

### Career Advice for Students and Alumni with Disabilities

Having a disability may present added challenges when seeking employment, but it can also present added opportunity. Many employers value diversity, and some are actively seeking individuals that add diversity to their workforce. Disabled individuals who are well-qualified for a position, have good coping skills and a positive attitude have excellent employment prospects when their disability is introduced and discussed properly. This information was developed by Engineering Career Services to address some of the distinctive issues that students with disabilities face when seeking employment in the U.S.

It is a supplement to the Student Guide to Employment, which can be found at:

<http://www.engineering.iastate.edu/ecs/students/the-employment-process/>

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## Employer Hiring Motivations and Diversity Efforts

When hiring, the primary goal of most employers is to identify the job applicant who will complete the work that they need done with a high level of quality, and will work well with the rest of their team. They are also looking for someone who will be dependable and is likely to become a loyal, long-term employee. If you can convince an employer that you are all of these things, then it is likely that you will receive a job offer.

Some employers are also actively seeking individuals who add diversity to their workforce. Successful organizations understand that teams composed of individuals with different backgrounds and experiences have more synergy, and are generally more innovative, productive, and gratified with their work environment. Individuals in underrepresented gender and ethnic groups have benefited most from diversity affirmative action efforts. Individuals with disabilities have not benefited as greatly due to factors that range from employer unawareness of a hidden disability to concerns about the cost of accommodations. However, employers are increasing their search for talent with disabilities due to the 2013 amendment of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and they know that one of their best sources for this talent is institutions of higher education like ISU.

## Discrimination Protection, Affirmative Action and Work-Related Accommodations

### The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA)

The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) protects individuals with disabilities from employment discrimination at private establishments with 15 or more employees as well as all state and local government agencies regardless of the number of employees. In order to receive protection under the ADA, you must:

- 1) Meet the employer's requirements for the position related to skills, education, experience, and other areas.
- 2) Be able to perform the essential functions of the position with or without reasonable accommodation.
- 3) Disclose your disability to the employer.

The ADA protects you from discrimination because you have a condition that may impact you in the workplace. However, this does not mean an employer has a legal obligation to grant you an interview or hire you. If you do not have the skills and qualifications for the job, or if you are unable (with reasonable workplace accommodation) to effectively and safely perform the job better than other qualified applicants, the employer has no obligation to hire you.

Examples of prohibited employment practices under the ADA include:

- Prior to making a job offer, an employer cannot ask questions that are likely to cause a disability to be revealed. (Note: An employer working to satisfy Section 503 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 can ask applicants to self-identify for record-keeping purposes. See the Disclosing a Disability Section for more information.)
- Prior to making a job offer, an employer cannot require applicants to undergo a medical exam. (Note: A medical exam can be required after a job offer has been extended as long as all individuals offered the same type of job are required to undergo the exam.)

- An employer cannot use recruiting practices that discriminate against job seekers with disabilities. For example, if a pre-employment test is required, an accommodation must be made for individuals that disclose a disability that necessitates extra time.
- An employer cannot refuse to provide reasonable accommodations during the interview process or on the job to an individual with a disclosed disability.

### Section 503 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973

In 2013, the US Rehabilitation Act of 1973 was amended to encourage employers to focus more efforts on hiring individuals with disabilities. The amended act now requires federal contractors to work towards having seven percent of their workforce comprised of employees with disabilities. This requirement applies to employers that have \$10,000 or more in aggregate contracts to provide goods and services to the federal government.

In order to measure and document their progress toward the diversity target of seven percent, many employers ask applicants to self-identify as having a disability. This self-identification is not the same as disclosing a disability to a recruiter, interviewer, or manager, which will be discussed in a coming section. An invitation to self-identify usually occurs during the application process and is treated as confidential information by HR departments. Individual responses are not shared with those involved in the job candidate selection process. When solicited with an assurance of confidentiality, you are encouraged to self-identify since this should have no direct impact on your employment prospects with the particular employer and will help to ensure that individuals with disabilities are given proper consideration for employment opportunities.

