
Interviewing Skills for Job Candidates with Learning or Other Hidden Disabilities



Study Guide

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Very few of us have a natural talent for job interviewing. But it is a skill that all of us can learn. And just as importantly, it is a transferable skill. That is, once you have taught yourself how to communicate your abilities effectively in an employment interview, you can use this skill in many other situations on the job to interact effectively with your co-workers and your supervisor.

The first thing to realize is that verbal communication is only part of the interaction. In fact, the communication process begins long before you ever enter the room.



Resume and Cover Letter

If you're going through normal channels to get a job, the first interaction with your prospective employer will be through your resume and cover letter. There are many excellent resources on how to write them. (Go to your library or the World Wide Web to find these resources.) But a well-written resume won't get you an interview if it's not: easy to read; no more than two pages long; clean (no smudges, no white-out, no spots or speckles); and absolutely free of spelling and grammatical errors. (Have several individuals proofread your resume and cover letter.)

Would you consider hiring somebody who sent you a sloppy-looking resume? What's the image that's conveyed? Somebody who does sloppy work.



Contact for the Interview

This may seem to be a minor point because the person who calls you to set up the interview will usually not be the interviewer, but an assistant. But you want to be very pleasant to whoever contacts you. You never know how that individual can influence a hiring decision. If a hiring manager can't decide between two candidates, he or she may ask a trusted assistant (the very person who set up the interviews) for advice. "What did you think of Bill Smith?" "Well, he was very nice on the phone. I liked his manner." Believe it or not, little asides like that can sometimes make the difference.



Promptness

If your interview is at 10:00 A.M. and you get there at 10:05, you won't get the job. Employers detest workers who are constantly late, no matter how brilliant they may be. **TIME IS MONEY** is one of the golden rules of business, and of any other organization that cares about operating in an efficient fashion.

If you're going to be late for something as important as the job interview—and it doesn't matter what the reason is—you're communicating that you're going to be late for work.

So get there at 9:55 A.M. Not at 10:00 A.M., and not at 9:30 A.M. Five minutes before your scheduled interview arrive at the office and let the receptionist know you're there. This communicates that you are ready to go, eager, a little ahead of the competition, but not desperate. If your interview isn't out of town, you can make a practice run a day or two before. (P.S. The hiring manager may not be ready to see you until 10:30 A.M. Use the time to go over your qualifications for the job.)



Appearance

Dress up and dress conservatively. It doesn't matter what the image of the company may be. One of the rituals of the job interview is that the candidate look his or her best. Hair combed and in place. No holes in shoes; no runs in stockings. Fingernails clean. Women should wear little makeup and neutral, if any, nail polish. And absolutely no gum chewing!

All of us, including job interviewers, make judgments based on appearances. It can influence the hiring decision. Ideally, the way you dress and look should have no impact on your ability to get the job. The best way to achieve that is to wear gray, brown or dark blue colors.



Body Language

Most of us are unaware of how we “come across” to an interviewer because we don’t make a habit of studying ourselves: how we sit, hold our heads, look at or away from somebody. Well, it’s time to become aware, because body language is very, very, very important in an employment interview. If you tend to look away from the interviewer, if you slump in your chair, if you have a weak handshake, if you frown or scowl a lot, all of these kinds of things will influence the interviewer about how he or she feels about you. It’s human nature.

Fortunately, like answering questions, this is something you can rehearse at home. You can use a mirror or, if you have access to a video camcorder, you can videotape yourself answering questions. Take a good look at yourself: Do you have good eye contact? Or do you look away? Or do you tend to stare, without ever looking away or blinking? Do you sit up in a chair, with your shoulders slightly back? Or do you slump forward? Do you lean toward someone? Or do you lean away (as if to say, “Back off”)? How do you use your hands? Do they lie in your lap? Grip the side of your chair? Or do you use them to illustrate a point? Or to take notes?

Ask friends and family to make a critical assessment of your body language. And then change whatever you need to change to develop a body language that indicates you are comfortable with yourself. That’s the picture you want to present to the interviewer.



Attitude

Your single greatest gift is the freedom to choose your attitude. It is more important than knowledge, education, background, talent or appearance. Someone who presents a winning attitude is a winner.

How do you project a positive attitude during the interview? Little things, related to body language, help. Nodding your head “Yes” and smiling once in a while (but only when the interviewer says something appropriate to nod and smile at) is a good idea. Try not to speak in monotone; this conveys dullness, lack of enthusiasm. Don’t speak too softly either. This is not the time to seem timid.

The main thing you want to convey, however you can, is YES. Yes, I am qualified for this job; yes, I want this job; yes, I will be a good employee. You have to exude energy and enthusiasm, whether you’re talking or listening. Again, this is something to work on long before the interview takes place.



