Disability Disclosure
Determining if and when to disclose your disability to a potential employer

Why Disclose on the job?
Every job seeker with a disability is faced with the same decision: “Should I disclose information about my disability?” Ultimately, the decision of whether or not to disclose is entirely personal. It is a decision to make only after weighing the personal advantages and disadvantages of disclosure.

Some job seekers choose not to disclose their disabilities because they believe they can manage their career in the same way as any other job seeker, or because they have become skilled at developing compensatory strategies and have the ability to self-accommodate without assistance. Others decide not to disclose at work because they fear being treated differently or being denied the same opportunities as job seekers without disabilities.

On the other hand, many job seekers choose to disclose disability-specific information for a variety of important reasons and to a variety of different people (employer, work mentor, co-workers).

Advantages of disclosure:
- Allows you to receive reasonable accommodations in order to be successful in the position
- Helps you obtain information to assist you in developing a career plan that addresses possible barriers
- Identifies disability-specific employment services and support networks
- Gives you an opportunity to discuss disability issues with prospective employers to determine whether the requirements of the position can be met, with or without reasonable accommodations
- Aids in developing mentoring and support structures with employees and employers with disabilities
- Provides legal protection against discrimination (as specified in the Americans with Disabilities Act)
- Reduces stress, since protecting a “secret” can take a lot of energy and increases your comfort level
- Gives you a clearer impression of what kinds of expectations people may have of you and your abilities
- Provides full freedom to examine and question health insurance and other benefits
- Provides greater freedom to communicate should you face changes in your particular situation
- Improves your self-image through self-advocacy

Disadvantages of disclosure:
Can cause you to:
- Relive bad past experiences that resulted in the loss of a job or negative responses from your peers
- Experience exclusion
- Become an object of curiosity
- Be blamed if something does not go right
- Be treated differently than others
- Experience conflicting feelings about your self-image
- Be viewed as needy, not self-sufficient, or unable to perform on par with peers
- Be overlooked for a job, team, group, or organization
Disclosing personal and sensitive information can be extremely difficult. Consider the list above and talk to people close to you, such as friends (both with and without disabilities), teachers, mentors, coaches, parents, and others. First, decide whether you will need reasonable accommodations on the job. If you do, or if you think you might, consider the personal advantages of disclosure.

If you have a disability, you must consider the support and services that you may need to be successful in the job of your choice. Are these support and services available to you if you require any accommodations? Remember that accommodations in the workplace are only provided when a worker discloses his or her disability and requests job accommodations. Employers and co-workers are not required to provide accommodations to workers who have chosen not to disclose their disabilities.

The process of learning how to disclose your disability-related needs effectively and develop an accommodation plan is extremely valuable. Effective disclosure skills require that you share information regarding your disability-related needs and that you provide creative, practical suggestions for job accommodations. Open communication with your employer, work mentor, and co-workers can help to evaluate the effectiveness of your accommodations and make changes when efforts are not working.

Remember that it is not essential to divulge specific personal information about your disability. Your disability is only important if it affects (or can potentially affect) your ability to perform essential functions of the job. The most important and helpful information to provide includes: how your disability affects your ability to perform the essential functions of the job, what support you need in order to provide a most favorable environment for your career, and your own ideas regarding accommodations.

**When to disclose on the job**

Although there is certainly no one “right” time and place to disclose your disability (it will depend on your individual situation), being proactive is strongly encouraged. This allows you to be in better control of your life. When you decide to disclose your disability to your employer, there may be settings and circumstances in which disclosure is more appropriate than others. Disclosure prior to the interview is encouraged only when an accommodations are needed for the actual interview. For example, if you use a wheelchair and the office where the interview is to be scheduled is on the second floor of a building without an elevator, you need to make the interviewer aware of your need for accommodations (for example, by suggesting that the interview be moved to a first floor location). Once you secure the interview, there are still many choices to be made as to when to disclose. Consider the following possibilities:

