

Disclosing Your Disability to an Employer

Job seekers with disabilities are inevitably faced with the decision of whether to disclose their disability. This is a hotly-debated topic among disability services and career development professionals. However, the decision to disclose, as well as when and how, is ultimately yours. Under the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), people with disabilities are not obligated to disclose their disability unless it is likely to directly affect their job performance.

If you have a disability, you must consider whether you can perform the essential functions of the position for which you are applying and if you need any accommodations to be successful. Remember that an accommodation is not intended to compensate for a lack of knowledge, skills or abilities. Workplace accommodations will only be provided when the employee discloses his/her disability and requests job accommodations.

Advantages and disadvantages of disclosure

Disclosing your disability can be daunting. Some employers may reject you because of negative, preconceived notions about people with disabilities. Additionally, you may not feel comfortable sharing personal information with strangers. On the other hand, disclosing your disability allows you protection against discrimination under the ADA. It also allows you to speak honestly and openly with your employer about accommodations.

Things to consider

- Your knowledge of your disability and how clearly you can discuss it
- Your ability to perform the essential job functions without accommodations
- How your disability may affect your ability to perform the job
- The employer's attitude toward people with disabilities
- Your own comfort and trust level with the employer
- Your past accommodations in a professional environment
- Your suggestions for accommodations, if needed

What to include in a disclosure

- General information about your disability
- The effect of your disability, both positive and negative, on job performance
- The types of accommodations used in the past
- Suggested or anticipated accommodations

Timing your disclosure

Many experts suggest not disclosing your disability if it is undetectable and no accommodations are needed.

1. Resume and cover letter

There is rarely a reason to disclose your disability this early, unless you use TTY or a voice relay for phone calls, or if your disability might be an asset to the position. However, if you are comfortable with disclosing at this point, carefully consider where and how the information is presented. Your resume and cover letter should focus on and highlight your relevant skills and experiences and make brief mention of your disability and your disability management skills.

2. Pre-interview

If you have a visible disability or need an accommodation for the interview, it is best to discuss your disability and accommodations prior to the scheduled interview so the interviewer is prepared. To initiate conversation about your disability, you might include a question about accessibility or request for accommodation when you ask about the interview location or directions.

3. The interview

If you have a visible disability, you will want to briefly discuss your disability and assure the interviewer that it will not negatively affect your job performance, especially with proper accommodations. Be prepared to answer any questions regarding specific accommodations, but provide examples of how you have already performed many of the functions of the job. Focus on your competency, including skills, experience, and education. If your disability is not apparent, you may use greater discretion about when to discuss your disability.

4. After being offered the job

Many people choose to disclose their disability after a job has been offered to ensure that the employer will focus solely on the individual's qualifications and skills. If you determine that you will need an accommodation, discuss it prior to your start date to ensure accommodations are made prior to your arrival.

5. During the course of employment

If you discover over time that you have underestimated your need for an accommodation, it is best to disclose your disability to your employer and ask for accommodations before your work performance is affected.

How to prepare

- Consider developing a personal philosophy about disclosure – what does it mean to be a person with a disability? How does it affect your life?
- Educate yourself about your disability and learn how to discuss it.
- Contact the Job Accommodation Network (JAN) at 800-526-7234 or at www.askjan.org to learn more about potential job accommodations based on your disability and the nature of the job.
- To help you gauge your potential employer's attitudes about hiring people with disabilities, do your research – look at the job announcement, browse the website, talk to current employees, and read company publications.
- Participate in internships or work-based learning to gain an understanding of accommodations needed and provided in a professional environment.
- Prepare yourself for personal or potentially illegal questions about your disability during the interview.
- Seek advice from other people with disabilities who have been successful in finding work.

Determine the NEED for Disclosure: Gather all the facts.

Consider the questions below. “Yes” answers may indicate a need for or benefit of disclosure. “No” answers may indicate a need for more preparation or limited benefits of disclosure.

- Do I have background information about the company?
 - Does the company, senior management, or owner welcome and value diversity?
 - Has the company participated in any disability related recruitment programs?
 - Is there a company policy on hiring individuals with disabilities?
 - Does the company offer any internship programs?
 - Is pre-employment testing required? What is the medium for testing?
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- Have I requested a detailed job description for the position?
 - Do I know what are the essential functions and expectations of the job?
 - Can I talk with an employee who is currently in this position or in a similar one?
 - Will my compensatory strategies (e.g., use of adaptive software or assistive technology) change the traditional way of getting the job done?
 - Will I need accommodations for the application process interview process, or at the worksite?
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- Does the supervisor use a flexible and personal management style?
 - Does the employer have experience in managing differences or diversity?
 - Does the employer focus on essential, rather than marginal functions?
 - Has the employer had positive experiences hiring individuals with disabilities?
 - Can I provide the employer with resource information about the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) and my specific accommodation needs?
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- Am I familiar with the protections provided by the ADA?
 - Am I comfortable with my disability?
 - Am I aware of my strengths and functional limitations?
 - Will I need potential medical assistance?
 - Have I explored technology or strategies to compensate for my limitations?
 - Have I previously used accommodations at a work-site?
 - Have I practiced disclosure with a family member, close friend, or career professional?

