

Managing your Career: Strategies for Students with Disabilities

Module#4: Self-Advocacy and Disclosure

Slide 1: Introduction to Module Series

Welcome to Managing Your Career: Strategies for Graduates with Disabilities. This presentation was developed by the Academic Advising & Career Centre in partnership with AccessAbility Services to help students with disabilities transition from university to the world of work.

Slide 2: Introduction to Module 4

This is module 4 of 6 in the series and is called “Self-Advocacy and Disclosure”. My name is Cheryl Leopard, and I’m a Disability Consultant in AccessAbility Services. I’ll be narrating this module.

Slide 3: Agenda

Self-Advocacy and Disclosure is the topic of this module. I’m providing you with an agenda so you’ll know what will be discussed in this module. I’ll first discuss self-advocacy as it relates to employment, specifically reviewing the definition of self-advocacy, the importance of it, examples of situations requiring self-advocacy in employment settings, and how to develop self-advocacy skills. Disclosure is the second part of this module and I’ll be discussing what is meant by disclosure, when to disclose, and what information to disclose.

Slide 4: Definition of Self-Advocacy

Many of you have advocated for yourself in university but may not realize that this was what you were doing at the time. Examples of times when you advocated for yourself in university include when you asked for accommodations, when you asked for help to understand course material or assignment instructions, and when you asked for an extension to complete an assignment. There will be times in your job search and on-the-job when you’ll need to advocate for yourself so let’s review the definition of self-advocacy and why self-advocacy is important. Self-advocacy means speaking up for what you need in an appropriate way. Being able to advocate for yourself in the work environment is very important because if you require accommodations, you’ll need to ask for them. In addition, parents and Disability Consultants are no longer appropriate people to be advocating for you in the work environment. Further, advocating for yourself is important because it helps you to take control of your life and research shows that self advocacy can help change the attitudes of employers for the better.

Slide 5: What does a Good Self-Advocate Look Like

To be a good self-advocate, you need to develop specific skills such as communication skills, negotiation skills and interpersonal skills. In addition to these skills, you need to know about your disability and how it impacts you. You must be able to describe your strengths and know your needs. You also need to be able to set goals and develop plans to reach your goals to be successful in advocating for your needs. A good self-advocate will also know when to ask for assistance. It's understood that being independent is important, however, there are times when each of us requires help from another person in order to achieve our goals. Finally, a good self-advocate is able to make decisions and accept responsibility for their decisions.

Slide 6: Steps to Self-Advocate

It's not possible for me to teach you all the skills that you need to advocate for yourself, however, I thought I'd provide specific steps you can take when advocating for your needs. When you advocate for yourself, you need to define what the issue is, think of possible accommodations or solutions, ask for help from an appropriate person to put the accommodations in place, and then monitor the accommodations or solutions. An example of this would be: you work in a cubicle at work and find that it's very distracting because you can hear others talking or the tapping on computer keyboards. The issue is that you're distracted because of the noisy work environment. Once you define the issue, you think of solutions on your own or by talking to others. Some of the possible solutions include asking to be moved to a quieter work space, using noise cancelling headphones or using a fan or white noise machine. Now that you have some solutions, you speak to your supervisor at an appropriate time and place. The Supervisor can then put an appropriate accommodation in place to help you to be less distracted in the work environment. You then monitor the accommodation to make certain that it's working well for you. If it's not working, you'll need to advocate again to have your needs met.

Slide 7: Situations Requiring Self-Advocacy

This slide provides examples of situations that require an individual to advocate for themselves in a work environment. These are examples only so there are other situations that will happen on the job that may require you to advocate for your needs. One example of a situation that will require you to advocate is disclosing your need for accommodations to perform job tasks. Another example of a situation would be asking for help or clarification of the instructions for a work assignment. Also asking for a vacation, raise or promotion are situations in which you will require to advocate for yourself. Finally, resolving a conflict with a co-worker is also a situation that will demand good self-advocacy skills.

