The Power of Potential: Navigating Disability and the Career Search with Students

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Abstract
Students with disabilities that affect behavior can sometimes find it difficult to interact with others, regardless of setting. When it comes to helping students seek employment during and beyond college, campus disability services can play an important part by helping these students strengthen their professional communication skills to ensure that the value of their college educations is not diminished because they cannot secure employment. This article explains how one institution's disability services office is helping to better position students with conditions such as autism spectrum disorder for successful professional life.
Taking out the “Dis”

James (not his real name) had worked as a temp in our disability services office for just over a year when he landed an interview for a full-time position in a different department at the university. We were all excited about the prospect of James landing a full-time position, and wanted to help in any way that we could. When James asked our director, Poppy Fitch, if she could assist by conducting a mock interview with him, she was more than happy to oblige. The mock interview was a chance for James to practice his interview skills, and gave Poppy the opportunity to share some best-practices with James. It wasn’t until a week after the interview that Poppy shared her experience with the rest of the team, “There was a really powerful moment during the mock-interview,” she said, “when things really clicked for James, and he said, ‘You know, I noticed that this position requires a lot of attention to detail, and as a person living with Asperger’s, that’s something that I am very comfortable with.’”

I was completely blown away at the ease with which James was able to turn his autism spectrum disorder, a highly stigmatized condition, into a strength that made him a more desirable candidate for the job. While I’m sad to report that James did not get the position, he did make it to the final round of interviews, which shows just how big of an impact appropriate preparation and disclosure can have on a job seeker’s chance of landing a job. I later met with Greg Lewis, a career services specialist in our Career and Alumni Services department, to talk about what college professionals should know about disability and the career search. What started as the simple matter of James’ self-advocacy eventually turned into a presentation given at NASPA’s 2015 annual conference. That presentation was designed to give student affairs professionals the information they need to help their students with disabilities navigate what can often be an intimidating process.

Communication is Key

As a content specialist, I have always been drawn to the simple, quality content produced by Scope, an organization based in the U.K. Their “end the awkward” campaign takes a straightforward approach to combating the discomfort that people might feel when communicating with individuals with disabilities. Scope, in addition to producing great content, does a lot right when it comes to disability education, including conducting research related to disability. According to a 2014 Scope study, 67 percent of individuals in the U.K. indicated that they felt uncomfortable speaking with individuals with disabilities, (Scope, 2014). While I’ve never been able to find corresponding data regarding disability communication for U.S. populations, it’s safe to assume that our country likely feels similarly uncomfortable in its ability to communicate with individuals who are living with disabilities. The Scope study also shows some startling data regarding 18–34 year olds, specifically that one in five people in that age group indicated that they have intentionally avoided talking to a person with a disability because they weren’t sure how to best communicate with them. The question this data begged us to ask was: what advice can we give our colleagues so that they don’t find themselves feeling this sense of overwhelming discomfort? Here are some suggestions:

1. **Use positive, people-first language.** Unless you have had a history of working with individuals with disabilities, or have found yourself working with your school’s disability support services office, chances are you could use a refresher when it comes to your disability diction. That’s OK. Many of us need a jump start when it comes to knowing what positive disability language sounds like. (Check out the tips from the Department of Labor at [www.dol.gov/odep/pubs/fact/effectiveinteraction.htm](http://www.dol.gov/odep/pubs/fact/effectiveinteraction.htm).) Using people-first language is simply the act of putting a person before a disability in a sentence’s structure (e.g., using the phrase “people with disabilities” rather than “disabled people”). If you want to learn more about what people-first language looks like, [www.disabilityisnatural.com](http://www.disabilityisnatural.com) will tell you all you need to know. What’s really important is that we all make an effort to be comfortable in our communications regarding disability. Like anything else, the more confident we are in ourselves, the more comfortable we can be around others.

2. **Be real.** Whenever I’m talking to groups, and I tell them to “be real,” a puzzled look comes across everyone’s face. To clarify what I mean by the term, I ask them to do a simple exercise: “Raise your hand if you’ve ever had the feeling that someone wasn’t being real with you.” Hands shoot up. “Keep them in the air if you enjoyed that feeling.” Crickets. When I think of what it means to “be real” I think of my first real job. When I was pursuing my undergraduate degree, I worked one-on-one with individuals who were affected by autism spectrum disorder. I lived in constant fear of someone approaching us and using language that sounded like [www.dol.gov/odep/pubs/fact/effectiveinteraction.htm](http://www.dol.gov/odep/pubs/fact/effectiveinteraction.htm).) Using people-first language is simply the act of putting a person before a disability in a sentence’s structure (e.g., using the phrase “people with disabilities” rather than “disabled people”). If you want to learn more about what people-first language looks like, [www.disabilityisnatural.com](http://www.disabilityisnatural.com) will tell you all you need to know. What’s really important is that we all make an effort to be comfortable in our communications regarding disability. Like anything else, the more confident we are in ourselves, the more comfortable we can be around others.

