Students with disabilities

Many employers recognise the advantages of recruiting a diverse workforce. But it’s not always easy to identify them and to know how to discuss your disability with potential employers.

**Disclosing disability**

When, what and how to disclose is often an issue for disabled people when seeking either employment or a place on a postgraduate course. It is an issue you may well want to discuss with a careers consultant or your university’s disability service.

You do not have to disclose a disability if you do not want to, but think about whether not disclosing will affect your ability to perform to your full potential during the recruitment process, or will make your working life difficult. It may be useful to think about how barriers may affect you in the workplace and what adjustments might help.

If you do disclose a disability during the recruitment process, it is best to do this as early as possible so the recruiter has time to prepare and make any necessary adjustments.

Any employer will be interested in how you have overcome barriers in the past and the strategies you have adopted to do so. If you choose to disclose but an employer does not ask what barriers or difficulties you face, offer a brief explanation to prevent any false assumptions or generalisations being made. Provide solutions rather than problems.

**The Law**

The Equality Act 2010 defines a disability as ‘a physical or mental impairment which has a substantial and long-term adverse effect on someone’s ability to carry out normal daily activities’. This covers any physical, mental or learning disability, including dyslexia.

It automatically includes HIV/ AIDS, multiple sclerosis (MS) and cancer from the point of diagnosis (even if asymptomatic) as well as facial disfigurement.

It is unlawful to discriminate against any disabled person who is applying for a job or is in employment.

Once an applicant has disclosed a disability, employers must make reasonable adjustments in selection procedures.

Employers must also make reasonable adjustments to the working environment to accommodate disabled employees.

While certain disabilities may preclude a person from some areas of employment, all reasonable alternatives should be explored before that decision is made.

If you feel you have been discriminated against, seek advice from the Equality Advisory and Support Service (EASS) www.equalityadvisoryservice.com.

**Reasonable adjustments**

During the recruitment process and employment, employers are obliged to make reasonable adjustments so that people with disabilities are not at a disadvantage. A reasonable adjustment is a change that removes or reduces obstacles that you face because of your disability. This can include things like extra time for tests, or specialist equipment.

It is a good idea to tell the employer about any reasonable adjustments or equipment you’ve had during your studies so they have an idea of what has helped in the past.
How can I identify potential employers?
Many employers recruit a diverse workforce and promote their commitment by involvement in the government’s Disability Confident scheme. You can find a list of who has signed up to the scheme at www.gov.uk/government/publications/disability-confident-employers-that-have-signed-up
If your preferred employer does not appear on the list there are other ways to find out if they provide a supportive environment for disabled employees.
Websites, recruitment publications and annual reports can also tell you a lot about employer attitudes. When doing your research, ask yourself the following questions:
• Do they have specific information on diversity or disabilities in their recruitment information online?
• Do they include any disabled staff in their employee profiles?
• What do they say about diversity and inclusion?
• Do they have a named contact in their HR department for queries around disabilities or disclosure?
• Are there networking groups for disabled staff?
• What kind of language do they use when writing about disability?

Sometimes the messages can be subtle but it all adds up to creating an image of the employer. Being able to speak to individuals you find through employee profiles or named HR contacts will give you an even clearer picture.

Organisations providing specialised advice
Disability Rights UK
www.disabilityrightsuk.org
Charity which campaigns for the rights of people with disabilities. Their site includes a careers section.

Equality and Human Rights Commission
www.equalityhumanrights.com
The EHRC have a legal remit to promote and monitor human rights and equality. Their site has advice on your rights as an individual and as an employee.

EmployAbility
www.employ-ability.org.uk
Career resources for disabled students and graduates. Includes a vacancies section with opportunities and employer events specifically for disabled students and graduates.

My Plus Students’ Club
https://myplusstudentsclub.com
Advice and resources about university and working life for disabled students and graduates. Includes employer profiles.

TARGETjobs Diversity Matters
https://targetjobs.co.uk/careers-advice/equality-and-diversity
Specialists provide advice on disability and mental health covering how to identify diversity positive employers, decide how and whether to disclose your circumstances, and get an understanding of your rights.

Remploy
www.remploy.co.uk
Remploy provides employment services and employment to people with disabilities and complex barriers to work.

Mindful Employer
www.mindfulemployer.net
Provides information, advice and practical support for people whose mental health affects their ability to find or remain in employment. It also has a list of employers that have signed up to their Positive About Mental Health charter.

Leonard Cheshire Disability
www.leonardcheshire.org/support-and-information/life-and-work-skills-development
Supports thousands of disabled people in the UK. They campaign for change as well as providing training, and support for disabled students and jobseekers including an internship programme Change 100.