- (Kara Barton) 7:30 It's really important for people to assess the environment that they work in. And so – a corporation really has an opportunity to introduce the climate and the context to the new employees. So when people enter an environment, they learn what the setting is. And so, there's an opportunity there to say, you know... "This is what we encourage people to do," and what are the healthy ways that people can be in the workplace? And if people are modeling healthy behavior, the employers are going to follow suit.
- (On-Screen Super) 7:35 Assess your workplace environment and culture
- (Christine Porath) 8:08 Yeah, I love that idea. Managers really need to walk the talk.
- (Steve Robins) 8:11 For sure.
- (Christine Porath) 8:12 I think people become very cynical and skeptical if it's a value to respect people and yet they don't see people living those values, especially at the top of the organization. Because Steve mentioned this stuff ripples in organizations and then outside of them. So,

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small actions matter more than we might think.

- (On Screen Title): 08:18 Christine Porath, PhD
Professor
Georgetown University, McDonough School of Business
- (Steve Robins) 8:30 And respect is a huge deal. We were talking before the podcast about that point from your research that that may be the top, what was the top desired characteristic or attribute in an organization for employees that feel respected?
- (Christine Porath) 8:43 Yeah...It was the number one thing that affected a range of outcomes. Leaders valuing people and respecting them was more important to people than even things like recognition, appreciation, learning and development, even useful feedback. People really have this desperate need to feel valued and to feel a sense of connection. When that's not there, people tend to feel isolated. They don't feel like they belong to a team and therefore they will not bring their best. And again, this applies for anyone, not just people with chronic illnesses.
- (On-Screen Super) 8:47 Data show that making employees feel respected and valued is critical to workplace productivity
- (Christine Porath) 9:16 Ok, so once the request for reasonable accommodations is made by an employee, are employees obligated to make them a reality?
- Kara Barton: 9:24 Title I of the ADA, the Americans with Disability Act, is the section that that covers employment. One of the key nondiscrimination requirements of this section is the obligation of the employers with more than 15 employees to provide reasonable accommodations for disabled employees. However, the ADA stops short of providing a summary of any policies or procedures that companies have to follow, which constitutes reasonable accommodations.
- (On-Screen Super) 9:31 Title I of ADA covers employment
It is the obligation of the employer with 15+ employees to provide reasonable accommodations for disabled employees
- (Kara Barton) 9:56 So...accommodations such as job sharing, telecommuting, reserved parking spots, relocating an office, et cetera, represent common ways in which employers and employees can work together to achieve an outcome that represents win-win for everyone. And Employers are not required to provide accommodations that might be perceived as undue hardship for the company, such as creating a brand new job profile for the

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employee or undertaking building renovations or furnishing personal need items, mobility aids, glasses, et cetera.

- (On-Screen Super) 10:01 Reasonable accommodations may include job sharing, telecommuting, reserved parking, etc.
- (Christine Porath) 10:31 So - we're used to talking about the Family Medical Leave Act. Usually it's in the context of a newborn baby where new moms and dads might take some time off. However, there are implications for people with chronic illnesses like MS and those that care for them, correct?
- (Kara Barton) 10:48 Absolutely. FMLA is not something everybody knows about. That would be a great thing for an HR department to talk about. There is paid and unpaid FMLA. That would be great to have HR departments discuss with employees who might have chronic illness they wouldn't know, but also who might have other people in their family who need to care for people with chronic illness. The caregiver or the person who is ill themselves might be able to use that time off. That will keep everybody productive and on- target for the goals at the workplace.
- (On-Screen Super) 10:59 Educate employees about the paid and unpaid provisions of Family & Medical Leave Act (FMLA)
- (On-Screen Title and Still Image): 11:16 On the phone:
Kara Barton, MSW, LCSW
Clinical Social Worker
Keck Medical Center, University of Southern California
- (Steve Robins) 11:28 Got it. Is there any rule of thumb, Kara, around how employees should you mentioned the mix of accommodations, what the initial ask might look like? Is it a smart to or recommended to ask for one thing or a list of things? How do you come to that initial ask or list of accommodations?
- (Kara Barton) 11:47 In our clinic at USC, we have our physicians refer to occupational therapy, sometimes known as OT. Those are the professionals who can speak to you specifically about what your job functions are and where the deficits are, where the fatigue might come in or any kind of discomfort or impairment related to your job function. And then the employee can then go into the employer with a very specific ask and say, "These are the things that I need." It could be time-oriented or space-oriented or-
- (On-Screen Super) 11:54 Employee should work closely with medical

