



## **Interviewing Skills For Job Seekers**

### **With Physical Disabilities**



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### **A 5-Point Strategy For Successful Interviewing**

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**T**he art of successful job interviewing is a skill few of us attempt to master. After all, we don't expect to spend much of our lives answering questions about why we are the most qualified person for the job. But one successful interview, which may last no more than half an hour, can change how we spend the rest of our lives.

For a person with a physical disability, successful interviewing includes coping with this mindset: "Can she do the job in spite of her condition?" The job candidate must develop a successful job strategy for overcoming the interviewer's preoccupation with the disability. That is the main point of this video training program.

## 1

### **Make an Informed Decision About If, When, and How To Disclose Your Disability.**

If an interviewer is going to know you have a disability the moment you enter the room, then you must determine how to handle the situation. This is the situation Lynn, the blind job seeker, ponders when she decides to apply for the job with CSSS.

As the video indicates, you have several options. You could mention it in your cover letter. Example: "As a blind individual, I am no stranger to overcoming unique challenges. This job looks like the kind of challenge I would truly enjoy." You could allude to it in your resume: "Member of the National Federation of the Blind" or "Adept at reading braille." You could wait until you are called for the interview: "Yes, I can be there on the 28th. I did want to point out that I'm blind but that it will have absolutely no bearing on my ability to do this job as I'll show you during the interview." Or you may decide to simply show up for the meeting and let the interviewer find out for him- or herself.

Here are pros and cons for taking any of these actions. If you indicate your disability in your cover letter or resume, you signal the employer that you have no fear that your condition will affect your ability to do the job. You also give the interviewer the maximum amount of time to prepare for dealing with a situation that he or she may be unaccustomed with. On the other hand, this is an easy way for the employer to screen you out.

If you disclose your disability when you are contacted for the interview, you are still providing the interviewer with ample notice and it will be more difficult for the employer to suddenly cancel the interview. However, an employer may decide to do just that—perhaps sending you a letter the next day saying the job has been filled.

An employer will have a much harder time claiming that if you walk into the interview without disclosing beforehand. The interviewer will have little choice but to interview you. But it may not be a very productive interview if an unpre-

pared interviewer is rattled by your disability. Even if the employer isn't disconcerted, he or she may be resentful that you didn't mention it ahead of time.

In a nutshell, these are the pros/cons. You have to decide how to deal with it. Of course, your options may be more limited depending on the nature of your disabling condition. As the video points out, if you use a wheelchair, you will probably want to make sure the site of the interview is accessible to you. If you are deaf or hard of hearing and want the employer to provide a sign language interpreter for the interviewer—as is your right—you would need to make that arrangement beforehand, probably at the time you are contacted for the interview.

The best way to make your decision about if, when, and how to disclose is to gather as much information as possible before the employment interview. Some people will tell you that this is an arduous, time-consuming process. Perhaps. But as Lynn says in the video, "Information is power." If you know the employer has hired people with disabilities in the past, then chances are the organization's hiring managers are more likely to know about such issues as making accommodations and will have a greater sensitivity to individuals with disabilities.

There are some basic things you can do to help you make an informed decision about the disclosure. Ask the employer to send you all of its written materials. Study them carefully. Does the company brochure, or its newspaper advertisement for that matter, say the organization is an "equal opportunity employer" (LOL) or use similar language that indicates it has a progressive policy toward hiring minorities, including people with disabilities? Are there any pictures in the materials featuring someone with a disability? Does the employer have a 1-800 number? These are some of the clues to whether or not the employer has a positive attitude toward hiring people with disabilities.

Libraries and the Internet can provide you with a wealth of information about local employers. Larger employers will have their own Web sites. And if you personally don't have access to the Internet, find someone who does—a friend or the library, for example.

Finally, try to talk to individuals who have some "inside" knowledge of the employer. This can be an employee of the company, someone who does business with that organization, or someone who works for a competitor of the employer. These individuals can give you a better idea of what it's like to work for this particular organization.

It's always a good idea to get as much information as you can on an employer before the interview. If nothing else, the interviewer will be impressed if you work your knowledge of the organization into the conversation. And the more you know about an organization, the better you'll know whether this is the kind of employer for which you want to work. But for someone with a physical disability, it is especially crucial to deciding what to do about the disclosure issue.

