DMEC
2026 ANNUAL CONFERENCE

Beyond the Summit

Supporting the Climb, Not Just the Request

ADA • PWFA • Connecting the Employee Experience

A conversation on compliance, connection, and the employee experience — with Chris Waddell as a human lens for what support makes possible.

Presented by Symetra | 2026

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Course Map: Three Sections, One Story

From statutory requirements to the lived experience of asking for support

01



ADA Essentials

Who is covered, what triggers the interactive process, and how to support functional needs

02



PWFA Essentials

What changes when limitations are tied to pregnancy, childbirth, or related medical conditions

03



Connection to Chris's Experience

How the climb becomes a practical framework for employers

The Common Thread: a good process helps people keep contributing in meaningful ways

SECTION 1

ADA Essentials

Start with the legal foundation, then translate it into employee experience moments



ADA: What Leaders Need to Hold Onto

The ADA is not just a form. It is a civil rights framework that requires individualized thinking.

Purpose

Protect qualified individuals with disabilities from discrimination and ensure access to equal employment opportunities and benefits

Coverage

Generally applies to employers with 15 or more employees. The ADAAA broadened how disability is interpreted

Obligation

Provide reasonable accommodations to qualified employees unless doing so would create undue hardship

Experience goal

A process that feels clear, confidential, collaborative, and focused on barriers not labels.

Compliance is the basecamp. Trust is gained through meaningful conversations at every step of the climb.



Employees do not need “magic words.”

They only need to communicate a workplace problem tied to a medical condition.

What the law says

Physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more major life activities; a record of such impairment; or being regarded as having such impairment.

What the employee says

- “I’m having trouble getting to work on time because of medical treatments.”
- “I need time off to get treatment for a back problem.”

How can HR help

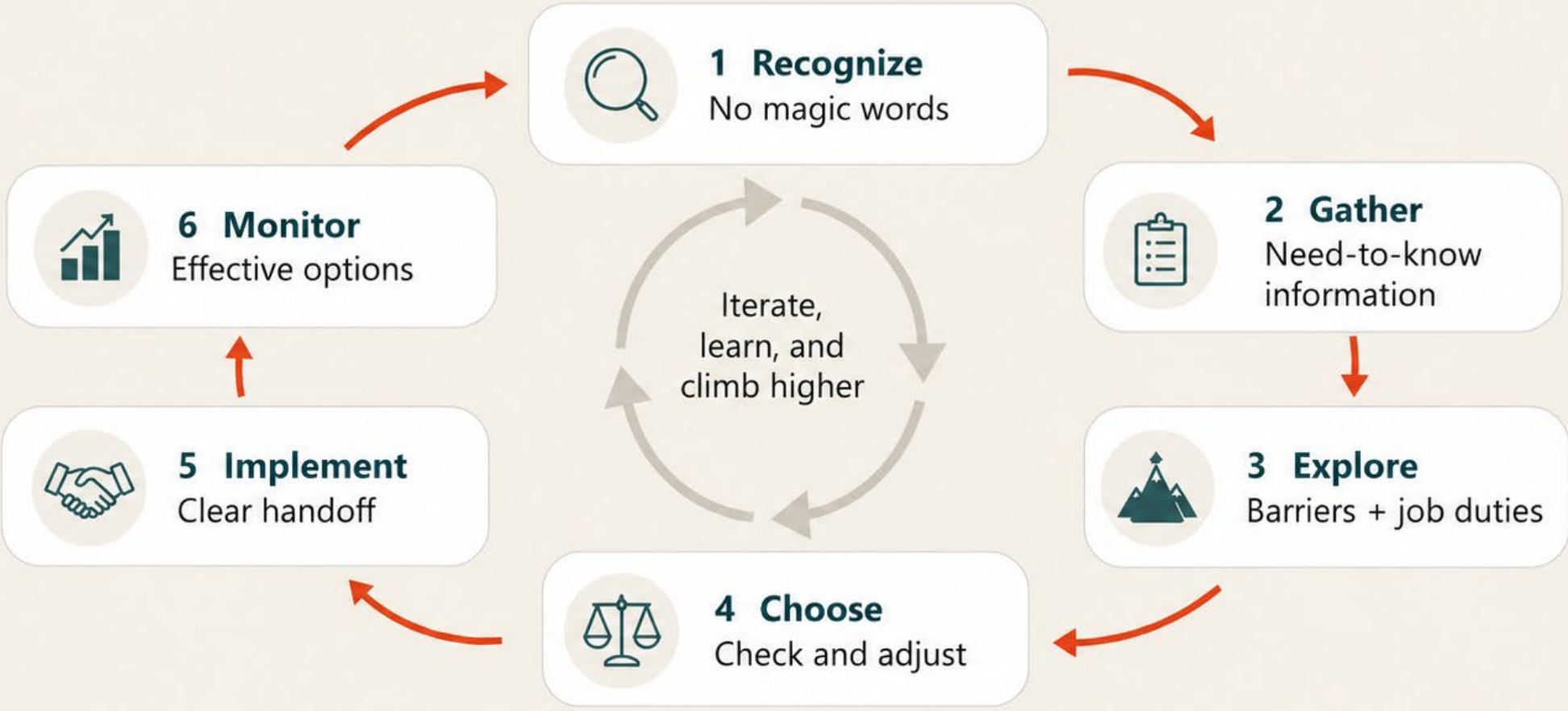
- Pause. Recognize the possible request.
- Explain the process.
- Ask only relevant questions.
- Move into the interactive process.

