

Disclosing a Disability

The suggestions provided here are helpful whether you're looking for a job or for an internship, but they are most applicable to the job search.

A Tip Before You Begin

Some companies and organizations have job and/or internship programs that specifically seek students with disabilities. To learn about some of them, see the Career and Community Learning Center binder called "Opportunities for Students with Disabilities." If you apply for a position through one of these programs, you will need to disclose your disability in order to qualify. That takes the burden off deciding if or when to disclose.

Issues to Consider about Disclosure

- **Prepare for how and what you might disclose:** Spend some time examining your feelings about your disability. How comfortable are you discussing it? Identify accommodations you might need to request in order to perform the new position. Weigh the advantages and disadvantages of disclosing your disability at different points in the job-search process. (See page 2 for tips about specific timing.)
- **If you do plan to disclose your disability:** Decide how detailed you want to be. Study the job description. Be ready to describe the skills you have that make you qualified for the position and capable of doing it well. Also be prepared to discuss any limitations caused by your disability, and workplace accommodation needs. Be informative but concise, and expect to be asked questions.
- **Consider invisible vs. visible disabilities:** A visible disability might put you in the position of having to discuss it. Be prepared for that. If you have workspace accommodation needs, you may want to discuss that at the same time. Be aware that some employers will make assumptions about a visible disability, so your disclosure can be an opportunity to correct any misassumptions about your ability to do the job effectively.
- **Be able to clarify workplace accommodations if you discuss them.** One of the unspoken concerns some employers will have is the cost of workplace accommodations, even though they often turn out to be minimal or free. You may want to briefly explain what you need and what the costs would be (e.g., inexpensive, free, or a specific sum).
- **Preparing a script in advance can be helpful:** After you've considered what you want to say, write it down. Keep in mind the potential employer wants to know 3 things: 1) Will you be reliable? 2) Can you do the job as well or better than anyone else? and 3) Will you be valuable to the organization? Practice what you want to say until you feel comfortable with it. While discussing your disability, positively describe your skills. The more you focus on your disability, the more relevant it will become to the employer. The more positive you are about what you can do, the more your strengths and personality will come across over any disability issues.
- **If you decide *not* to disclose your disability:** Be sure you can perform the essential functions of the position before accepting it. If you can't—for whatever reason—you can be fired for that later. Be aware that the employer can't make helpful accommodations unless you disclose what you might need. Also, if an emergency medical situation were to arise while you were at work, you may want to have explained what should be done to help.

Suggested Disclosure Script

"I have (preferred term for disability). I do have the skills and ability to do this job. It helps if I have (specific accommodations you need). I am confident I can do the job well, and I would look forward to the opportunity to contribute to (organization or company name)."

The Bottom Line is that you and your future employer must both feel comfortable.

Tips about disclosure timing in the job-search process are on page 2.

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Disclosure Timing Options: Pros and Cons

As you read the tips below, keep in mind that some potential employers will be comfortable with your disability disclosure and some won't, no matter when or how you disclose it. What's more important is how comfortable you are. The more comfortable you are, the more likely you are to be effective in the job search, and to find a position that's a good fit.

TIMING: DISCLOSE ON YOUR RESUME OR COVER LETTER

PROS: You're being honest and can have some peace of mind. Lets the employer decide if disability is an issue.

CONS: Might disqualify you before you can present your qualifications. You might have a harder time finding work.

TIMING: WHEN AN EMPLOYER CALLS FOR AN INTERVIEW

PROS: Honesty. Provides you with peace of mind. Reduces the element of surprise before you meet in person. The employer may feel more comfortable being told in advance of a potential interview.

CONS: You might not be considered as seriously. Your performance abilities may be doubted before you've had a chance to discuss them.

TIMING: DURING THE INTERVIEW

PROS: Honesty. Demonstrates your confidence and poise. Allows you to explain briefly and positively in person.

Discrimination is less likely face-to-face.

CONS: The surprise factor may make the employer uncomfortable. Employer may be distracted during the interview or doubt your ability to perform. Puts the responsibility on you to avoid over-explaining your disability, and to mention it at an effective time. (**TIP:** Bring up your disability at a natural time—when you're discussing job qualifications and duties. Be concise and focus on the positives—how well you can do the position.)

TIMING: AFTER THE INTERVIEW BUT BEFORE YOU START A POSITION

PROS: If accommodations are needed, the employer will have a chance to arrange them before you arrive.

CONS: Employer may distrust you for waiting to disclose.

TIMING: AFTER YOU START A POSITION

PROS: You get a chance to prove yourself on the job before disclosure, and discuss it with coworkers if you choose.

(**NOTE:** If your disability doesn't impact job performance, but your employment situation somehow changes after disclosure, you may have legal recourse.)

CONS: The longer you put off disclosure, the harder it becomes. It may be difficult to reestablish trust afterward. The employer might accuse you of falsifying your qualifications. Coworkers may treat you differently and the office climate could become negative.

TIMING: AFTER A JOB-RELATED PROBLEM CAUSED BY DISABILITY

PROS: You've had a chance to prove yourself on the job before disclosure.

CONS: Employer might accuse you of falsifying your qualifications. If you disclose now (rather than never), the employer may think you're unable to perform the essential job duties. Relationships with your coworkers or supervisor may be hurt if they feel you haven't been honest.

—Disclosure timing information adapted from Aase and Smith, Disability Services, University of Minnesota

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