**During an Interview**

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<tr>
<th>Advantages</th>
<th>Disadvantages</th>
<th>Considerations</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Honesty/peace of mind</td>
<td>• Puts responsibility on you to handle disability issues in a clear, non-threatening way</td>
<td>• How comfortable are you with discussing your disability?</td>
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<td>• Opportunity to respond briefly, positively, and in person to specific disability issues</td>
<td>• Too much emphasis on issue indicates possible problem; you are not being evaluated on your abilities</td>
<td>• Do you have a plan outlining how you are going to discuss your disability?</td>
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<td>• Discrimination is less likely face-to-face</td>
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<td>• If you have a visible disability, you may wish to discuss your disability and how it will not get in the way of doing a good job, especially if you have proper accommodations</td>
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### After the Interview – When a job is offered, but before you begin work

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<td>• Honesty/peace of mind</td>
<td>• Employer might feel you should have told him/her before hiring decision was made</td>
<td>• If the job requires medical testing and you take medications that will show up in a screening, you may choose to disclose this to the employer at this time</td>
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<td>• If the disability information changes the hiring decision, and you are sure that your disability will not interfere with your ability to perform the job, there may be legal recourse</td>
<td>• Might lead to distrust with employer</td>
<td>• Evaluate disability in relation to the requirements for the position</td>
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<td>• Be able to explain how disability will not interfere with ability to perform the job including job safety</td>
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### After You Start Work

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<td>• Honesty/peace of mind</td>
<td>• Nervousness or fear of having a disability-related problem on the job</td>
<td>• It is always better to ask for accommodations before your job performance is questioned</td>
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<td>• Opportunity to prove yourself on job before disclosure</td>
<td>• Possibility of a disability-related problem before co-workers know how to react</td>
<td>• The longer you put off disclosure, the harder it becomes</td>
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<tr>
<td>• If disclosure affects employment status and the condition does not affect ability to perform job or job safety, you may be protected by the law</td>
<td>• Could change interaction with peers</td>
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### After a Disability-Related Problem On the Job

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<tr>
<td>• Opportunity to prove yourself on job before disclosure</td>
<td>• Possible employer accusations of falsifying your application</td>
<td>• Relationships you establish with co-workers may be hurt if they feel you have been untruthful with them and it may be difficult to re-establish trust</td>
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<td>• Possibility that your co-workers will not know how to react to your disability</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Can perpetuate disability myths and misunderstandings</td>
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### Never

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<tr>
<td>• Employers can’t respond to your disability unless you have a disability-related problem</td>
<td>• If a disability is discovered, you run the risk of being fired</td>
<td>• If you are able to perform the essential functions of the job without reasonable accommodations, you need not disclose your disability</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Nervousness and fear of having a disability-related problem on the job</td>
<td>• If you have a disability-related medical situation, you might be harmed by inappropriate first aid</td>
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Activity:
Read the following examples and determine a course of disclosure for each potential job seeker. First determine whether or not it is necessary for the job seeker to disclose his or her disability. Then think about the “why,” “when,” “what,” “to whom,” and “how” questions. Write your responses in the space provided.

1. Linda’s emotional disability has recently worsened and it has become difficult for her to perform some aspects of her job. Her psychiatrist has made some recommendations to her regarding changes in her work schedule.
   Disclose?
   Why?
   When?
   What?
   To whom?
   How?

2. Jamal’s schizophrenia has been well controlled by medication for the past three years. He recently graduated from college with a 3.5 grade point average (GPA) and is ready to apply for a job in the graphic design field, but he’s a bit nervous.
   Disclose?
   Why?
   When?
   What?
   To whom?
   How?

3. Carl uses a guide dog. He was recently called for an interview at a local IT firm.
   Disclose?
   Why?
   When?
   What?
   To whom?
   How?

4. Josephina has arranged an interview with the supervisor of a large department store to discuss a position as a sales clerk. She wonders how much her learning disability in math will affect her ability to run the cash register and give correct change.
   Disclose?
   Why?
   When?
   What?
   To whom?
   How?
What information to disclose on the job

Remember that preparation is essential when planning to disclose your disability to an employer. Is your information presented in a clear and concise way that is relevant to the job? If it is, TERRIFIC! If not, make some changes and practice rehearsing your disclosure conversation. Don’t forget that it is unnecessary to disclose very detailed medical and/or personal information. Get to the point, and keep it positive!

