

# Discussing Disability with an Employer

Presented by Katie Fields of Access U

Discussing disability with an employer is a personal choice that is up to the discretion of each individual. To make this decision, we need to consider the information below.

## Benefits of Discussing Disability with an Employer:

- Obtain accommodations
- Protection under the ADA
- Disability as an asset (workplace diversity, problem solving, adaptability, etc.)
- Set the narrative about your disability
- Have an edge over other non-disabled applicants
- Safety

## Risks of Discussing Disability with an Employer:

- Discrimination — even with the ADA and anti-discrimination laws, people with disabilities can be discriminated in workplaces.
- Your employer or coworkers may have pre- or misconceptions about disability and people with disabilities.
- The risk of perhaps not obtaining the job.

## The Spectrum of Disability Visibility

*When thinking about disability disclosure, you have to first recognize that there are different levels of disability visibility and where you fall on this spectrum may influence your decision regarding discussing your disability.*

Visible Disabilities	Semi-visible Disabilities	Invisible Disabilities
Appear as “disabled”	May appear as “atypical”	Appear as “able-bodied”
Easily noticed and remembered as disabled	Noticed, but not associated with a disability	Not noticed and hard to remember
CP, blindness, deafness, paralysis, amputation	ASD, learning, behavioral, hearing loss, legal blindness, chronic illness	MS, diabetes, celiac disease, depression, cancer, bipolar disorder, OCD

## What to Consider:

The first thing to think about when thinking about disclosure is whether or not you'll need accommodations for the interview or job. Remember, you only have to tell employers what they need to know. You don't have to disclose more than that.

If your disability is obvious, you should probably disclose it before you meet the employer face-to-face. Like it or not, the employer assumes you're able-bodied, so when you show up, you might surprise them. Employers can be especially concerned about accommodations and don't always realize that a disability doesn't mean someone needs an accommodation.

If you have a semi-visible disability, a brief disclosure during the conversation can help alleviate any concerns they have. Again, you only need to speak to the "tell" they're observing. You don't have to go into detail.

If you have an invisible disability, you do not need to discuss your disability before receiving an offer. Once you've accepted a job, you can decide whether or not to disclose based on whether you will need accommodations or not.

*The employer you are applying with is also relevant to your disclosure decision. If you are applying for a position with an agency that focuses on disability, it might make more sense to disclose your disability because it's relevant to the job.*

## **How should I talk about my disability with an employer?**

Remember that you set the narrative! If we can discuss our disabilities as the unique strength that it is, employers will be more likely to respond the same way. If we feel shame and express embarrassment or negativity about our disability, it's likely that an employer will respond the same way. Sometimes employers may wonder how you will complete the job. Come with solutions to their perceived problems! Be prepared to discuss the assistive technology you use, the accommodations you utilize to be successful, etc.

- Always speak positively or neutrally about your disability
- Discuss your disability as a unique strength
- Be prepared to discuss assistive tech and helpful accommodations
- Don't give diagnosis or medical info; focus on what's relevant and what they need to know

## **Disability Success Story**

This exercise is to help you see the unique talents and strengths you've developed living with a disability.

The steps to crafting your disability success story are

1. Identify your medical impairment. This is the thing your body literally cannot do.
2. Identify the adaptations or accommodations you use as a result. These can be assistive technology, assistive devices, or internal coping mechanisms like a different kind of outlook

3. Identify the unique skills, abilities, outlooks, assets, etc. you have that an able-bodied person doesn't because of the accommodations you use.

**Example:** "I have a spinal cord injury, which means my brain doesn't talk to my arms and legs. To adapt, I use a power wheelchair to get around, and I use a specialized software to work on a computer. Because of the nature of the software, I pay much closer attention to detail."

**Another Real Life Example:** An autistic student applies for a Computer Science internship at a local technology company and is asked "What is your biggest strength?" He responds with the following: "My biggest strength is probably my attentiveness to detail. As an autistic individual, sometimes noticing social cues can be a challenge, so I've spent much of my life observing my surroundings to better gauge a situation or environment. Being so skilled at observation has allowed me to catch small details many others might not readily notice, like detecting bugs in my peers' codes."

## Requesting Accommodations

Accommodations are not special treatment; rather they are modifications that provide equal opportunity to successfully perform their job. In addition to on the job, accommodations can also be requested during the application process.

The Job Accommodation Network ([AskJAN.org](https://askjan.org)) recommends several key principles:

- **Keep it simple** – Use plain language and don't give more info on diagnosis than needed
- **Put it in writing** – Documentation helps ensure your request is addressed in a timely manner
- **Talk to the right people** – Go directly to HR when possible. Check the employee handbook for the appropriate contact when unsure.

## Identifying Inclusive Employers

- Visit the [Disability Equality Index](https://www.disabilityequalityindex.com) and view top-scoring companies
- Look for the word "disability" used in an organization's diversity statements and communications about company policy
- Select organizations with a disability-focused Employee Resource Group (ERG)
- Consider opportunities with federal agencies, government contractors and subcontractors
- Review company's careers site for any mention of requesting accommodations
- Look for organizations that partner with disability-related organizations
- Ask local disability community for their recommendations

## Additional Resources:

- [Know Your Rights](#) Under the ADA
- [Job Accommodation Network](#) - A great resource for ADA and accommodation information
- The [U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission \(EEOC\)](#) and the **Department of Justice (DOJ)** - share responsibility for enforcing Title I of the ADA; complaints alleging employment discrimination should be filed directly with the EEOC.
- [What Can You Do? Campaign for Disability Employment](#) - federally funded highly collaborative effort among several disability and business organizations that showcases supportive, inclusive workplaces for all workers
- [Access U](#) is a free, local career development program designed to support disabled students in becoming competitive job seekers
- [LimeConnect](#), [Workforce Recruitment Program](#), [Vocational Rehabilitation](#), [Inclusively](#), [abilityJOBS](#)

**Have questions?** Contact Katie Fields, College Outreach Coordinator at Starkloff Disability Institute, for additional career advising support at [kfields@starkloff.org](mailto:kfields@starkloff.org).