Talking About Your Disability

# In The Interview

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Excerpts from Working with People with Disabilities in a

Job Placement Job Retention Environment

## A Question And Answer Study Guide

The following is a guide for applicants regarding talking about disability-related job issues in employment interviews. It is written in a question and answer format that can be given to a person in a structured classroom or unstructured private learning situation. The authors sincerely hope that its use will increase the employment opportunities of qualified persons with disabilities, increase the number of informed quality employment decisions made by employers and facilitate inclusion as an organizational value.

**Talking About Your Disability In The Interview**

**A Questions and Answer Study Guide**

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1. **QUESTION: Why should I bring up my disability in an interview?**

# ANSWER: One important benefit of job candidates positively raising the subject of their disability in an interview is that the issue of disability is now on the table. This allows the applicants and the employer to begin a mutually constructive dialogue about the applicant’s abilities, strengths, and the employer’s needs. This process increases the chances of a successful job offer and acceptance.

Job developers and counsellors have found that applicants who positively address the subject of their disability and potential reasonable accommodations with employers are more likely to be successful in their job search.

1. **QUESTION: What is a reasonable accommodation?**

ANSWER: Basically, a reasonable accommodation is some change in the job or the interview/evaluation process that takes into consideration your disability-related job challenges and enables you to do the job and or be properly and fairly evaluated.

In the interview examples of these accommodations could be providing a sign language interpreter for someone who is deaf or hearing impaired and needs that assistance. It could be giving more time for someone to complete a test, making sure an application or computer file is accessible for the applicant, or making sure the interviewing facilities are accessible.

On the job, an accommodation could be many things to enable the employee to have the accessible environment or tools to perform the job duties. For example, an accommodation might be changing or modifying the work schedule for someone, providing equipment to enable employees to communicate, or changing the way that work is traditionally performed. You should study what the Americans with Disabilities Act says about reasonable accommodations. One important thing to remember is that an employer may be obligated to provide an accommodation if it is not an undue hardship for the employer to do so. More importantly, it is something the employer would want to do for the benefit of the organization and to build a skilled and talented workforce.

1. **QUESTION: How do I know if I need reasonable accommodation?**

ANSWER: To know if you need a reasonable accommodation, you need to consider two things:

One: What are the essential duties of the job I am applying for?

Two: Would an accommodation enhance my ability to interview and satisfactorily perform these functions?

A job counselor or placement professional should be able to tell you what are the essential functions of the job. Essential functions are the duties that are important and fundamental to the job, not ones that are incidental or optional.

If the job placement person you are working with does not know what the essential functions of the job are, then the employer may be able to tell you.

“What are the essential functions of the job?” can be a very good question to ask an employer in an interview. You may have to decide in the interview whether an accommodation is needed and how and when to bring it up.

If you do not know what the employer considers the essential functions of the job to be, you and your counselor can anticipate based on general knowledge of the job. In this way, you will be better prepared. Keep in mind that each employer may do the job differently and these functions can change from employer to employer, even from department to department with the same employer.

Once you have identified these essential functions, the question becomes, “Can I do the essential functions of the job with or without a reasonable accommodation?”

Working with the placement organization, you should be able to determine if there are any functions that you need accommodation to perform. If you do, at this point, it important to clearly define what accommodation you would need.

An employer may be uncertain as to the type of accommodation needed. Applicants who can suggest what accommodations they need and how these accommodations will improve their performance do both themselves and the employer a favor.

1. **QUESTION: What if I cannot do one of the “marginal” functions of the job?**

ANSWER: If you cannot do a marginal or optional function because of your disability, then the employer has the option of accommodating you to allow you to do it or waiving that function for you. The employer should not consider your inability to perform a marginal function in their overall hiring decision.

If your inability to perform the marginal function has nothing to do with your disability, then the employer can consider it as part of your overall qualifications and evaluate your inability to do it with the same weight that he or she would use with any applicant.

Example: If being able to drive a car was a marginal function of a job and an applicant could not drive because of a disability, then the employer should not consider it against the applicant. But if the applicant could not drive simply because he never learned or wanted to drive, then the employer could consider it as a concern for evaluation in the hiring decision.