Employee experience question: *“Will I be believed and guided, or tested and delayed?”*



The Interactive Process: An Iterative Climb, Circling Higher with Every Step

Using the below steps can reduce uncertainty and improve outcomes.



The employee sees a path. The employer sees a repeatable, equit*able* process.

ADA Accommodations: Practical Options and Common Pitfalls

Think broadly. Decide individually. Avoid blanket rules.

Do's

- Build a collaborative, individualized process
- Lead with empathy & actively listen to the employee's concerns
- Keep the process collaborative; involve the employee & keep them informed
- Keep job descriptions current so decisions reflect the actual role
- Evaluate each request individually

Don'ts

- Avoid shortcuts that turn into blanket rules
- Wait for "magic words" before starting the conversation
- Keep medical information in regular HR files
- Count protected absences against performance
- Use "100% healed," "no remote work," or automatic termination rules

Conversation starter:

"I'd like to understand how your condition affects your work and what we may be able to do to help you perform your job successfully."

SECTION 2

PWFA Essentials

A parallel accommodations framework with a faster, lighter, pregnancy-specific posture



PWFA: What Changed for Employers?

The PWFA fills gaps between ADA, the Pregnancy Discrimination Act, and FMLA.

Core requirement

Covered employers must provide reasonable accommodations for known limitations related to pregnancy, childbirth, or related medical conditions unless it causes undue hardship.

Effective dates

The PWFA was enacted on June 27, 2023. EEOC final regulations were issued April 15, 2024, and became effective June 18, 2024.

Key difference from ADA

Pregnancy itself is not automatically an ADA disability, but PWFA covered limitations do not need to meet the ADA disability standard.

HR Approach

Move quickly. Keep documentation limited. Consider interim accommodations because pregnancy-related needs can be time-sensitive.

PWFA shifts the focus from paperwork to finding practical ways to help employees stay at work.



PWFA: Known Limitations & Predictable Assessments

Many requests should be quick, simple, and documentation-light.

KNOWN LIMITATIONS

1. Communicated by the employee or representative
2. Related to pregnancy, childbirth, or related medical conditions
3. No minimum severity required

PREDICTABLE ASSESSMENTS

1. Carry water and drink as needed
2. Additional restroom breaks
3. Stand or sit when jobs require the other
4. Breaks as needed to eat and drink

NOTE: Usually, no supporting documentation is required for these simple modifications.

Employee experience question: "Can I get what I need when I need it?"

PWFA Process: Simplify, Respond, Support

The interactive process often can be a brief conversation or email exchange.



ADA vs. PWFA: Same Goal, Different Terrain

Both keep employees connected at work – one may be a steeper climb, the other a gentler hike.

ADA Route

Covered reason
Disability substantially limiting a major life activity.

Essential functions
Employee must generally perform with or without accommodation.

Documentation
Relevant support may be requested when disability or need is not obvious.

Leave
May be reasonable; indefinite leave is not required.

PWFA Route

Covered reason
Known limitation related to pregnancy, childbirth, or related medical conditions.

Essential functions
Temporary suspension of essential functions may be reasonable.

Documentation
Limited to minimum needed; no docs for predictable assessments.

Leave
Cannot require leave if another reasonable accommodation works.

The wrong route can create delay, over-documentation, or missed support.

SECTION 3

Connection to Chris's Experience

How support, tools, and trust turn barriers into navigable terrain



Why Chris's Story Belongs in an Accommodations Conversation

The parallel is not about disability as inspiration. It is about designing support for real conditions.

The Employee Lens

A major life event changes the route. The destination may remain meaningful, but the climb now requires new information, new tools, and a support system.



The Employer Lens

An accommodation request is often the employee's way of saying: "The route changed. I need help finding a viable way forward."



The HR Opportunity

Turn a vulnerable moment into a guided experience: orient, listen, protect dignity, coach the manager, and keep the employee connected to contribution.



Support does not erase the climb. It makes the climb navigable.

The Accommodation Journey Mirrors a Climb

Two perspectives move toward the same summit: employee questions on one side, employer actions on the other.



A better process helps employees move from uncertainty to orientation to contribution.

Move from Reflex to Reframing

PROACTIVE SUMMIT

Separate operational concerns from assumptions about commitment, capability, or credibility.

Like climbing a difficult route: pause at the foothold, name the barrier, choose the next workable move.

Reflex

Reactive thoughts that can pull the conversation off-route:

"Another remote work request."

"This will be unfair to the team."

"We need full documentation first."

Reframe

Proactive questions that move toward a workable accommodation:

"What barrier is the person facing?"

"What would allow essential work to continue?"

"What can we try, monitor, and adjust?"



Design Principles for a Better Accommodation Experience

For HR and managers: build the support system before the need arises

1



Human First

See the person behind the request, not only the condition or case type.

2



Clear Path

Explain roles, privacy, timelines, and what the employee can expect next.

3



Right-Sized Information

Ask for what is needed — not everything that could possibly be collected.

4



Manager Enablement

Provide scripts, reminders, and escalation paths for hard conversations.

5



Feedback Loop

Check effectiveness and make adjustments without making employees start over.

6



Culture Signal

Show that disability, pregnancy, and life events are part of a diverse workforce to support.



When leaders across the organization show up this way, the process becomes a cultural signal: you are seen, heard, and valued.

Closing Discussion: Supporting the Climb

Use these prompts to connect Chris's story to your organization's next step.



Where might employees feel uncertain, unseen, or unsupported today?



Which manager reflexes need reframing?



Are there accommodations that could be handled more quickly?



How will you know whether employees feel safe asking for support?



The summit is not the approval letter.
The summit is sustained contribution, trust, and dignity.



Questions?

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