Slide 8: How to Develop Self-Advocacy Skills

There are ways in which you can develop your self-advocacy skills if you feel that you need to do so. You can attend self-advocacy workshops within the community or within the university. There are many good books and on-line articles that you can read to develop your skills. You can talk to other people who you know are good at advocating for themselves to teach you how they do it. Possible examples of people you can ask to teach you would be your Disability Consultant, a friend, a mentor or a family member. Finally, to improve your self-advocacy skills, you need to practice. Once you've learned as much as you can about how to advocate, you then need to practice.

Slide 9: What is Disclosure

The remaining slides of this module will discuss information about disclosure in the context of disability and work. Disclosure simply means telling an employer that you have a disability, and that you have a need for specific accommodations on the job because of the impact of the disability. You likely already have practice disclosing information about your disability to others if you attended university because there may have been times when you disclosed information to your professors or other university staff members about your disability and how the disability impacted you academically. Disclosing information about your disability is a personal decision. Deciding to disclose to an employer that you have a disability can be challenging for you due to fear of negative consequences. Often, individuals with disabilities tell me they're afraid because they fear the employer may not give them an interview or offer them a job because they have a disability. It's important to note that you only need to disclose to an employer that you have a disability if you think you require accommodations. To help you decide if disclosure is appropriate, you need to understand your disability-related needs and the job tasks. If you decide to disclose to the employer that you have a disability because you require accommodations, be certain to know your legal obligations of disclosure, understand your diagnosis, identify your needs, know the job duties and be prepared with potential solutions.

Slide 10: What Information to Disclose

If you decide to disclose information to an employer about your disability-related needs in order to get accommodations to perform job tasks, please keep in mind that you only need to provide information as it relates to your needs. You tell them how the disability impacts you but you don't have to tell the employer the name of the disability. Although not required to do so, it's beneficial if you provide potential solutions for your needs. Let's take a look at an example for clarification of what I mean. Let's say that you have been diagnosed with Diabetes. One impact of the disability is that you have vision loss that prevents you from reading printed material. You would only need to let the

employer know that the impact is the loss of vision that prevents you from reading printed material. You do not need to let the employer know that the name of the disability is Diabetes. Keep in mind that you will want to be proactive in identifying your needs and suggesting accommodations. Module 5 of this series will provide you with more information about accommodations.

Slide 11: When to Disclose

If you decide to disclose that you have a disability and require accommodations, you'll need to decide when to disclose the information. Basically, there are 6 different times in seeking, obtaining and maintaining employment in which you could disclose information about your disability to an employer. As you can see from this slide, you could disclose information about your disability: at the time of the job application; when you're offered a job interview; during an interview; at the time you're offered a job; after you begin work; or after a problem or change on the job. Also, you have the option to never disclose info about your disability providing that you do not need accommodations. The next several slides will review the best times to disclose.

Slide 12: At the Time of the Job Application

As mentioned in the previous slide, you may want to disclose you have a disability at the time of the job application. Only disclose at the time of the job application if the company has an employment equity program in place. The reason for disclosing at this point in the job search is that your application will likely be considered ahead of other applications if there's an employment equity program in place. You can disclose on your cover letter that you have a disability or over the phone but never disclose the information in your resume. One potential concern about disclosing at the time of the application is that if you're not selected for an interview, you may wonder if it's because you disclosed that you have a disability and this may lead to frustration or becoming discouraged.

Slide 13: When Offered a Job Interview

You may decide to disclose about your disability when you are offered a job interview but this should only happen if you require accommodations to participate in the interview. For example, if you require a sign language interpreter to be present during the interview for communication purposes, you'll want to let the employer know this when you're offered the interview. This will provide the employer sufficient time to put the accommodations in place for you to be able to participate in the interview. Tell the employer about your accommodation needs for the interview using the same method of contact used to offer you the interview. One main concern about disclosing at this point in the job search is that employers may develop preconceived notions about your disability and your skills before meeting with you.