Answering & Asking Questions

Our videotape, "The Employment Interview and Disclosure," presents eight standard questions that you may be asked during an interview. These aren't the only ones you'll be asked, and you may not be asked all of them, but the better you can answer them, the more you'll be prepared for any questions.

1. What made you apply for this job?

Be ready to cite several reasons why you think your current level of skill and interest help qualify you for the position and make several points why you are particularly interested in working for this employer (which also gives you the chance to show the research you have done on the organization).

2. What specific skills and abilities would you bring to this position?

In other words, why do you think you're more qualified for this position than anybody else? Why should I hire you? By this point, through your research of the employer and the specific job, and perhaps by whatever the interviewer has said about the position, you should know exactly what he or she is looking for. You've got to respond by tying your experience and training to those specific needs.

Since you've gotten the interview, you must have the basic qualifications for the job. But so do plenty of other applicants. You have to distinguish yourself from all those others.

Try to use specific examples rather than vague generalities. Don't say something like: "I'm really good with people." Instead offer something like: "I had a summer job as a customer service representative at Sears and I had to deal with a lot of angry customers. Some of them wanted to sue us. But I was able to handle their complaints to their satisfaction. That's the kind of challenge I enjoy."

Try to come up with any examples of how you solved a problem or overcame a challenge. But make sure they are relevant to the position for which you're interviewing.

3. What are your greatest strengths?

As one employer representative in the video said, an employment interview is not the time to be humble. Tell the employer about four or five of your abilities or characteristics that are somehow related to the job. And again, try to give brief examples:

"I'm very computer literate. I can find the information I need on the Internet faster than anybody else I know."

"I'm the kind of person you can trust with anything. Last year, our neighbor asked me to drive his wife's new car cross country for him." (That's right, you can use personal, "nonwork" examples as long as they make the relevant point.)

4. What are your greatest weaknesses?

If you're thinking about disclosing, this is not the time to do it. You don't want to associate your disability with weakness. The best approach is to list a few "weaknesses" that are actually strengths: "Some people say I take my work too seriously." "I get frustrated with persons who don't do their share of the work."

5. Is there anything about this job that would present a particular challenge to you?

If this question comes up, the interviewer may be indicating that he or she has some doubt that you can handle one or more of the responsibilities. You can find this out by asking, "Did you have anything particular in mind?"

If the interviewer responds, "No," you can assume it's a routine question he or she asks all applicants.

Assuming that this question comes near the end of the interview, after you've highlighted your qualifications, this could be the moment to disclose if you choose to. But as we emphasize in the video, if you think you're going to need an accommodation, you should know exactly what it is and how it will overcome whatever the limitation may be to doing the job.

Here's one way to answer the question if you want to use the opportunity to explain your accommodation needs:

You: "I can honestly tell you, Ms. Jones, that I think I can handle all of the challenges of the position without any problems. However, I think I could do the job even better if you could do one thing for me."

Ms. Jones: "What's that?"

You: "If you could provide me with clear, written instructions on all my assignments it will ensure that I understand them perfectly the first time. You see, I have an auditory perceptual problem which limits my ability to process information orally. It will have no effect on my job performance as long as you can provide me with this accommodation."

Ms. Jones: "Are you sure this won't cause other problems?"

You: “Believe me, Ms. Jones, if I thought it would, I’d tell you about them. It’s not easy for me to bring this up during an interview, but I wanted to assure you I am up to this challenge because I know how to deal with it. All it requires is written instructions. I’ve analyzed this position very thoroughly, and I’m convinced that as I said before, I can handle all of the challenges of the position.”

Always end on a positive note.

If you decide not to disclose, you may want to answer the question by restating the major duties that the interviewer has stressed and how your skills and training qualify you to handle each one.

6. Where do you hope to be five years from now?

No one likes this question, but interviewers often ask it. One reason may be to find out if you plan to stay with the organization for a long time. Or it may be that the interviewer wants to know how much you’ve thought about your future, or what your style of planning is like. Are you a “big-picture, long-range thinker” or are you a “short-term, live-in-the-present” doer? Or maybe the interviewer asks the question just to see what you’ll say.

Your best answer is something safe: “At this point, I’m seeking the opportunity to show how well I can perform this job, and hope to go as far as dedication and working intelligently will carry me.”

7. Is there anything about yourself that isn’t on your resume (or application form) that you’d like to tell me about yourself?

The interviewer may ask this question, usually at the end of the interview, to find out if you can give him or her a piece of information about yourself that would set you apart from the other candidates. (This question is more likely to come up if you are one of the two or three top candidates for the position.)

