

RESOURCES FOR STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES

Many students with physical or mental disabilities struggle to decide if they should disclose a disability in an academic or employment setting. This is a very personal decision that can only be made by you. It's important to learn what strengths you have to offer an employer, how to manage your job search, and how to seek out accommodations when necessary.

Career Development Center

The Career Development Center (CDC) supports students with physical, learning, sensory, psychological, developmental, and other disabilities. We encourage students to make one-on-one appointments with CDC staff members so that we can advise you on issues such as your career plan, job search strategies, and ways of highlighting your strengths.

Log in to your **Job Finder** account under the Calendar tab to set up an internship, job search strategy, or career advisement appointment with a CDC staff member.

We can help you:

- Learn more about major, career, and industry specific resources.
- Create a unique job search strategy and highlight specific resources that match your interests.
- Create an action plan for your personal job search integrating all of the available resources to help you find your dream internship, co-op, or full-time job.

Office of Disability Services

If you identify as having a disability, either invisible or visible, please call or email the Office of Disability Services (ODS) to learn about the services and supports available to you, including academic accommodations.

Disability Disclosure

Disclosure entails sharing information about your disability in order to receive accommodations or adjustments to maximize your performance. Disclosure can be done to receive either academic or work-based accommodations.

To disclose or not disclose

Disclosure is voluntary and based on your personal decision. You are not required to disclose either a visible or invisible disability. In general, one would disclose a disability in order to receive a work-based accommodation. There is no single right or wrong approach to disclosing a disability.

Decision-making process

If you are trying to decide whether or not you should disclose a disability, answer the following questions:

- Do I have an obligation to disclose to perform my job effectively?
- When is the right time?
- How much information does the employer need?
- How will disclosing the information affect my employment?



Advantages to disclosure

There are several advantages you can gain from disclosing a disability, including:

- You will start to receive reasonable accommodations.
- You will be protected legally under the American's with Disabilities Act (ADA).
- You can improve your self-image and advocacy skills.
- You can receive assistance with learning new skills.

Examples of informed decision making in disclosure to receive work accommodations:

- Brian is deaf and will need an interpreter for an on-site interview at a technology company.
- Tammy, who has attention deficit disorder (ADD), needs directions printed because she misses steps when directions are presented to her orally.
- Miranda uses a wheelchair and needs an assistant to help her file paperwork in elevated filing cabinets in order to support her job in the insurance industry.
- Timothy has schizophrenia (which is controlled by medication) and needs a private workspace or dividers in his work area to limit disruptions and make his work day more effective.
- Melody is autistic and needs a highly structured work environment that is centered on her individual needs, which include training and enhancing social skills, language, and self-help.

Times to disclose

You can disclose a disability at any stage of the employment process. In most cases you would disclose when you feel you need a work accommodation or adjustment. It is best to be proactive and disclose before you start experiencing work performance issues or conduct problems. Stages at which you might choose to disclose include:

- Pre-employment
- During the interview
- When the job offer has been made
- Post-offer
- When you have been working in the job
- Not at all

To whom should you disclose?

Disclosing a disability is on a need-to-know basis. Check your employee handbook to find out more about your employer's policy on accommodation requests. A general rule of thumb is to disclose to a person who has the ability to grant you work accommodations, such as your direct supervisor, manager, or human resources professional. Under the ADA, employers are required to keep all disability information confidential.

How to disclose

Let your employer know that you have a need for a work adjustment. You can simply say that it is for "a reason related to a medical condition." You do not have to give your specific diagnosis. Remember, you have no obligation to disclose a disability. However, it is your responsibility to seek out the assistance that you need. When you do disclose, it is only necessary to share information about your work limitations, condition, and needed accommodations.

It is a good idea to practice your disclosure conversation in advance with a friend or person you trust. Keep the conversation positive and focused on your strengths. Your confidence will convey that you have thought about what you need in order to accomplish the tasks required of the job.

Ways to disclose a disability

You may choose to disclose your disability in one of several ways, including:

- In person to a manager, supervisor, or human resources professional.
- During an interview to make sure the work environment is a good fit, or over the phone to ensure the facility is handicapped accessible.
- In a cover letter to communicate how you've overcome obstacles due to your disability.
- On the voluntary self-identification portion of a government or job application.

