To Tell or Not to Tell
Disability Disclosure...That is the question

The jury is still out in terms of what is best for applicants with disabilities regarding when to disclose a disability, especially if one has an invisible disability. The opinions are as varied as the ages, gender, educational credentials, professional classifications and ethnic backgrounds of those queried. However one thing is clear, if the disability requires any form of accommodation, the applicant will have to divulge at some point.

What is disclosure?

Disclosure is the process of informing a potential employer that you have a disability. Many people are unsure as to whether or not they should inform potential employers about their disabilities, and at what point it would be appropriate to disclose this information.

Do I have to tell potential employers about my disability?

You are not required to tell potential employers about your disability, and they cannot ask you about your condition. However, it is legal for employers to ask in an interview, “Are you able to perform the essential duties of this job with or without a reasonable accommodation?” Disclosure aside from answering this question is a personal choice dependent upon type of disability, how the disability will affect your work and your personal feelings. However, if you know your disability may impact your ability to perform your job, then you need to be prepared to disclose at some point before you begin the new job. You should then be prepared to also discuss how you will still be able to complete job functions, and identify accommodations that may be needed.

When should I disclose my disability?

No matter when you decide to disclose, you will want to present your disability in the most positive way possible. Make sure to discuss the following:

1. Disclose your disability - you do not need to go into extensive detail.
2. Describe your skills and specifically how you will do the job.
3. Show that you are aware of attitudinal barriers that you may encounter in an office, and be prepared to discuss how you make others feel more comfortable around you.
4. Identify any accommodation that may be needed.
5. Specify that you have references to verify your work experience upon request.

The most important aspect of disclosing your disability is presenting yourself as a problem-solver rather than a problem-creator. You are someone who can do the job and help work towards greater productivity. Above all, you can compete on equal terms with people who do not have disabilities.

There are several appropriate times to disclose your disability to a potential employer. You should decide when you would feel the most comfortable making this disclosure.

Application

Never state your disability under the health section of an employment application. This reinforces the stereotype that people with disabilities are unhealthy.

Resume

If you have had work experience (paid or volunteer) that is related to your disability, be sure to include it on your resume. However, never state your disability anywhere in your resume, since this implies that you feel that it is a very important aspect of the job search process.
Cover Letter

Disclosing in a cover letter might be appropriate, especially if the advertised position indicates or implies that having a disability might be a strength (i.e. working with individuals with disabilities) or if your work experience clearly indicates that you have a disability. (See example). If you choose to disclose in your cover letter, you may want to staple the letter to the back of your resume so that the employer reads about your abilities before learning the specifics about your disability. Be aware that disclosing in a cover letter may lessen your chances of being granted an interview in some cases.

Interview Confirmation

Many people choose to disclose at this point. It would be very difficult for the employer to back out of the interview at this late time. Also, employers react more favorably to this type of disclosure than to the "shock" tactic. (See #5). When you call to confirm your interview, be sure to talk directly to the person who will be interviewing you. (See example).

Interview

Some people do not disclose their disabilities and simply show up at the interview, "shocking" the interviewer. The first five minutes of the interview are the most important, and you do not want to spend them in uncomfortable silence. Therefore if you believe your disability may cause discomfort to your interviewers, you may want to address it up front. In doing so, you will want to stress how the disability has or has not affected your ability to perform essential functions. If it has impacted your ability to perform responsibilities, be prepared to share how you addressed your accommodation needs.

Job Offer

Sometimes, if all that is needed is a special chair to make your back more comfortable, or special technology to scan documents – things that were not necessary to identify prior to this point, then now may be the time to share what would be necessary to perform your job. If, for example the position requires occasional trips where you are expected to drive, but don’t have a license, then this is the time when you will need to disclose before you accept the offer.

Maybe Never

If your disability is under control, and you require no accommodations from your employer, you may never need to disclose. For example, if you are a diabetic, have a psychological disability or other non-visible disability but have it under control, you may not want to disclose until after you have accepted the job offer and/or until such time as your disability warrants disclosure.

Disclosing during the interview confirmation (Sample)

1. Call to confirm the interview. Make sure to ask to speak directly with the person who will be conducting the interview.
2. Confirm the date, time, and location of the interview.
3. If necessary, disclose your disability. However, before disclosing, you may want to ask a few questions about the interview process that may require accommodations. For example, in the case of someone with a mobility disability, a fair question might be “Will all meetings be in one room, or will I be expected to go to other rooms or buildings through the course of the interview process?” At this point then the candidate can choose to disclose by stating “The reason I asked is because I use a wheelchair and want to make sure that any routes we use to get from place to place are accessible.
4. Close the conversation positively. “Thank you for your time. I am looking forward to meeting with you and discussing the possibilities for employment.
Ms. Elizabeth Trent  
Personnel Director  
Center for Independent Living  
2356 Sutter Pike  
Ritter, NJ 08836

Dear Ms. Trent:

I am responding to your advertisement for an assistant in your finance department. As I have stated on my resume, I graduated with a Bachelor of Science in Business Administration, with a major in Finance. I worked as an intern at Dean Witter, Inc. for the duration of my senior year.

In addition to my experience at Dean Witter, Inc., I have worked as a volunteer leader at the YMCA of Tuckahoe leading exercise classes for children with disabilities for the past three years. I feel that this experience has helped me learn how to work effectively with others in a supervisory capacity.

As a person who uses a wheelchair, I believe my personal as well as professional skills make me a very strong candidate for the position. I hope that I will have the opportunity to meet with you to discuss my qualifications for this position. I will call you in a few days to arrange an interview at a mutually convenient time.

Sincerely,

Harold Stone  
Enclosure