Talking About Your Disability

# In The Interview

#### By Rich Pimentel

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.

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 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.

1. **QUESTION: How do I know if I need a 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 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 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.

 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.

 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: 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.

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.

 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.