Requesting Work-based Accommodations

The majority of employers say the costs associated with hiring a person with a disability are the same as hiring a person without a disability. Many companies already have the resources in place and there is no cost to them. If someone does not disclose, they may never know what resources could be available for them. You should look at this process as "Accommodating" versus "Accommodations." Just as an employer would accommodate a full-time student to attend classes, an employer would accommodate an employee with a disability.

Things to keep in mind

- Why you are disclosing.
- How it affects your ability to do key job tasks.
- Types of accommodation that have worked in the past.
- What you are your anticipated needs?

Examples of reasonable work-based accommodations

Let your employer know what work accommodations you need. It is always best to be knowledgeable about what you need in order to convey this to an employer. Below is a list of common work accommodations used to help employees perform their jobs:

- Providing Technology (communication aids, computer access aids, hearing and listening aids, etc.).
- Having part-time or modified work schedules.
- Acquiring or modifying equipment (ergonomic chair, desk, keyboard, etc.).
- Making existing facilities accessible.
- Arranging mobility or transportation aids.
- Providing qualified readers or interpreters.
- Allowing for auditory tapes of meetings.

Participate in Work-based Learning Experiences

Participating in a work-based experience such as an internship, co-op, or career shadowing opportunity will help you build confidence and gain soft skills like communication and leadership. Other benefits of work-based learning experiences include:



- Breaking down barriers to employment and opening eyes of employers to your capabilities.
- Providing an opportunity to network with potential employers.
- Exploring career options while in school to decide what's the right fit for you.
- Apply skills learned in the classroom and through project-based experiences.
- Practicing in identifying appropriate accommodations and disclosing and discussing disabilities as they relate to the performance of job tasks.

Get Your Application Materials Ready

- 1. Prepare a good resume:** A resume is a written summary of your education, skills, and technical experiences. Do not forget about leadership, project work, and volunteer experiences.
- 2. Create a cover letter:** Cover letters highlight the aspects of your background that are most relevant to the reader and in alignment with the job description.. This is essentially a sales pitch to an employer. A cover letter is also a place where you can first disclose a disability. This could be an advantage if:
 - You are applying to a state or federal agency that has to comply with affirmative action policies.
 - You are applying for a job that is related to your experience with a disability such as a rehabilitation counselor.
 - Having a disability is a requirement of the position.

- 3. Complete Job Applications:** for most jobs, the employment process starts with a job application.
 - Employers are prohibited from asking medical or disability related questions on a job application due to ADA regulations.
 - A government agency may ask an applicant to voluntarily disclose a disability to comply with affirmative action policies.
 - In all other cases, it is advised that you leave questions blank regarding your disability or medical history. This allows you to explain why you left questions blank at a later date.

Interview Strategies

Do your homework

If you need accommodations like access to the building, you may need to disclose your disability. Map out the location of the interview and make sure it is accessible to you. If it is not, contact the interviewer to request a different location. In the case that it is not, have a location in mind in the event that the interviewer needs suggestions.

It is okay to call and ask questions about accessible parking spaces or accessible features such as elevators. It is always best to have these issues arranged ahead of time, at least one day prior to your interview. This will also prove to your employer that you are able to plan and solve these situations successfully.

Be prepared for difficult questions

The best way to tackle difficult questions is to be ready for them. List out questions you have difficulty with and prepare answers. It is always best to practice your responses to these answers. If a script will make you feel more comfortable, make one and practice it until you



no longer need it. You can also make an appointment to review “Interview Skills” or to do a “Mock Interview” at the CDC.

If you encounter a question about a difficult time during school or otherwise, always answer professionally and in a positive manner. If you do disclose your disability, do so with confidence and focus on the present. Remember, the focus should be on your abilities and qualifications to do the job you are seeking..

Focus on your abilities

Keep the focus on your skills and abilities, not your disabilities. You are being interviewed because you are qualified and capable of filling the position’s qualifications. Sell the employer on your strengths and what you can do. Always be positive and reframe your weaknesses into positives. Be honest and you will be in a good position.

Some examples of reframing weaknesses include:

“I am very detail oriented and I am going to make sure that I get it right every time.”

