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Job Accommodation Network

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## Consultants' Corner, Volume 01 Issue 13

### Disability Disclosure and Interviewing Techniques for Persons with Disabilities

Deciding when to disclose a disability can be a difficult choice for a person with a disability who is job hunting. If you have a hidden disability such as a learning disability or a psychiatric impairment, when and how to disclose your condition can be a real dilemma. Below are some guidelines for dealing with disability issues in the pre-employment process:

#### **Step One: Start with a Good Resume**

Take time to write a good resume. This is a written summary of your education, training, work experience, and most importantly, contact information. A resume should have three basic components:

- 1) Name, address, telephone number, and e-mail address;
- 2) Education and training experiences; and
- 3) Work history and experience.

Do not overlook the value of non-paid work experience such as internships, volunteer activities, and work that you have done for non-profit organizations such as a church, civic organization, or political party.

#### **Step Two: Write a Cover Letter**

A cover letter is used to introduce you to the prospective employer. It should briefly identify who you are and why you are applying for the position. It also should invite the employer to contact you for an interview. Be sure to enclose a copy of your resume with this letter.

A cover letter also gives you your first opportunity to disclose your disability. This would be to your advantage if:

You are applying for a job with a state or federal agency that must comply with affirmative action policies;

The job you are applying for directly relates to your experience as a person with a disability such as a rehabilitation counselor; or

Having a disability is a qualification for the position.

For example, a job as an addictions counselor may require that an individual be a recovering alcoholic.

#### **Step Three: Completing Applications**

For most people, the employment process begins with a company's job application. How you obtain and fill out this application can be the first impression the employer has of you. If you go to the job site to obtain an application, be mindful of your appearance. While it may not be necessary to wear your best interview suit it is important to wear clothes that are clean, ironed, and free from tears or holes. Be polite and come prepared with a pen or pencil and a copy of your resume. If possible, take the application home with you. This will allow you to complete the information in a calm, stress-free environment. Remember that neatness counts.

The Americans with Disabilities Act prohibits employers from asking medical or disability-related questions on a job application. The exception to this is that a government agency can ask an applicant to voluntarily disclose a disability for affirmative action purposes. Otherwise, if you encounter specific questions about your disability or medical history, leave them blank. If necessary, this can give you the opportunity to explain why you did not answer the questions instead of why you intentionally gave false answers.

#### **Step Four: The Interview**

For most job seekers, the interview is the "make it or break it" point. Remember that you have about a minute to make a good first impression, and first impressions mean everything during this stage of the employment process. Disclosure of your disability is critical at this point if accommodations, such as access to the building, are necessary to do the job. Do your homework! If you know the location for the interview is not accessible to you, contact the person who will be interviewing you and request an alternative location. It is a good idea to have a location in mind, just in case the interviewer needs some suggestions.

If you do not know if the location is accessible, call and ask questions about whether there are accessible parking spaces available or whether the building has an elevator. It is better to deal with these issues ahead of time than 15 minutes before your interview. This also shows your prospective employer that you are able to deal with these situations effectively.

The best way to handle difficult questions during the interview is to be prepared for them. Make a list of the questions you know you are going to have trouble with and formulate an answer, then practice your delivery of these answers so you will be ready for them. For example, "I see that there is a two year gap in your work history. What have you been doing during this time?" This is an opportunity to talk about what you have been doing, not what you have not been doing. Think about valuable life experiences that you have gained during this time. Have you been taking care of children or a parent, going to school, taking art classes, or volunteering? This question may prompt you to disclose your disability if you have not already done so. Be sure to do it in a way that shows how you have dealt with a difficult situation in a positive manner. Remember to keep the past in the past, stating that you are ready to move forward and are qualified and able to do the job you want.

Remember to talk about your abilities, not your disabilities. Employers need qualified, capable individuals to fill positions. Find a way to show that you are that person. Sell them on what you can do, not on what you cannot do and the interview will go better than you expect. Be positive about yourself and be honest.



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