DMEC
2026 ANNUAL
CONFERENCE

# They're Not "Difficult," They're Different

## How Gen Z Is Changing Leave & Accommodations Management

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## The Misread

# ~~Difficult~~ → Different

One word. Everything in this talk turns on it.



# This is not a future problem

Gen Z has already overtaken Baby Boomers. The cohort you'll administer for the next 15 years is here now.

**~30%**

of the U.S. workforce by 2030 (BLS projection)

**~41%**

of the U.S. shift workforce today

**2024**

the year Gen Z passed Baby Boomers in workforce share

**Source:** BLS/NACE; Deputy 2026 (illustrative); DOL Trendlines



# The first generation raised on documented accommodations

For Gen Z, asking for an accommodation isn't a novel act . It's a procedure they ran at the start of every school year.

**They didn't learn the interactive process from you. They learned it in second grade.**

**~15%**

of K–12 students have an IEP
(7.5M — an all-time high)

**+ 504 plans push it to well over 1 in 5 students by high school**

**Source:** NCES (IDEA 2022–23); Oregon DOE / NCES (504 plans)



# They kept the muscle in college

IDEA ends at graduation. In college the burden to self-advocate shifts onto the student (and they learned to carry it).

**11% → 21%**

college students reporting a disability (2004–2020)

**~69%**

of that growth is mental health & ADHD

**The "sophisticated" entry-level request isn't suspicious. It's a fifth-year skill.**

**Source:** U.S. GAO; The Phoenix / NYT analysis



# They research before they reach you

By the time they contact HR, it's often the last step, and they arrive with a script. Sometimes a wrong one.

**92%**
of Gen Z trust TikTok for career advice

**46%**
have landed a job or internship through it

**55%**
admit they've followed advice that turned out misleading

**Source:** Zety Gen Z Career-Trends Survey, Jan 2025



r/BipolarReddit

## What kind of workplace accommodations do you have?

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r/disability
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## Workplace Accommodations and Ideas

For those of you who are working, what have you found to be the most helpful tools and accommodations your boss or employer has provided?

I am looking for ideas that I can ask for in my own situation to make it easier on me but still allow me to contribute.

r/disability
DreamCatcher2526

## Workplace accommodations under ADA - how did you handle it?

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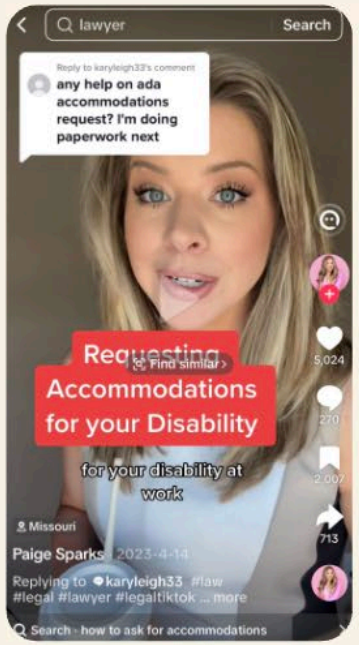
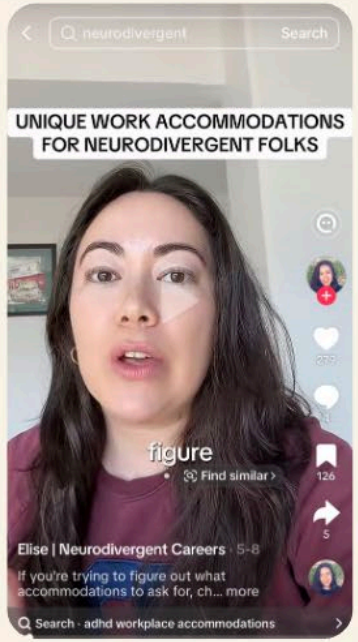
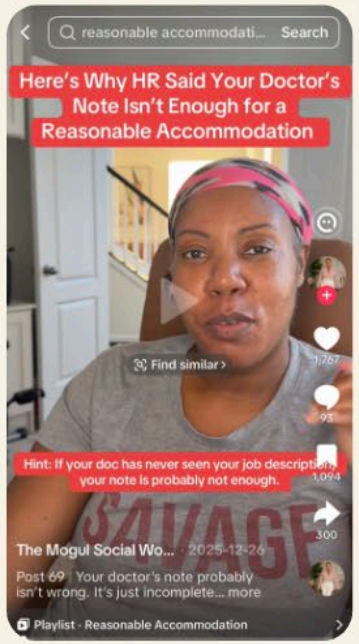
## Accommodations at Work