When it comes up in an interview that you cannot do a marginal function of a job because of your disability, it is important that you make clear that the inability is disability related so the employer will not factor it against you in the employment decision.

1. **QUESTION: What if I feel that the employer does not have a right to know about my disability?**

ANSWER: An employer is prohibited from making general disability or medical inquiries in an interview. They may not ask about current or past medical conditions. However, if a job is offered the employer might require a medical examination if that is a requirement of all applicants who receive a conditional job offer.

You should keep in mind that there is a difference between your disability and your disability job-related accommodation needs. Information about your disability include: its definition, how you acquired it, how it affects your life, its prognoses, any medical treatments, etc. Employers generally have neither the right nor need to know these things.

Disability job-related needs for an accommodation is another issue. If you request a reasonable accommodation, the employer may need to evaluate how you can perform the functions of the job with or without an accommodation. The employer might need information to properly accommodate and evaluate you.

The information the employer would need should be limited to how it affects your ability to do the job. You can discuss this aspect of your disability with the employer without revealing the more personal aspects of your condition.

Example: The employer might have the need to know how the applicant who uses a wheelchair was going to perform some of the job functions while using the wheelchair and whether the applicant needed a reasonable accommodation to perform those functions. At the same time, the employer might not have a need to know why the applicant uses a wheelchair, the nature of the injury or illness, the medical prognoses of the condition and how the disability affected the applicant off the job.

If you feel uncomfortable about an employer knowing anything about your disability, it is your right not to discuss or disclose it. However it is important to remember, the employer only has the obligation to accommodate known disabilities.

Refusing to assist the employer with information about your abilities, limitations and need for accommodation only hinders the employer’s ability to successfully accommodate and evaluate you. Let the employer know how the accommodation enables you to perform the essential requirements of the job.

Ultimately the decision is yours, but the question is, “Are you doing everything you can do to maximize your employment potential, help the employer to hire you, and be the best possible employee you can be?”

1. **QUESTION: When will the issue of my disability come up in an interview?**

ANSWER: While the employer does not have the right to make general medical inquiries of applicants, employers do have the right to ask an applicant if they can perform the functions of the job they are applying for.

If an employer asks you if you can perform a function that your disability does not permit you to perform, you can answer that you are unable to perform that function; and thus, the employer may ask “Why?” and the issue of your disability might be raised.

Example: The employer asks if the applicant can lift a 50-pound box from the floor to the table repeatedly and the applicant says “no”. The employer asks why, and the response is “because of a back surgery”. Now the issue of a disability has been raised within the context of a proper interview.

If you can perform a function but need accommodation to do so, the need for accommodation raises the issue.

Example: If an employer asks if an applicant can review and proof documents with or without a reasonable accommodation and the reply is “yes but I will need a magnifier to see the small print,” the disability issue has been raised. In this example, the potential accommodation has also been raised that would allow an applicant to perform the duties of the job.

If there is something in your background or employment history that is only explained by your disability, then the disability issue might be raised.

Example: An employer questions an applicant about why the worker left her last job and now wants to change fields. The applicant replies that she was injured on the job and can no longer do that kind of work. Thus, the issue of the disability is brought up.

When the disability is obvious to the employer and causes reasonable concern about the applicant’s ability to perform the essential functions of the job, the employer may question the applicant about his or her abilities to do the essential functions of the job. This is an opportunity for the applicant to explain and/or demonstrate how the applicant can and will perform on the job.

Example: An applicant comes in who has an arm amputated. The employer does not see how the applicant can deliver heavy or awkward loads on the delivery route. So, the employer asks the applicant to explain or demonstrate how he would do the function.

The problem is that many employers do not understand the Americans with Disabilities Act and are afraid to pursue even valid questioning without support and encouragement from the applicant with the disability. Some employers know the law but are afraid of offending or insulting the person with the disability. This creates a problem for both the applicant and the employer. Applicants who help the employer to address concerns regarding their ability to perform the essential functions of the job are more likely to be hired than the ones who do not.

1. **QUESTION: How do I know whether to bring it up or not?**

ANSWER: The Americans with Disabilities Act does not require, restrict, or recommend to applicants with disabilities when, if, or how to bring their disability up to an employer.

