



SELF-IDENTIFICATION OF DISABILITIES FAQ

1. Am I required to tell employers and teachers about my disability?

No you are not. That is up to you. Some people feel comfortable bringing it up and some people do not. Some people believe that employers and teachers have a need to know and some people do not believe it is any of their business.

If you bring it up, it should be because you think it will benefit you to do so. What to bring up, how and when to do it, is up to you. It's a personal decision.

2. What are the benefits to me of bringing up my disability to an employer or teacher?

The main benefit is that if you need an employment or academic accommodation to be successful, self-identification starts the communication with the employer or teacher about what you need and how the accommodation will help you to be the best employee or student that you can be.

Not bringing it up may make it more difficult to get the accommodation you need. Without the accommodation it might be more of a challenge to be successful in the job or the classroom.

Another benefit is that if you believe that the employer or teacher might be worried that your disability may cause you to have problems on the job or in the classroom, bringing it up gives you the opportunity to explain how you are able to perform successfully even if you do not need an accommodation.

3. Can bringing disabilities up ever make it more difficult for me?

Sometimes. This was truer in the past than it is today. Before there were laws like the Americans with Disabilities Act as Amended, and State and Federal laws against discrimination in employment and education, people have often chosen not to talk about their disabilities because they were afraid that if a school or employer found out about their disability they would not want them.

This is one of the reasons why many people with disabilities who lived during these years still believe it is better not to say anything. Our world has changed a lot in the last twenty years. People have a better understanding about what persons with disabilities can do in the workplace and the classroom.

Today, simply knowing about a person's disability is not a valid or legal reason to reject them. Employers and teachers are more receptive to accepting and accommodating them to be successful.

Are there still people who feel negatively about people with disabilities? Yes, of course there are. However, there are fewer of them every year. There are many more reasons for you to self-identify a disability to employers and teachers today than there were in the past. Successful persons with disabilities believe that the rewards of doing so are greater than the risks.

4. Why should I not just wait for the employer or teacher to bring it up and ask me about it?

The short answer is they might not bring it up. All disabilities are not obvious, can be seen or observed. Some are what is called hidden. If you need an accommodation because you have a hidden disability that will make it difficult for you to do the essential tasks of your job or perform and learn in school and it is never discussed, you might not get the accommodation you need.

Sometimes an employer or teacher may not ask a question about an obvious or visible disability because they are uncomfortable talking about it and are not sure if you will be offended if they do. Most of us were taught when we were children never to point out or talk about people's disabilities. Many people avoid it.

You have the right to talk about your disability to an employer or teacher but employers and educators are limited in knowing the way they can ask. This is especially true for employers.

Employers are prohibited from making disability or medical inquiries or examinations of an applicant in an interview. They may not ask about current or past medical conditions, and unless a job is offered, the employer may not have an applicant submit to a medical examination unless all applicants for that job who received a conditional job offer are required to have the medical examination.

You should keep in mind that there is a difference between your "disability" and your disability job-related limitations. Information about your disability may 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 limitations and your need for accommodation is another issue. If you request a reasonable accommodation or if the employer cannot evaluate how you can perform the functions of the job with your disability, then more information might be needed by the employer to properly evaluate and accommodate you.

The information the employer would need to do this should be limited to what is called the job-related "manifestation of the disability;" simply put, 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 disability.

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 does not have a need to know why the applicant was in 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. But 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 evaluate and accommodate you.

The decision is yours, but the question is, "Are you doing everything you can to maximize your employment potential and help the employer to hire you?"

5. What does the term "accommodations" mean and what does it have to do with disabilities?

Basically it is some change in the job or the classroom that takes into consideration your disability or student-related limitations and enables you to perform satisfactorily.

In the classroom these accommodations could be providing a sign language interpreter for someone who was deaf or hearing impaired and needed that assistance. It could be giving more time for someone to complete a test if they have a learning disability, or assisting someone to take notes if they have cerebral palsy and cannot take them on their own.