Decide WHEN to Disclose: Consider Pros and Cons

When	Potential Gains	Potential Setbacks
In a cover letter	Advance time to prepare positive written disclosure and to tailor your abilities to duties of job description.	Employer's preconceptions may hinder opportunity for an interview. Unable to read employer's body language and mood.
In a resume or on a job application	Establishes "up front" relationship and communication.	Employer may have stereotypes about disabilities and may not offer you an interview.
When employer calls for an interview	Establishes open communication and gives an employer time to review Americans with Disabilities Act compliance information.	May not get serious consideration during interview.
Before the interview	Shows respect to employer, gives employer advance notice to secure any accommodations that may be needed during the interview, and time to research proper etiquette or refresh knowledge on ADA.	Employer has advance time to yield to his or her stereotypes about disabilities.
During the interview	Opportunity to read employer body language, to time the disclosure, and to disclose in a brief, positive manner.	Employer may feel uneasy and ill prepared to respond with appropriate and legal questions.
After the job offer	May have legal recourse if disclosing disability negatively affects the hiring decision. There is time to get accommodations in place before the job starts. Positive relationship has already been established with employer.	Employer may feel that you have been dishonest in the application process, which may erode trust.
After the job begins	Gives opportunity to establish credibility before disclosure. Gives freedom to talk with co-workers about disability related issues.	May take time to secure requested accommodations. Employer may believe you have not been honest with may negatively affect your relationship.
When performance difficulties arise	Difficulties may not arise (i.e. you may never need to disclose).	Employer may have difficulty changing his or her perceptions of your work performance, feel betrayed or wonder why you waited so long.
Never	Disability information is kept private.	Not protected from discrimination under the ADA.

Choose HOW to Disclose: General Guidelines

How	Examples
Stress current involvement in a positive activity that shows your ability to manage your disability.	<u>Resume</u> : Member of the American Blind Skiing Foundation
Be optimistic; focus on your abilities and job qualifications.	<u>Cover Letter</u> : As an individual with a lifelong physical and speech disability, I learned early on to focus on my intellectual abilities and to develop strengths within my limits. For example, I received my first computer when I was 5 years old and learned to operate it independently. Today I am proficient in many software applications operating systems and system troubleshooting.
Give the employer information on what he or she needs to do or provide regarding communication, directions or supervision.	<u>Telephone Call prior to the Interview</u> : "I am calling to confirm my interview scheduled at your company in 2 days. Could you please tell me where to find your office's accessible entrance?"
Educate the employer by articulating or demonstrating how you can perform the essential functions of the job. Have resource information available for the employer.	<u>During the interview</u> : "Have you ever heard of a screen reader? I have a learning disability and have difficulty reading in the traditional way. My screen reader, which reads electronic information aloud using a computerized voice, has enabled me to succeed at college and I know it will be useful on this job"
Explain the benefits of your disability regarding your personal growth or perseverance.	<u>During the interview</u> : "Through my disability, I have learned the value of connecting with professionals. I can be resourceful and creative to get the job done."
Face employer concerns by talking about your compensatory strategies or accommodations solutions.	<u>During the Interview</u> : "You may be wondering how I can type letters with my physical disability. I have a great software program that allows the computer to type as I speak words. It can be loaded on most computers. I would be happy to show it to you sometime."
Use general, functional terms to briefly explain the impact of your disability on the job; avoid technical, medical diagnoses.	<u>After the Job Offer</u> : "During the interview, you explained that work was verbally assigned at a staff meeting. I find that I work best when instructions are both written and verbal. I have a disability that makes processing verbal information a challenge. Could you accommodate me in this way?"
In a private setting, remind your employer about your right to confidentiality.	<u>After the Job is Accepted</u> : After disclosing your disability in your employer's office: "Thank you in advance for keeping this information confidential."
Frame the disclosure around how you work best.	<u>A Few Weeks on the Job</u> : "I have noticed that I am having a difficult time completing my work assignments. I have a medical condition that requires frequent breaks in order to do my work. Would you allow me to work later to enable me to take more breaks? I always get the job done when I manage my schedule in this way."