### Work-Related Accommodations

A work-related accommodation is any modification or adjustment to a job or the work environment that will enable a qualified applicant or employee with a disability to participate in the application process or to perform essential job functions. Accommodations can range from making existing facilities accessible, job restructuring, acquiring or modifying existing equipment, or reassigning an employee to a vacant position. The ADA requires employers to make “reasonable accommodations.” Reasonableness is determined on a case-by-case basis and involves evaluating whether an accommodation will be effective and whether it will constitute an undue hardship on the employer. Providing workspace on the ground floor might be viewed as a reasonable accommodation, while installing an elevator probably wouldn’t.

THE NEED FOR A  
WORKPLACE  
ACCOMMODATION DOES  
NOT REQUIRE  
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DISABILITY PRIOR TO THE  
START OF EMPLOYMENT.

You likely have a pretty good understanding of the accommodations that are important for your success as a student and your accommodations in the workplace might be similar. Before you start searching for employment and interacting with employers, you need to do some self-reflection to understand your abilities and limitations. Think about how your disability might affect your capacity to complete tasks common to your major and investigate accommodation(s) that you may need. When you begin your search for employment, read job descriptions closely and realistically assess your ability to do the work with and without accommodations. If you are unsure about the accommodations that might be helpful for your disability, the Job Accommodation Network and Askjan.org is a good source information.

## Self-Advocacy and What to Do If You Are a Victim of Discrimination

Most employers are knowledgeable about the ADA and the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, but some may not be and you should be prepared to advocate for your rights. Most employers will be very willing to make accommodations or change recruiting practices to give you fair consideration for employment. If, however, you feel that you are a victim of discrimination, the U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) is responsible for enforcing the ADA and should be contacted. More information can be found at <http://www.eeoc.gov/>

## Disclosing a Disability

Disclosure is sharing information about a disability with an employer. A distinction is being made in this document between disclosure and the self-identification (discussed earlier), which helps HR departments track affirmative action progress. Disclosure is not required and not necessary if you will not require workplace accommodations and your disability will not affect your work performance. For individuals with a visible disability (or visible accommodation) disclosure will naturally occur at some point in the job search process. Individuals with non-apparent disabilities will need to decide whether or not to disclose based on the particular situation. You will need to disclose in order to receive protection from discrimination under the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) and when you need accommodations. However, to receive workplace accommodations, disclosure can wait until after starting employment.

IF YOUR DISABILITY WILL NOT IMPACT THE INTERVIEW PROCESS OR JOB PERFORMANCE, THERE IS NO REASON TO DISCLOSE YOUR DISABILITY TO YOUR EMPLOYER.

## Pros and Cons of Disclosure

### Pros of Disclosure

- Disclosure may facilitate the discussion of important skills, positive character traits (resourcefulness, organized, an ability to 'think outside the box', etc.), and activities related to a disability. For example, you may have developed leadership skills in a disability-related organization or an ability to better relate to individuals who are facing challenges in their lives.
- When an employer is working to reach diversity goals, disclosure may provide an advantage over other equally qualified candidates. (Engineering Career Services can determine whether an employer has an affirmative action program without identifying the individual with a disability.)
- When a disability is apparent during an interaction with an employer, addressing it may put the employer at ease, provide an opportunity to dispel misconceptions and explain it in a positive light.
- When an unseen disability could affect interview performance, explaining it might result in more favorable consideration. For example, if distraction due to ADHD might cause an interviewer to think that you are not highly interested in a position or not fully focused on the interview, it might be best to disclose your disability and discuss how it could affect the interview but be managed in the workplace.
- Sharing personal information relevant to a position generally results in an increased level of trust and may lead to stronger professional relationships.
- Successful handling of a sometimes delicate subject can demonstrate confidence and maturity to an employer.

## Cons of Disclosure

- Disclosing may become a distraction. Remember employers are looking to hire the best candidate for a position, so if too much of a discussion is disability-focused, they may not develop a clear understanding of your skills and qualifications.
- Disclosure may have a negative influence on some employers. Some physical and mental conditions may trigger specific prejudice that are difficult to be overcome.
- Some employers may simply not understand a condition and not want to invest the energy required to fully evaluate the effects that a condition may have on their operation.

## Timing Considerations for Disclosure

Once you have decided that it is in your best interest to disclose a disability, timing becomes the next consideration. Timing is situation-dependent but generally speaking, the best time to disclose a disability is when you have an opportunity to discuss it and explain why you are the best candidate for a particular position despite having a disability. Considerations for various disclosure opportunities are discussed below.