“I apologize but I won’t be making a lot of eye contact during this interview; it is of no indication of my interest in the job.”

If you have trouble talking about your strengths, you can access and utilize MyPlan through your **Job Finder** account. MyPlan can be used to take self-assessments (interest, personality, skills, values) and research careers and majors. Make an “Assessment Results” appointment to go over your results with a CDC staff member.

Bring a portfolio or other supporting materials

If you have trouble talking about your strengths or making small talk, bring a portfolio to showcase your work. Let your work do most of the talking for you.

Distracting behaviors

If you have trouble with fidgeting or remaining focused during an interview, bring a small outlet for your energy such as a paperclip.

Practice, Practice, Practice

Practice is the best preparation for an interview. You should spend about 2-3 hours preparing for your interview. Make an “Interview Skills” or “Mock Interview” appointment with the CDC to best prepare.

Send a Thank You Note

A thank you note can distinguish you from other candidates and clarify questions from the interview you felt you didn’t articulate well. It will also re-affirm your interest in the job. Refer to the **Thank You Note Writing** cheat sheet for ideas on thank you notes.

Illegal Interview Questions

The ADA places restrictions on disability-related questions that can be asked of applicants and current employees. Questions asked by employers should only be asked if they are required to perform the essential functions of a job. If an interviewer asks you about these topics, you can respond in different ways:

- If you are comfortable answering the question, you may. However, you do not have to.
- If you do not wish to answer the question:
 - Politely express to the interviewer that you prefer to keep the focus on items that are directly relevant to the position.
 - Inquire as to how this information relates to the job, as you prefer to keep the content focused on your professional qualifications.



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Examples of illegal interview questions include:

- Do you have a disability?
- Does your disability inhibit you from performing the essential functions of the job with or without an accommodation?
- Can you sit?
- Are you able to carry objects?
- Are you color blind?
- Why do you use a wheelchair? Will we have to make an accommodation for your wheelchair?
- Describe all of your disabilities.

Please let the CDC know if you encounter any illegal questions on a job interview.

Career Plan

The checklist below will help you create an action plan for the next steps in your job search:

- Review the **Resume Writing** tip sheet and have your resume critiqued by the CDC.
- Define your job objective, what you want to do or what role you are targeting. Make sure this objective is reflected on your resume (you may have various versions of your resume to support different job objectives).
- Review the **Cover Letter** tip sheet and have your cover letter critiqued by the CDC.
- Take inventory of the skills you have to offer an employer by utilizing MyPlan to take assessments (interest, personality, skills, values) and research careers and majors. Think about how you can highlight these skills in your resume, cover letter, networking conversations, and interviews.
- Make an “Assessment Results” appointment to go over your MyPlan results with a staff member from the CDC.
- Attend a CDC Workshop or internship/co-op/job search appointment to learn tips and strategies to find opportunities.
- Identify the industries and company types of interest to you—large or small, private or public, revenue level, sustainable initiatives, specific technology, etc.
- Identify work and lifestyle values that are important to you, e.g., a flexible work schedule, travel percentage, affordable living in the area, rural location vs. being near a city, working outside, spending most of your time at a desk, etc.
- Assess what environments you work best in, e.g., on a team or independently.
- Use Job Finder, Career Shift, job boards, company websites, and professional organizations to research companies and find job openings that align with your interests and skills.
- Practice interviewing with a mock interview (60 minutes) or interview skills (30 minutes) appointment at the CDC.
- Meet with the Office of Disability Services to determine what work-based accommodations or adjustments you may need to be successful.



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Resources

- ABILITYJobs: abilityjobs.com
- Association on Higher Education and Disability: ahead.org
- Career Opportunities for Students with Disabilities: cosdonline.org
- Getting Hired: Jobs for People with Disabilities: gettinghired.com
- JAN (Job Accommodation Network): <https://askjan.org/topics/discl.htm>
- Jobs Without Limits: JobsWithoutLimits.org
- National Organization on Disability: nod.org
- National Business & Disability council: viscardicenter.org/services/nbdc
- U.S. Business Leadership Network (USBLN): usbln.org
- Worcester Polytechnic Institute Office of Disability Services: wpi.edu/offices/disabilities

Career Development Center

Project Center

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