Slide 14: During an Interview

Disclosing that you have a disability during the interview should only happen if the opportunity presents itself and you believe that you require accommodations on-the-job to perform the job tasks. Disclosing during the interview allows you to highlight your strengths and explain in person why the employer should hire you. You can also address any concerns the employer may have and this will increase your chances of being offered the job. One potential concern about disclosing that you have a disability during the interview is that timing is essential to make certain there's sufficient time to address any concerns the employer may have. Leaving it to the very end of the interview won't allow you the opportunity to address concerns.

Slide 15: At the Time of the Job Offer

Perhaps the best time to disclose that you have a disability and require accommodations is when you've accepted the job offer and know for certain that you require accommodations to perform job tasks. Disclosing at this time provides the employer time to put accommodations in place and proves to the employer that he/she decided to hire you because of your skills and abilities. It's important to reassure the employer that you are qualified and capable of performing the job. It'll be helpful if you have potential accommodations ready to discuss with the employer but this isn't absolutely necessary. When disclosing at this point, try to do it in-person or over the phone to allow you the opportunity to express your needs and address any concerns the employer may have. Potential concerns with disclosing at this stage include the employer feeling resentful that you waited until now to disclose or the employer may rescind the offer.

Slide 16: After Starting the Job

Another opportunity for you to disclose that you have a disability and require accommodations is after you begin work. Keep in mind that at this point the only reason to disclose is because you have first-hand experience of what the job tasks are and you realize that you need accommodations to perform the job tasks. Asking for accommodations will help you to perform the tasks better and will reduce your stress and anxiety. The best way to disclose is in-person to the appropriate person such as your direct supervisor or the human resources manager. Potential concerns you may encounter disclosing at this stage is that it could impact your relationship with your supervisor and co-workers or your job performance may have already been impacted because you tried the tasks without accommodations.

Slide 17: Change in the Job

You may have decided that you didn't need accommodations to perform the job tasks when you first started the job but if new job tasks are added or if you move into a new position within the company, you may find that accommodations are required due to the new job tasks. At this point, you've likely proven to the employer that you have excellent skills and abilities so hopefully it will be easier for you to ask for accommodations. It's important that you speak up if the change on the job creates a need for accommodations so that you perform the new tasks well and this will help reduce your stress and anxiety. The best way to disclose is in-person to the appropriate person such as your direct supervisor or the human resources manager. Potential concerns you may encounter disclosing at this stage is that it could impact your relationship with your supervisor and co-workers.

Slide 18: Never

If the job is a good fit with your strengths and the disability does not impact your ability to complete the work, you may not need to ever disclose that you have a disability. However, if you choose not to disclose but you feel that you require accommodations, you will never get the accommodations you may need. This may lead to poor job performance and much stress on your part in trying to perform the job tasks without the accommodations you need. If you do decide not to disclose that you have a disability, be certain that you obtain regular feedback about your job performance so that if problems do arise, you can put in place accommodations to help you perform the job.

Slide 19: When is Disclosure Appropriate & Required

Up until now, I talked about the times when you can choose to disclose to an employer that you have a disability and require accommodations. However, there may be times when you must disclose to an employer that you have a disability. The Ontario Human Rights Commission has stated that you must disclose that you have a disability if it threatens the safety or property of others or if the disability prevents you from safe and adequate job performance even when reasonable efforts are made to accommodate the disability. If you find yourself in either of these situations, you must tell the employer about your disability related needs.

Slide 20: Resources to Explore

It's not possible for me to cover all the information that's available about self-advocacy and disclosure, so this slide contains resources if you wish to learn more about self-advocacy and disclosure.

Slide 21: Contact Information

I'd like to thank-you for your time and wish you the best of luck in your job search.

We always appreciate feedback about how to improve the modules in this series. Please feel free to contact us with your feedback. Our contact information is listed on this slide.

Slide 22: References

No narration