And remember what Billy Wright, the video's host, said: "The choice is yours. When, if, and how you tell a potential employer about your disability is entirely up to you. You're under no obligation to ever mention it, not even during the interview."

## 2

### Put the Interviewer at Ease.

Take it upon yourself to help the interviewer relax. Assume the worst: That the interviewer is going to be nervous or uncomfortable. Be assertive and demonstrate that you are a friendly person. Smile and offer to shake hands, even if that may be physically difficult for you to do. And like the job seekers in the video, say the interviewer's name now and then. It helps massage his or her ego and costs you nothing.

And as Lynn, Allison, and Tim did, use the first few seconds to try to dispel a stereotype. Remember this: First impressions last. So when you say or do something at the very start of the interview that indicates that your disability, whatever it is, does not handicap you in your daily life, you've made a point the interviewer will remember.

## 3

### Be Patient With Improper Disability Etiquette.

Going into the interview, assume that even if the interviewer knows the nature of your disability, he or she has no knowledge of the basics of disability etiquette. That way, you may be pleasantly surprised if the interviewer knows that one should always talk directly to an individual who is deaf and not the sign language interpreter, or that one should ask first before offering assistance to a wheelchair user or someone who is blind. And you won't be disappointed when the interviewer doesn't know these things.

As Billy Wright points out in the video, here's an opportunity to take advantage of your disability. "When an interviewer acts inappropriately or awkwardly and you deal with it in a pleasant and calm manner, they're going to remember that."

So if you're wondering whether you should or should not correct someone's inappropriate behavior during the interview, our suggestion is to do it—but in a very nice way. The interviewer will learn something new about disability etiquette and he or she will see you as a pleasant person, a quality all employers seek in an employee.

## 4

### If You Can, Deal With Illegal or Inappropriate Questions in a Positive Manner.

It was the intent of the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 (ADA) to end discrimination against individuals with disabilities, especially in employment-related activities such as the hiring process. The reality is, of course, different. Employers, intentionally and unintentionally, break that law every day. In the employment interview, they often ask questions that are not "job-related" or of "business necessity," as the ADA requires.

In the interview, Mr. Weatherby asks Tim if he has a driver's license. The job apparently requires no driving. Therefore, the question is not job-related or of business necessity. Perhaps this employer is concerned how Tim is going to get to work. The interviewer seems to believe that someone in a wheelchair is going to have daily transportation problems. To put it frankly, it's really none of Mr. Weatherby's business how Tim gets to work, as long as he gets there on time.

Clearly, it's an unfair question that one would not expect a qualified job candidate with a disability to answer. But let's take the interviewer's point of view for a moment. Let's assume he is satisfied that Tim can do the job. Yet he is concerned that Tim will get to work on time. It would have been appropriate for Mr. Weatherby to emphasize that he expects the person who fills this position to be on time for work every day. It would have been perfectly legal to state the company's attendance policy and ask Tim if he could meet the attendance requirement.

Instead, he asked a question that seems only vaguely connected, if at all, with getting to work on time. When Mr. Weatherby asks the question the first time in the video, Tim angrily puts Mr. Weatherby on the defensive. In the second instance, Tim assures Mr. Weatherby that transportation will not be a problem for him (even as he subtly points out that the question has nothing to do with the job).

As Billy Wright emphasizes, you must decide how to answer an illegal question. Try to consider these things in giving your answer: What is the employer's motive for asking that question? Is he or she trying to screen me out or is the interviewer looking for assurance that I can do all aspects of the job? Is the interviewer seriously considering me for the job or just going through the motions?

Remember your options. You can refuse to answer the question and point out it's an illegal question. If you choose, you can go so far as to file a complaint with the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission although experience shows that the odds of your winning the discrimination complaint are against you. Nevertheless, you may think the employer will learn a valuable lesson from you if you protest.

The other option is to give the employer the benefit of the doubt that it was not an intentional breaking of the law and answer the question in as positive a manner as you can.

You may also be asked the type of personal question that seems totally out of bounds for an employment interview. Ms. Wintergreen asks Allison if she goes to the movies very often. The question is not only illegal but insensitive as well. This type of question will truly test your patience. But if you think you can, try to respond with a jovial comment. That's something employers also value: someone with a good sense of humor.