3. **Know the law.** While it might not seem like it’s related to disability communication, having a solid understanding of disability law can really go a long way when it comes to boosting your confidence. Not entirely thrilled about brushing up on your disability employment law? Check out the links that follow for clear, concise overviews of the laws you need to know:

Disclosing a Disability: No Right Answer

The thing that really impressed me about James’ interview was how gracefully he handled his disclosure. Disclosing a disability, especially to a prospective employer, is not an easy thing to do. While James was able to take his disclosure and turn it into an opportunity to illustrate why he was a good fit for the job, chances are, this won’t always be the case with the students you encounter. While you can’t guarantee that a student’s disclosure will always go so smoothly, you can prepare them for disclosing by working with them to develop a disclosure strategy.

1. **Timing is everything.** Just because James chose to disclose his disability during the interview process doesn’t mean that your students have to. There is no one “right” time to disclose. The table below illustrates some of the advantages and disadvantages of disclosing at different times of the job search.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time of Disclosure</th>
<th>Advantages</th>
<th>Disadvantages</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Before the Interview</strong></td>
<td>When the employer is specifically recruiting individuals with disabilities. Gets the disclosure out of the way, allowing more focus to be paid on other strengths during the interview process.</td>
<td>Employers use the application process to screen applicants. Applications are often not considered an appropriate place to disclose personal information.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>During the Interview</strong></td>
<td>Can address any visible disability that would be noticed by the interviewer. Has the potential to demonstrate confidence when communicated effectively.</td>
<td>May “surprise” potential employers. Has the potential to take focus off of a job-seekers skills and experience.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>After the Interview</strong></td>
<td>Provides employers an opportunity to ready any required accommodations for the person.</td>
<td>Employer might wonder why the individual did not disclose earlier.</td>
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Note: The information was presented adapted from *Disclosing a Disability in a Job Interview*, 1996; and *Disclosing a Disability*, 2011.

It’s important to understand that there are other times for an individual to disclose as well, including: after being offered a job, when already in a job and a disability-related problem arises, or never. The most important thing is that the individual disclosing feels comfortable in the timing of the disclosure. It is better to have people feeling confident in their communications than ask them to disclose during a time that might seem like a better fit for them.

2. **Give students the facts.** James was able to turn his disclosure into an educational moment. He presented himself as someone who was not only comfortable in communicating his disability, but also in using that communication to educate his prospective employer about Asperger’s. This can be a great opportunity for an individual to come across as being a well-informed, self-aware job seeker. Still having a hard time seeing what this might look like for your students? Try working with them to build one of the following facts into their disclosures:

- For students wanting to dispel disability myths regarding job performance: “A DuPont study which involved 2,745 employees with disabilities found that 92 percent of employees with disabilities rated average or better in job performance, compared to 90 percent of employees without disabilities.” (See www.onestops.info/article.php?article_id=93.)
- For students wanting dispel disability myths regarding job retention: “Companies report that employees with disabilities have better retention rates, reducing the high cost of turnover. Other American surveys reveal that after one year of employment, the retention rate of persons with disabilities is 85 percent.” (See www.un.org/disabilities/convention/facts.shtml.)
- For students wanting to dispel disability myths regarding accommodation costs: “Most workers with disabilities require no special accommodations, and the cost for those who do is minimal or much lower than many employers believe. Studies by the Job Accommodation Network have shown that 15 percent of accommodations cost nothing, [and] 51 percent cost between $1 and $500.” (See www.onestops.info/article.php?article_id=93.)

By building some sort of educational information into a disability disclosure, your students have the opportunity not only to present themselves as well-prepared job candidates or employees, but also to help break down any negative preconceived notions that a potential or current employer might have regarding employment and disability.
3. Preparation is essential. The last thing you want is for a student to go through the disclosure process without feeling comfortable or prepared. To ensure that your students are as comfortable as possible, encourage them to do the following:

- **Be honest.** Encourage your students to examine their feelings regarding their disabilities. The more comfortable they are with themselves, the more comfortable they will be in their disclosures.

- **Practice.** Disclosing a disability takes practice. Encourage students to polish their disclosure with a friend, family member, or staff from the career center.

- **Be clear and informed about accommodations.** Do your students require any adjustments to the work environment to be successful? If so, make sure that they are comfortable communicating detailed information about what those adjustments are. (Check out [http://askjan.org/](http://askjan.org/).)

- **Develop a disclosure outline.** Work with your students to find out what their ideal disclosure would look like, and use that information to come up with a plan.

### Putting the Focus Back on Ability

James taught me something when he went in for that interview: It’s not how people label you that matters; it’s your potential. Maybe you have never worked with a student with a disability. Maybe you have never had a working relationship with anyone with a disability. Maybe you fall into that group of people who feel uncomfortable speaking with individuals with disabilities. At the end of the day, none of that matters. What matters is that you have the potential to make a lasting, positive impact in your students’ lives.

### Resources