### On Your Resume or Cover Letter

Disclosing a disability on your resume or cover letter is generally not recommended. It is usually better to disclose after the interest of an employer has been captured and there is an opportunity to discuss any concerns or misconceptions an employer might have. However, if a disability is indicated because disability-related campus clubs or community activities are included on your resume, it might be advantageous to include a positive statement or two about the disability in a cover letter.

### When Applying for a Position

Disclosure when applying for a position is only recommended when applying to an employment program specifically for candidates with disabilities such as the 'Workforce Recruitment Program' or the 'Schedule A Hiring Authority for People with Disabilities.' When an employer is a federal contractor and working to meet the seven percent disabled employees target invoked by Section 503 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, applicants are encouraged to self-identify to the human resources department. Usually this is done as part of an on-line application process or on a form that is separate from the application form. (Note: when you self-identify, the information is only used for record keeping and goal progress measurement. The information is not supposed to be used in making hiring decisions.)

### When Invited for an Interview

Disclosure is necessary when an accommodation is needed for the interview process or when concerned about accessibility. It is also recommended when a disability is apparent so that the interviewer will not be caught off guard. A simple statement such as, "I really appreciate the opportunity to interview for this position, and I am really looking forward to meeting you Mr. Smith. I have a disability that makes it difficult for me to climb stairs, and was wondering about the accessibility of the interview location." Or "Hopefully, this will not affect anything, but I wanted to let you know that I have a speech impediment so that it doesn't come as a surprise to you." This will provide the interviewer with an opportunity to better prepare for the interview and lead to a better discussion. When a disability is not apparent and may not necessitate a workplace accommodation, it is usually best to wait until more is found out about the position and you have started developing a professional relationship with the employer.

## During the interview

Disclosure is recommended when a disability is apparent and it may cause the employer to have concerns about job performance. Disclosure is also recommended when a disability is not readily apparent but may affect your interview performance. For example, if inattention due to ADHD or memory problems could negatively affect your interview, it might be best to address the disability so you can explain why you are still the best candidate for the position.

## After Receiving a Job Offer

If you didn't find it necessary to disclose prior to receiving a job offer, the primary reason to consider disclosing before accepting the offer is to investigate any workplace accommodations you are fairly certain you will need to be successful. If you feel a certain accommodation is necessary for you to be successful in a position but the employer does not feel this is a reasonable accommodation, it is best to have this discussion before you have started the process of relocating or have turned down interviews/offers with other potential employers.

## After Starting A Job

For some, waiting to see if a workplace accommodation is needed before deciding to disclose is the best option. Even if it is years after starting a position, it is wise to disclose and seek accommodations if you are struggling to perform your job adequately.

## Who to Disclose to

Deciding who to disclose a disability to is often affected by the timing of the disclosure. It is usually best to disclose to the HR manager. HR managers are usually advocates for equal employment opportunity and they will likely ensure that you are treated fairly. During the interview process, if you are not in contact with the HR department and feel it is necessary to disclose to the interviewer, it is recommended that you ask the interviewer to put you in touch with the HR manager so you can also make them aware of your disability. You might say, "Engineering Career Services said it is important to let the HR manager know that I have a disability that will require an accommodation. Could you put me in contact with that person?"

Once you are hired, your boss will need to be informed so that he or she can provide the necessary accommodations and judge your job performance fairly. You may want to inform your co-workers so that they understand your disability and can provide support if needed. Who you tell and how much you want people to know about your disability is completely up to you.

## What to Say

Before disclosing a disability to an employer, it is important to plan out how much you want to disclose and exactly what you want to say. Be prepared to advocate on your own behalf and dispel any misconceptions that an individual might have about your disability. The employer will need to hear that you have developed ways of working around limitations to get things done and that you have a history of success. Tell them about your coping skills, use of adaptive technology, and strengths that you have developed as a result of your disability. Most of the discussion should be focused on your abilities, accomplishments, and motivation to achieve more, but be prepared to address the employer's concerns regarding your abilities and discuss the specific accommodations you will need to do the job. There is no established procedure for making a disclosure, but the following is a good approach:

THE DISCUSSION SHOULD  
FOCUS ON YOUR ABILITY  
TO DO THE JOB WELL  
WHEN PROVIDED WITH  
REASONABLE  
ACCOMMODATIONS.