You need to have a ready answer. If you haven’t done so already, you could disclose your disability and make your accommodation request—and you must do it in a positive, matter-of-fact manner. If you choose not to disclose, you might state some extra-curricular activity that indicates you do good work in your community (“I volunteer at the homeless shelter twice a week”), have intellectual pursuits (“I’m member of a debating society”) or lead an active lifestyle (“I’m an avid hiker and skier”).

8. Do you have any questions for me?

By the end of the interview, you should have already asked a lot of questions. Remember, this is a two-way conversation.

The one question you should not ask is, "What would my salary be?" Don't focus on money; let the interviewer bring it up.

**** Could you describe to me the ideal candidate for this position?***

This is the first question you should ask, as early in the interview as possible, because you want to tailor your responses to that description of the "ideal candidate."

Even if you've already found out some of this information during your research, you should ask questions like:

**** With whom would I be working? Who would be my supervisor?***

**** What is the size of my work unit? How large is the organization?***

**** How does this position fit into the organizational structure?***

**** How is work evaluated? How often are performance review evaluations?***

**** Could you show me where I would work?***

It may be essential for you to have a certain kind of work environment to accommodate your disability. If this is the case, you should see the work area before you complete the interview so that you can better determine if the designated work space would present a problem for you. And if it is a problem, at some point you should address it—either during the interview, when you're offered the job, or when you begin work. And remember to offer a positive solution when you do.

**** The final question: When can I expect to hear from you?***



Closing the Interviewing Process

There are two simple but important steps for closing the interview. The first happens in the office. You state your sincere interest in the position.

The second takes place as soon as you get home. Write a very short note to the interviewer thanking him or her for the interview and again restating your interest in the position. Carefully check your spelling and grammar and make sure to get your interviewer's name and title right. Mail it immediately, so that the interviewer should get the note in two to three days.



Practice, Practice, Practice

As I said at the outset, most of us are not born to interview. But we can all become good at it by developing our skills at home. If you have access to the videotape, use it over and over. Get your friends and family to rehearse with you too. Consult the resources listed below for other questions you may be asked during the interview.

And remember this: It's up to you. If you think you can do it, you can. If you don't think you can, then you haven't tried hard enough. C'mon, ready, set, rewind.



Resources

Your library and the World Wide Web on the Internet are gateways to excellent publications and other materials on job interviewing, resume writing and all other facets of job seeking. I've listed below several books that you can get through your library that are specifically aimed at job seekers with disabilities.

Job Strategies for People with Disabilities by Melanie Astaire Witt.

The Answer Book: Job Search Strategies for Students with Disabilities
by Jane Parsons.

Getting the Job Done: A Manual for the Development of Supported
Employment Programs for People with Physical and Multiple Disabilities
by Jane Everson.

What Color Is Your Parachute?: A Practical Guide for Job-Hunters
& Career-Changers by Richard Nelson Bolles.

(This outstanding resource, published annually, has included a supplement for job seekers with disabilities since 1990.)

▼ Below are the complete addresses and telephone numbers of the organizations identified in the video.

Job Accommodation Network

P.O. Box 6123
809 Allen Hall
Morgantown, WV 26506
(800) 526-7234
(800) 526-4698 (for West Virginia residents)

LDA

Learning Disabilities Association of America

4156 Library Road
Pittsburgh, PA 15234
(412) 341-1515

LEAD

147 N. French Street
Alexandria, VA 22304
(703) 823-2536

Mainstream, Inc.

3 Bethesda Metro Center
Suite 830
Bethesda, MD 20814
(301) 654-2400

**National Center for Law and Learning
Disabilities**

P.O. Box 368
Cabin John, MD 20818
(301) 469-8308

National Center for Learning Disabilities

381 Park Avenue South
Suite 1420
New York, NY 10016
(212) 545-7510

Orton Dyslexia Society

The Chester Building
8600 LaSalle Road
Suite 382
Baltimore, MD 21286
(410) 296-0232
(800) 222-3123

This information is published by Avenues Unlimited, Inc. as a supplement to its training videotape, Interviewing Skills for Job Candidates with Learning or Other Hidden Disabilities

Avenues Unlimited, Incorporated is a private, nonprofit organization dedicated to helping job seekers with disabilities project their abilities to employers, and helping employers recognize the abilities of job seekers with disabilities.

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Interviewing Skills for Job Candidates with Learning or Other Hidden Disabilities was especially created to help people with hidden disabilities prepare for the job interview. The tips provided in this video will help you succeed in getting the job you want and qualify for.

This video was produced by Avenues Unlimited, Inc. a private, nonprofit organization. Avenues Unlimited is dedicated to helping job seekers with disabilities project their abilities to employers, and helping employers recognize the abilities of people with disabilities.

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