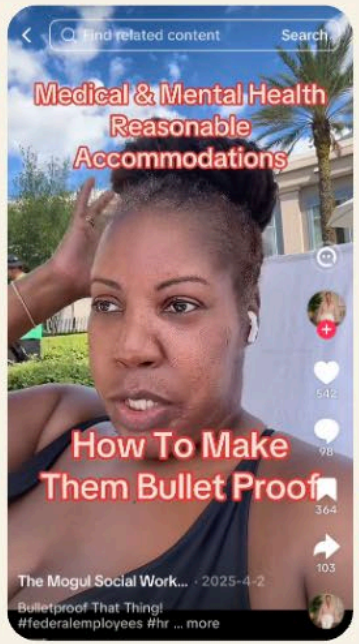
Hey all,

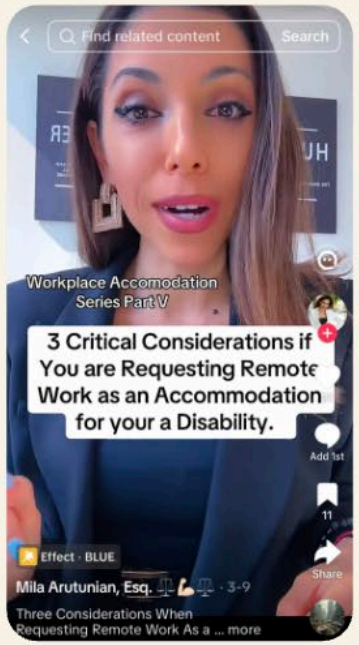
My manager has told me that she will try her best to provide any accommodations for me at work for my POTS and endometriosis. They've already given me a later start time so I can drink my fluids and get my heart rate half normal in the mornings. Is there anything you've requested at work that's been helpful to you?

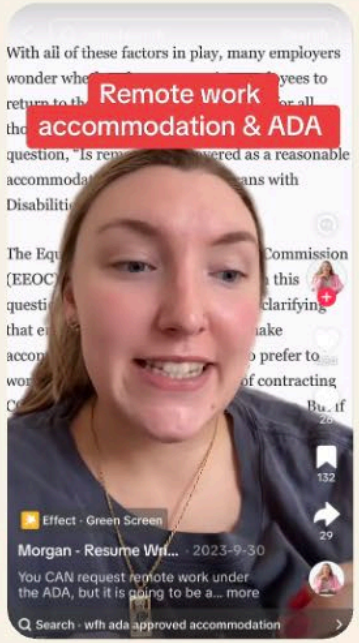


# The AI co-pilot in every request

The "GPT employee" is here. Prompt a chatbot for an accommodation letter and it returns the same buzzwords, the same structure, in the same order, every time.

**Typical AI-generated request**

- "Reasonable accommodation" under the ADA
- Flexible scheduling
- Written instructions
- Advance notice of meetings
- Clear, direct communication

**A computer-generated request is still a valid request. Your job isn't to grade the prose. Your job is to run the process.**

**Source:** "The Rise of the GPT Employee," L&E Law Insights, 2026



# Why this generation, specifically

The highest reported rates of anxiety and depression of any living generation — and the highest willingness to disclose.

**~47%**

of Gen Z often or always feel anxious (Gallup)

**~39%**

have worked with a mental health professional (highest of any generation)

**Source:** Gallup 2023 & 2025; Annie E. Casey Foundation



# What they value (so you can predict the ask)

Strip the slang and the asks are predictable. And they'll keep shifting toward the invisible, episodic, and psychological.

**Flexibility**

**Mental health support**

**Transparency**

**Purpose**

**86% say a "sense of purpose" is key to their wellbeing. And they'll trade pay for balance.**

**Source:** Deloitte 2026 Gen Z & Millennial Survey

# The vocabulary that's spooking your managers

Strip the TikTok packaging and almost all of it means one old thing: "I'll do my job, and I'll name my boundaries out loud."

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| **Quiet quitting** | **Act your wage** | **Bare minimum Monday** |
| **Loud quitting** | **Revenge quitting** | **Conscious unbossing** |

**Signals, not threats! The danger is a manager who hears the slang and decides someone is "difficult."**

**Source:** Gallup; SHRM 2025; Fast Company; WorkTok roundups



# A field guide: difficult vs. different

| What you see | "Difficult" read | "Different" read |
|---|---|---|
| **Cites the statute by name** | Litigious / gaming | **Process-literate (often makes the interactive process faster)** |
| **Request mirrors a template** | Coached / coordinated | **Used the same free AI everyone uses** |
| **Pushes back on documentation** | Evasive | **Knows ADA limits on what you can demand** |
| **Posts about it online** | Threat / disloyalty | **Default communication mode** |



# The cost of getting the label wrong

"Difficult" isn't a personality note. Filed quietly in a manager's head, it becomes three compounding costs.

