

Review tips for job seekers with disabilities

By Joan Hope, Ph.D., Editor

“How do I gauge those hiring me to know if this is the space and place for me?” That’s one question you need to address if you are a job seeker with a disability, said Amy French, Assistant Professor of Educational Leadership at Indiana State University. And while disability is part of your identity, you face the challenge of determining when in the process to disclose a disability — or whether to disclose it at all, if it’s not apparent.

French shared tips that can help you with your job search or that you can share with students as they pursue their careers.

When to disclose

When to disclose a disability is an individual decision, French said. By law, job seekers do not need to disclose a disability they need an accommodation for until they are hired, she said. Depending on the disability, they might not know whether they need an accommodation until they are in the environment.

But some individuals require accommodations for the interview process, and then the decision is when and how to request those, French said.

French encourages individuals not to disclose right away if they don’t have to and to make the timing

Be an ally to attract, retain the best job candidates

If you are hiring or supervising an employee, you can take steps to show you are an ally to individuals with disabilities. Your actions can help them decide your institution is a good place to work and to accept a job offer. Amy French, Professor of Educational Leadership at Indiana State University, suggested the following steps to demonstrate your institution’s commitment to supporting job candidates and employees with disabilities:

- Ask at the onset of scheduling interviews if the candidate needs any specific accommodations during the interview process.
- Proactively offer transportation. Most larger campuses have a golf cart or some other means of transportation that can get job candidates across campus.
- Plan to offer captioning or other assistive technology. Although you don’t want to try out something you’re not trained on during an interview or campus visit, incorporating options as a regular practice using universal design principles can be helpful.
- Ensure spaces incorporate universal design principles. Make sure everyone can visit the places they need to go. For example, if there are cubicles, are they laid out in a way that accommodates all persons?

Allyship doesn’t end when the person is hired. French suggested keeping these factors in mind for employees:

- Remember that access is not just about the physical environment. For example, flexibility with scheduling can make the difference in the success of a staff member with an invisible disability. The staff member might need a way to rejuvenate and refuel after a crunch time in the office or might need a work schedule that allows for regular counseling sessions.

- Be aware of how the characteristics of certain spaces can help or hurt a staff member’s ability to succeed. For example, if a staff member has a hearing impairment and needs to meet with groups of students, the technology available in the assigned space and its acoustics can help make a big difference in the success of the meeting. Acknowledging the shortcomings of certain spaces is a first step to successful scheduling.

- Communicate openly. As a supervisor, it’s helpful if you say, “Here are some things I’m paying attention to. What am I missing?” That takes the burden off the staff member to start conversations about disability.

A research study French worked on showed that one thing that made an impact on graduate students was if their supervisor shared knowledge about disability. For example, one graduate student said his supervisor gave a lunch-and-learn presentation about disability. That created a strong bond for the student with the supervisor and gave the student the sense he could talk to the supervisor if he needed to.

“Just including disability in the conversation creates a sense of belonging,” French said.

- Follow through. French heard a story about one new professional with a hearing disability who requested a specific phone. Although the supervisor agreed, staff members at the college passed the information back and forth and moved the request up the chain for six months without taking ownership for getting the phone or even reviewing the details. The cost of the needed equipment was only \$35, but the assumption that assistive technology is expensive prevented action. The delay meant the new professional was “not being as awesome as he could have been,” French said. “We all need to take ownership,” she added. ■

decision as the hiring process moves through its steps. The point you think you might get an offer is a good time to ask questions such as “In the past, how have you supported individuals with disabilities?” she said.

Requesting accommodations during interview process

Ideally, an employer will ask if any accommodations will be needed for an on-campus interview, campus visit, or online interview. But that doesn't always happen, French said. French recommends looking carefully at what the plans are and requesting specific accommodations that will allow you to be successful.

Examples include:

➤ If a meal is involved and you have dietary restrictions, ask if the menu can be attached to your schedule so you know whether the food choices will work.

➤ If you have meetings in different buildings and have mobility challenges or become exhausted walking long distances, request transportation or extra time between meetings.

It's not necessary to go into the details of your disability when requesting a needed accommodation. Instead, focus on what you need in this moment.

Requesting accommodations once hired

Once you're in the job, it's a good idea to seek a relationship with the human resources professional

in charge of disability services and perhaps the student disability coordinator to know where the crossovers in responsibilities occur and learn how to engage. Accommodations should be an ongoing discussion, French said.

Even if you find you don't need accommodations or are able to arrange for them in an unofficial way, it's a good idea to document your disability, French said. That way, if circumstances change and you need an accommodation to be provided in a formal way, the process can move forward more efficiently, she said. If you haven't documented your disability, there's no grounds for an accommodation to be granted when you need one, she added.

Email Amy French at Amy.French@indstate.edu. ■

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