You might wish to present the following information to your employer, supervisor, work mentor, or co-workers:

- General information about your disability
- Why you’ve chosen to disclose your disability, including its impact on your job performance
- The types of job accommodations that have worked for you in the past (in previous jobs and in training situations)
- The types of job accommodations you anticipate needing in the workplace
- How your disability and other life experiences can positively affect your work performance

Most importantly, keep the disclosure conversation focused on your abilities, not your disability.

To whom to disclose on the job

As a job seeker with a disability, you might choose to disclose information when developing your career plan and searching for employment. You might disclose information to the following individuals:

- Career counselors
- Disability-specific adult employment services personnel
- Prospective employers or human resources personnel
- Workplace mentors

When selecting the person to disclose to, reflect on the following questions first:

- Does this person have the power to determine how reasonable the request is for the accommodations?
- Can the person provide the required accommodations?
- Is the person responsible for hiring, promoting, or firing?
- Is the person in a supervisory role and will he or she support me?
- What experiences does this person have with similar disclosure situations?
- Do I have respect for and trust in this person to keep my disclosure confidential?

Remember that it is important to select a private, confidential, comfortable place to disclose and to allow enough time to discuss the impact of your disability. The person(s) to whom you are disclosing might have questions, suggestions, or concerns that require more time for discussion.

Rights and Responsibilities

It is important to understand that, as a person with a disability, you also have significant responsibilities to yourself and to your employer and co-workers. Some of these rights and responsibilities are outlined below:

You have the right to:

- Have information about your disability treated confidentially and respectfully
- Seek information about hiring practices from any organization
- Choose to disclose your disability at any time during the employment process
- Receive appropriate accommodations in an interview so you may demonstrate your skills and abilities
- Be considered for a position based on your skill and merit
- Have respectful questioning about your disability for the purpose of reasonable accommodations
**It is your responsibility to:**
- Disclose your need for accommodations if you desire any work-related adjustments
- Search for jobs that address your skills and abilities
- Inform the manager or interview panel about your need for appropriate interview accommodations in a timely manner
- Identify appropriate and reasonable accommodations for an interview
- Negotiate reasonable accommodations with an employer at the point of job offer and beyond
- Bring your skills and merits to the table
- Be truthful, self-determined, and proactive

**Activities**

**Practice Script**
Research shows that having a disclosure “script” and practicing it with friends, teachers, relatives, and mentors will be of great benefit to you when the time actually comes to tell. Most people find that it is easier to talk about the impact of having a disability rather than offering a formal or clinical definition.

When arranging for a job interview, a young man who uses a wheelchair might say, “I’m really looking forward to this interview and I am checking to make sure that the interview room can accommodate my wheelchair.”

During the interview, a person with a hearing impairment, who can lip-read, is concerned about communicating on the job. She might say, “I can lip-read in face-to-face interaction, but will need TTY services and devices when using the phone.”

An employer expresses concern about a worker’s productivity. The worker might say, “I am having more difficulty than I anticipated keeping up with my co-workers because of my learning disability. In the past, it has helped to work alongside an experienced mentor.”

To help you practice explaining your disability, write your explanation down. You may have to do this several times before it truly says what you want to say, in a way that someone who knows very little about disabilities will understand. Use additional paper if needed.

Here are some questions and hints to think about while preparing your disclosure practice script:
- Write about your positive attributes or strengths first
- Identify the limitations or challenges you face at work because of your disability
- Identify which accommodations have worked best for you in the past and why
- Consider how disclosing can help the business employer and your co-workers (try to put yourself in their shoes)
- End the script with positive points

**Resources**


The complete guide can be found at: www.ncwd-youth.info/resources_&_Publications/411.html
Information on the Collaborative can be found at: www.ncwd-youth.info/
Information about the Office of Disability Employment Policy can be found at: www.dol.gov/odep/
The comprehensive federal website of disability-related resources is also available at: www.disability.gov
Career One Stop: www.careeronestop.org/
The Job Accommodation Network (JAN): www.jan.wvu.edu/
TransCen, Inc.: www.transcen.org/