### Retention

They leave a manager who reads their boundaries as defects (and tell the internet why).

### Equity

Slower, stingier processes for "difficult" people is disparate treatment by temperament.

### Legal

Near a protected request, "difficult" becomes evidence of pretext.

**Courts look hard at temporal proximity. The label is the exposure.**

**Source:** EEOC retaliation framework; NAMI 2025



PART 3 · ASSESS OPERATIONAL IMPACTS

# Four pressures on your program

**And they compound.**

**Volume**

Rising - more requests, arriving earlier in the process

**Documentation**

Expectations shifting on both sides

**Complexity**

Layered conditions, episodic needs, multi-leave stacking

**Compliance**

Public by default; administered on the record

**Source:** EEOC; NAMI 2025; Jackson Lewis



# Volume and documentation are shifting together

## Volume

- Requests arrive earlier, often before a manager conversation ever happens.
- Submitted off-hours, through whatever channel exists, with a script in hand.
- The follow-up load (not the intake) is what actually overwhelms teams.

## Documentation

- EEOC limits you to information necessary to establish the disability and need.
- Not a full medical history. Not a medication list.
- **"You're not entitled to that" may simply be correct.**

**Source:** EEOC guidance; HR Dive 2025; NAMI 2025



# Complexity is up, and it's public by default

Past employees who felt wronged complained to a friend. This generation documents in real time (and has a distribution channel).

### Cases are layered

Episodic conditions, stacked leaves, and PWFA + state PFML interplay — exactly where a sloppy process shows.

### The record is public

Screenshots, recordings, "get-laid-off-with-me" videos. You're administering leave on the record.

**A program built to survive that scrutiny is simply a better program.**

**Source:** Jackson Lewis; Fisher Phillips; Miles Mediation



# The compliance floor keeps moving

None of this sits on stable ground. The rules under the requests are shifting too.

### PWFA

A whole accommodation framework, still maturing through enforcement and litigation.

### State PFML

An expanding patchwork of paid-leave laws that keeps adding layers.

### AI-in-employment

Brand-new laws regulating your use of AI in employment decisions.

The tech empowering your employees is the same tech you're being asked to adopt (& regulated on).

**Source:** Jackson Lewis; Fisher Phillips; HRMorning; VertiSource



# Meet expectations with the tools that created them

The generation raised by technology expects a tech-grade experience from your program. Close that gap… carefully.



# Where automation genuinely helps

Four places it earns its keep in our world. All four make the program more consistent and transparent.

### Intake & triage

Structured and accessible, available at 11pm, when they actually file.

### Status transparency

Kill the black box. The unknown drives the anxious follow-ups and the public posts.

### Consistency

Same lawful questions, same routing, every time. Your best defense against disparate treatment.

### Audit trail

A record that exists by default, not because someone remembered to document.



THE BRIGHT LINE

# AI can route. It cannot decide.

**The interactive process is an individualized human conversation. Full stop.**

Answer a templated request with a templated denial and you've automated your way into a failure-to-engage claim. AI handles the process; humans own the determination.



# Responsible AI = compliance, privacy, defensibility

## Watch for screen-outs

Automated tools can penalize a disability or collect medical info they shouldn't. Bias review + a path around the tool.

## Meet the new notice laws

CO, IL, CA and more now require notice and challenge rights. Build them in now.

## Treat AI as records

Prompts and outputs are discoverable. Put them under legal hold.

## Protect privacy

Across a multigenerational workforce - minimize what you collect and who can see it.

**Source:** Brown Goldstein Levy; Barrett & Farahany; Fisher Phillips



# The floodgates fear isn't supported by the data

**56%**
of accommodations cost $0 to implement

**~$300**
median one-time cost of the rest

**~2 in 3**
employers rate them very or extremely effective

**Source:** JAN "Low Cost, High Impact" (2019–24); DOL/ODEP



# The strategic pivot

The whole talk in one line:

**Consistency + Transparency + Documentation**

the same three things that make a program…

**Legally defensible**

**What Gen Z rewards**



# Five moves to make this year

1. **Beat TikTok to it** Publish clear, plain-language rights and process info. Be the most trusted source in their feed.
2. **Standardize the interactive process** Same lawful questions, same routing, every time. Kill analyst-by-analyst variation.
3. **Train managers** Separate the behavior from the merits. Tone tells you nothing about validity.
4. **Modernize intake + status** Transparency defuses both the anxious follow-up and the public post.
5. **Govern your AI** Human-in-the-loop on every decision; treat AI prompts and outputs as records.



IN CLOSING

# They’re not difficult.
# They’re different.

**And different (unlike difficult) is something you can actually build for. Let’s build!**



# Questions?

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