Of course, if the employer persists on asking you out-of-bounds questions, as Mr. Rottomley does with Lynn, you'll want to find a graceful way to steer the conversation back to where it belongs. Lynn does this rather flawlessly, connecting Mr. Rottomley's focus on her disability with her ability to rise to the challenge of getting around a large campus. "I thrive on challenges like that," she says, "that's why I applied for this job." Then she immediately asks an important ques-

tion about the job itself, which makes Mr. Bottomery respond with an answer about the job. If you find yourself in a situation like this, try to do what Lynn did. If the employer persists on asking you questions not related to the job, you can always fall back on: "May I ask you question?" to which the only response is, "Yes." Then be sure to ask a question that is related to the job.

## 5

### **If the Interviewer Doesn't Ask You a Question About Your Ability To Do Some Part of the Job & You Think It Should Be Asked, Discuss It Anyway.**

The reverse of asking you questions that are illegal or inappropriate, are not asking you questions that are legitimate and job-related. If the employer literally sees that you have a disability and feels it may affect your performance of any aspect of the job in question, he or she should ask about it.

But there are at least three reasons why the employer may not. (1) The interviewer may be afraid he or she is breaking the law. While many employers are not familiar with the ADA, many others, especially corporations, are. They know that they should not ask any disability-related questions during an employment interview. They may think this also means not asking any job-related questions that can be affected by a person's disability.

(2) Some interviewers, just like some people in general, simply feel awkward about mentioning your disabling condition to your face. They may not know how to discuss it effectively in relationship to the job in question.

(3) The regulations implementing the ADA make it clear that it is up to the individual with a disability to request a reasonable accommodation. Therefore, if the job seeker does not bring up his or her need for an accommodation during interview, the interviewer may assume no accommodation would make it possible for the applicant to perform a particular aspect of the job. Therefore, the interviewer reasons, the applicant is not qualified for the job.

Also, if an employer has not had much experience in making accommodations, he or she will look to you on being the expert. Indeed, leaders in the disability community have long said that an individual with a disability knows much more about his or her accommodation needs than an employer does. It's up to you to prove that it's true.

As we state in the video, it is up to you to decide whether or not to discuss your accommodation needs during the interview. Is it advantageous or even essential for you to do so? Let's look at an example from the video. Ms. Wintergreen is closing out the interview with Allison, who is deaf, and has not talked about how they would communicate on a daily basis. Is it farfetched for Ms. Wintergreen to believe that she would have to hire a sign language interpreter full time in order to accommodate Allison? It would seem so-unless you have had no experience in communicating with a deaf worker on the job and the only thing you have to go by is the interview-for which Allison has requested an interpreter.

So it is definitely essential for Allison to discuss the daily communication process with her prospective employer.

What if you don't know what your accommodation needs might be for a particular job? And what if you don't know what specific accommodations would work for you?

You have to do your homework. Try to find out everything about the job before and, if necessary, during the interview. Ask for a complete job description before the job interview. During the interview, be sure that the interviewer has described the job to you in detail. Make certain that you fully understand all the essential functions of the job. Then you can determine what accommodations you might need. And if you are not sure, there is a free service, sponsored by the President's Committee on Employment of People with Disabilities, that can provide you with solutions to your accommodation needs: the Job Accommodation Network (JAN). JAN has hundreds if not thousands of documented examples of how individuals with your disability have been successfully accommodated in the workplace. JAN's phone numbers are: (800) 526-7234 (Voice/TTY), (800) 526-4698 (Voice/TTY; West Virginia residents only). If you don't know going into the interview what reasonable accommodations would meet your needs, you can tell the employer that you will provide the information after the interview.

Discussing your accommodation needs in an informative, matter-of-fact way also gives you the opportunity to display another quality that employers value highly: initiative.

As we suggest in the video, the best time to talk about your accommodation needs if you decide to do so is when there is an obvious opening related to your ability to perform a function of the job, or at the close of the interview, after you've convinced the interviewer that you are truly qualified for the job. Never begin an interview talking about your accommodation needs. And finally, when discussing accommodations, always put them in terms that are clear to the interviewer's ears: "This accommodation will help make me a more productive employee for you." Drive the point home that if you get the accommodation, both of you will benefit.



## 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 W.J.
- *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 Eberlein
- *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.)

**Interviewing**



**Skills For**

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This video was produced by Avonics Limited, Inc., a private, nonprofit organization.

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