On the job, an accommodation could be many things. Changing the work schedule for someone who needs medical treatments, providing accessible computer equipment for blind or visually impaired employees, changing the way work is traditionally done or assigned, and making the workplace accessible among many others.

6. What are adaptive behaviors and how are they different than accommodations?

We think of accommodations as things that:

- Employers provide such as talking computers, accessible workstations, flexible schedules and equipment.
- Schools and instructors provide, such as lecture notes, having someone read a test to you, or extra time for an examination or test.
- Society provides accommodations for people through accessible public spaces, shopping assistance in retail stores, access to public services and transportation.

Adaptive behaviors are the things that each person with a disability learns to provide for themselves through the things they do every day. Given your limitations, what kind of things have you learned to do to make you more successful with what you want to do? Persons with disabilities practice adaptive behaviors in every aspect of their everyday lives, their social lives, recreation, workplace and education.

Examples:

- A person who is blind might arrange their living space in a certain order where things are always put in a specific place. They might fold their paper money in a certain way so they know the difference between \$5, \$10 and \$20 bills. They may have learned to put their right hand out when they meet someone so they can shake hands rather than wait for the person to put their hand out since people are timid about doing that and it sometimes becomes awkward.
- A person who uses a wheelchair might check out all claims of accessibility before going somewhere. Just because someone says something is accessible doesn't mean it is. The person when meeting someone might offer them a chair so they can be at the same height.
- A person with dyslexia might ask people to give them verbal information rather than written information.
- A person who is deaf or hearing impaired might use texting to communicate with someone if there is no interpreter available or verbal communication was difficult.
- A person with AD/HD might take large tasks and break them down into smaller tasks using a task notebook. This person might use software to stay on task and manage time.
- A person might use noise cancelling headphones to eliminate distractions while studying or reading.

These adaptive behaviors may seem like common sense to us because we do them every day. But at work or school there are adaptive behaviors that each person with a disability can do to be more successful. Your adaptive behaviors on the job or in the classroom are as important to your success as the accommodations provided for you by an employer or school.

7. How do I decide whether to bring my disability up or not?

There is no law that requires, restricts or recommends to persons with disabilities when, if, or how to bring their disability up to an employer or teacher.

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

- A. If the disability will require a reasonable accommodation, the person with a disability should bring it up and explain the nature of the accommodation needed and how it will enable the person's ability to perform.

Example: An applicant who is blind requires a "talking" computer to do required word processing. The applicant informs the employer of the need for accommodation, the nature of the required equipment and details of his or her past performance using such equipment.

- B. 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 should bring it up and explain how they will perform those functions.

Example: An applicant has three fingers amputated from his or her dominant hand. The person needs to be able to type and take written messages. He or she has learned to both write and type without any accommodations. But since the employer will notice and probably be concerned, the applicant may want to bring it up and explain or demonstrate how he or she can perform those functions.

- C. If the disability is not obvious and will not have an impact on performance, the person should not bring it up; as it has no bearing on an accommodation at all.

Example: A student has been treated for depression. He or she is currently on medication that controls the depression and does not affect performance. There is no reason to bring it up.

8. Are there correct and incorrect ways to bring up a disability?

Yes there are. Once you decide if you want to bring up your disability your next step is to choose how you will do it. There are other exercises in this section which will teach you the best way to do it.

Here are a few things to consider.

Do not make a bigger deal out of the disability than it really is. The main focus of any interview is who you are, what you can do and why the employer should hire you. The issue of disability and 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. Do not focus only on the “need” for the accommodation, but stress the resulting productivity and effectiveness of the accommodation to allow you to perform the function.

Do not only concentrate on your limitations but stress on your ability. Would it be better for a person who is deaf to describe themselves as someone who cannot hear or someone who can read lips? They both describe the same person but the latter one is much more positive because it describes what the person can do, not what the person cannot do.

Do not only talk about what the disability prevents you from doing. Talk about what the accommodation allows you to do.