- Briefly describe your disability and any functional limitations you have that will likely affect your job performance. You do not need to thoroughly discuss your diagnosis and never describe your disability as a "weakness."
- Describe any accommodations that you are likely to need. These may be accommodations you have needed in the past, or new ones based on the nature of the job. Don't mention accommodations that you may not need. If you find you need an accommodation after starting the job, you can request it at that time.
- Assure the employer that with reasonable accommodation you will be able to perform the job well. Emphasize job-related skills and abilities. Convey the message that you're a qualified candidate with great skills who also happens to have a disability.
- Ask the employer if they have any questions or concerns so you can address them.

### Example Disclosures:

#### Example 1

Mr. Smith, I really appreciate this opportunity to interview with you! Before we get too far along with the interview, I wanted to let you know that I have ADHD, which causes me to struggle with distractions. If I become distracted for a moment, please don't take this as a lack of interest in the position or this discussion; I am highly interested in this position. I have developed coping skills that have allowed me to be successful academically, so I am confident that I will be able to perform well in the workplace. The only accommodation that I may need is a workspace that is not filled with distractions. Do you have any questions about ADHD or any concerns about it affecting my ability to do this job?"

#### Example 2

"Ms. Jones, I know your company has an affirmative action program aimed at hiring individuals with disabilities. I have dyslexia, which primarily affects my spelling and ability to listen and write at the same time. I have strong writing skills but rely heavily on a computer with spellcheck software. It's also helpful to receive written instructions when they are extensive since it's unlikely that I will remember the details that I don't get written down. Instructions involving three or four steps are not a problem; it's just the long lists that usually get communicated in an email or document anyway. Once I am clear on the instructions, I am very effective at getting things done with a high degree of quality and efficiency. Do you have any questions about dyslexia or any concerns about it affecting my ability to do this job?"

## Additional Resources

ISU Student Accessibility Services <a href="https://www.sas.dso.iastate.edu/">https://www.sas.dso.iastate.edu/</a>	Student Accessibility Services is a unit in the ISU Dean of Students Office responsible for coordinating accommodations for ISU students with documented disabilities. The SAS staff are a good source of information about the ADA and achieving success at ISU as you prepare for your career.
The Job Accommodation Network (JAN) <a href="http://askjan.org/">http://askjan.org/</a>	JAN is one of several services provided by the U.S. Department of Labor's Office of Disability Employment Policy (ODEP). The website provides a list of accommodation ideas that will be useful to individual who are unsure about the accommodations that they might need.
The Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) <a href="http://www.eeoc.gov">www.eeoc.gov</a>	The EEOC offers guidance on types of reasonable accommodations, and how to request them.
Schedule A Hiring Authority <a href="https://www.eeoc.gov/eeoc/publications/a_bc_applicants_with_disabilities.cfm">https://www.eeoc.gov/eeoc/publications/a_bc_applicants_with_disabilities.cfm</a>	This EEOC website provides Information on The Schedule A Hiring Authority for people with disabilities that are interested in working for the federal government.
Iowa Vocational Rehabilitation Services <a href="http://www.ivrs.iowa.gov">www.ivrs.iowa.gov</a>	Many states offer vocational services to disabled individuals. For residents of Iowa, this resource is Iowa Vocational Rehabilitation Services Office, which has an office in the ISU Student Services Building.
The Workforce Recruitment Program (WRP) <a href="https://wrp.gov/">https://wrp.gov/</a>	The WRP is a recruitment and referral program that connects federal sector employers with college students and recent graduates with disabilities.
Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) <a href="http://www.ada.gov/">http://www.ada.gov/</a> and <a href="http://www.eeoc.gov/facts/ada18.html">http://www.eeoc.gov/facts/ada18.html</a>	More information regarding the ADA is available at these two websites.

## References

- US Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, News Release, Persons with a Disability: Labor Force Characteristics - 2014, USDL-15-1162, June 16, 2015, <http://www.bls.gov/news.release/pdf/disabl.pdf>
- Best Practices for Recruiting Students with Disabilities, NACE Spotlight for Recruiting Professionals, NACE Website, October 15, 2014
- Betsy Johnsen, "Disclosure of a Disability in a Job Interview," NACE Journal, February 2012
- Websites listed in Additional Resources section