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professional to identify deficits in job functions

- (On-Screen Super) 12:20 Employee can then express specific needs to employer around necessary accommodations
- (Steve Robins) 12:26 Temperature too I understand can be a big impacter, colder places.
- (Kara Barton) 12:30 Sure. Proximity to the restroom or quiet to be able to focus. These are different kinds of needs. It really is a conversation first before going into the employer. And that can help the employee feel more comfortable going in instead of grasping at straws.
- (Steve Robins) 12:50 I was just...That reminds me of a conversation I had in preparing for today's podcast. A gentleman who is also the head of the HR organization for his employer, one of the household name beverage companies, and was talking about the fact that you would be surprised at how many people in the upper echelon of executives in that company had special accommodations for them for a variety of reasons and several from MS and had been receiving those accommodations for decades.
- (Christine Porath) 13:20 Yeah, I think that's where the best cultures sit is that idea of partnerships and relationships. What we know from research is that those kinds of cultures tend to promote better productivity, more innovation. Certainly to your point, Steve, higher retention, right? You're able to keep very talented people-
- (Steve Robins) 13:38 That's exactly right. Right...right.
- (Christine Porath) 13:40 ... who are contributing their best. One of the questions I have, Kara, is how can companies train supervisors or HR partners to be real partners in these health-related matters involving their employees or direct reports?
- (Kara Barton) 13:56 Well, it's a really big opportunity for many companies. Often human resources and other professionals feel like they have to avoid the topic of asking about anything related to someone's health in the workplace for fear that the question or response might be brought up in a legal situation down the road. Employees feel that same way as well. But this lack of openness really can lead to a culture where supervisors are afraid to ask about the welfare of their employees. Employees end up living with hiding their health issues, which is causing another burden on them to actually hide and manage and relegate that to their personal life rather than taking advantage of the educational resources and support accommodations that employers can provide.

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(On-Screen Super) 14:25 Lack of openness can lead to a difficult working environment
Causes undue burden on employee and employer

(Kara Barton) 14:46 That said, there are legal considerations that HR professionals and management-level colleagues should be aware of. There are best practices around ways in which supervisors can appropriately ask whether health-related challenges are getting in the way of an individual's ability to perform in the workplace. It makes sense for companies to develop a set of guidelines or a training module that all supervisors can expose, at least be exposed to this kind of topic. In addition to setting the manager up for success, it would help limit the downstream legal liability for the employer.

(On-Screen Super) 14:50 Important to take legal considerations into account
Leverage best practices for how to ask about health-related issues
Create guidelines and training modules for supervisors

(Christine Porath) 15:19 Well...thanks Kara, that those are great ideas. And...Steve and Kara, thanks so much for spending time with us.

(Steve Robins) 15:24 Sure.

(Christine Porath VO) 15:26 Thanks for your time today. For those listening, be sure to check out the MS Work Space website at ms-workspace.com. There you'll find resources that can provide additional support to employees in your organization, as well as a very unique MS Estimator tool that can help give you a sense of the impact MS may be having on your company right now. So visit that MS Work Space website and thanks again for listening.

(On-Screen Animation) 15:26 (ms-workspace.com screen shots)

(On Screen Logo) 15:50 (MSWS Multiple Sclerosis Work Space)
(ms-workspace.com)

(On Screen Logo Animation) 15:55 (MSWS Multiple Sclerosis Work Space)

(On-Screen Super) 16:04 Be sure to view Episode 1 in this series to learn about "The Impact of MS" on your organization.

(Fade Out) 16:13