The following opinions are based on extensive experience in developing jobs for persons with disabilities.

1. If the disability will require the employer to provide a reasonable accommodation, the applicant should consider bringing it up and explain the nature of the accommodation needed and how it will enable the person’s ability to perform.

Example: An applicant may require voice activated software to do required word processing. This is often available in word processing software that is commonly used. The applicant informs the employer of the need for accommodation, the nature of the required equipment, and details of their past performance and success using such equipment.

1. If the disability will not require an accommodation but is obvious (visible) and the average employer would have reasonable concerns or doubts as to how someone with the disability would perform the job functions, the applicant may decide to bring it up, explaining how the functions in question will be performed.

Example: An applicant has three fingers amputated from her dominant hand. The applicant needs to be able to type and take written messages. She has learned to both write and type without any accommodations, but since the employer will notice and probably be concerned, the applicant brings it up explaining or demonstrating how she can perform those functions. If the applicant did not bring this up, the employer might assume she cannot perform the job functions.

1. If the disability is not obvious and will not impact on the job’s performance, the applicant should not bring it up, as it has no bearing on the job at all.

Example: An applicant has been treated for depression. He is currently on medication that controls depression, and it will not affect job safety or performance. There is no reason to bring it up.

1. **QUESTION: How do I bring it up?**

ANSWER: It is important to keep the importance of disability within the context of the interview and job. In other words, do not make a bigger deal out of it than it really is. The focus of any interview is who you are, what you can do and why the employer should hire you. The issue of disability and the need for accommodation does not change that in any way.

First present your qualifications for the job. Focus on your ability to do the essential functions of the position. Next bring up the functions that you will need a reasonable accommodation; and focus on the resulting productivity and effectiveness of the accommodation to allow you to perform the job functions.

Do not concentrate on your limitations but stress your ability. Would it be better for a person with a back injury to describe themselves as someone who cannot stand for more than an hour or someone who can stand for up to an hour? They both describe the same situation but the latter one is much more positive because it describes what the person can do, not what the person cannot do.

Be ready for the subject to come up within the interviewer’s questions about qualifications and abilities and respond with your explanation. If the subject does not come up, then you should bring it up near the end of the interview. Remember, explain how the value of accommodation results in positive outcomes.

1. **QUESTION: What if I want my counselor or job developer to bring it up for me?**

ANSWER: Then ask them to. But before you do, remember that it is generally more effective if you bring it up yourself. It sends the employer a message that if you are hired and problems arise, you will be an active and effective partner in helping to resolve them.

If you do not feel able to deal with the details of the reasonable accommodations you need, or simply do not wish to talk in detail about it, then you might bring up the subject and advise the employer that your counselor or placement professional is available to answer any questions, as well as provide the employer assistance.

Whatever you decide should be done with the advisement and cooperation of the placement professional or job placement agency you are working with.

1. **QUESTION: What does my job counselor need to know?**

ANSWER: Interesting enough, job counselors need to know what the employer needs to know — your abilities and qualifications, your job-related limitations, and potential needs for accommodation. They will be using basically the same standard for referring you to an interview that an employer uses in considering you for the job.

With your help they can be of great assistance to you. Helping to identify the functions of the job you want, helping you identify any reasonable accommodations you might need, and coaching you to present yourself and your abilities in the best possible light.

As a person with a disability, the American with Disabilities Act represents a big change and a new world for you. It also is a big change and a new world for employers and placement organizations. The best things you can do for both your job counselor and you are to be honest about your vocational goals, to not be afraid to dream and share your dreams with others, and to pursue them for yourself. Your job counselor is bound by confidentiality to not share information with an employer without your permission. As such it is beneficial for them to have a clear understanding of any barriers you may face in finding or retaining employment so that they can assist you in finding the best job for long-term employment.

The most important factor in your job search success is you. The purpose of this guide is to help make your search for employment an informed and effective one. It is your responsibility to educate your job counselor and the employer about your abilities and the value of an accommodation, if needed, to create a win-win situation. Prepare yourself to put the employer at ease with knowledge that reinforces the value of hiring you.