

Workshop #1: Managing Your Disability in Competitive Employment

This workshop explores the various ways you can best represent your disability in the world of work. The ideas and approaches that follow can vary based on your style and personality. Accept these ideas as important considerations in order to present yourself in the best possible way. Take these concepts as starting points for you to refine further in ways which are most comfortable for you. One word of caution, however: While you can adapt these techniques to your circumstances, you should try not to stray too far from the basic truths and realities these practices represent.

Workshop Topics

1. The Disability Experience
2. Creating a New Experience
3. A New Perspective for the Workplace
4. Key Disability Values
5. Accommodation Strategies
6. Disclosure Strategies
7. The Emotional Response
8. Why Choose Work?

In addition to the discussion notes listed below, more content on each these topics can be found in “Part I: The Disability Factor” of *the Make It Work: Disability & Competitive Employment* book available at <https://wid.org/wid-e3/employment-empowerment/>.

Discussion Notes

1.) The Disability Experience

(understanding why disability may send a negative message)

While society has made significant advances in accepting and integrating people with disabilities into many aspects of life, the unfortunate truth remains that the general public still holds negative attitudes, understandings and practices around the idea of having “disability”. Persistent negative attitudes force people with disabilities to deal with unnecessary barriers and challenges. The historical and religious drag of these long held practices, beliefs and traditions about disability continue to haunt us today. These are powerful forces to overcome.

So, if you are a person with a disability and have negative feelings about yourself – understand why this happens and never blame yourself for being discouraged. These are longstanding and deeply held traditions which are gradually changing and will dramatically change for you when you become determined not to give-in to them. Don’t allow yourself to become discouraged. Don’t let ignorance win.

2.) Creating a New Disability Experience

Negative attitudes will only be reversed when the oppressed person or group decides not to accept or to comply with them anymore. People with disability must teach society a new lesson about their potential. You don't have to let others define who you are or who you want to become. You can and must control your destiny. You can and must educate those around you about your true potential. Stop accepting society's negative disability related expectations about you. Know they will be coming your way, especially in the world of work. Develop a personal strategy for taking the power back through the force of your personality. Speak-up about your interest, skills, experiences, and you will begin to push away those artificial barriers. Don't let other people's beliefs about you make you afraid, mad and hold you back. Believe in yourself. Develop your personal power in a positive way and you will change the conversation.

3.) A New Perspective for the Workplace

Here are some positive thoughts to consider as you prepare yourself to push back disability negativity.

- Disability is Normal – Say it out loud and believe it. You are a normal person. Disability is a normal part of the human condition (15% of the world's population is disabled). Let's begin to think this way. This truth can build your self-confidence to see yourself, not as a disabled person looking for a job but, as a job candidate who, like all other job applicants, may be tall or short, male or female, have a disability or not. Be prepared and confident about this fundamental truth. Not only should you feel this way about yourself; but, you should also act this way in your life – be normal. It's normal to go to: school; work; travel; vacation; recreation; sport and exercise your full citizenship. Also, to have friends, a partner and, if you like, a family. Make disability a normal part of living your life.
- Diversity includes disability – As you may know, employers have widely embraced the idea that having a diverse workforce gives them a stronger work force; and, in turn, a better company. A more diverse work force means better work teams and more experiences to draw from when solving problems. Plus, having a more diverse workforce can increase an organization's ability to better serve and market to the groups they represent. In other words, organizations can perform better and make more money when they are diverse. With the awareness and attention currently being paid by employers to the value of diversity, you should consider preparing yourself to promote the idea that disability (your disability) is an important addition to their diversity effort. By having workers with disabilities in their organization (and you are one) you can help them expand their diversity capability.
- Having a disability is an asset – Have you ever thought about the fact that managing a disability has given you skills and experiences that may have made you a better person? And, perhaps, a better job candidate? Or, that the experience of handling a disability develops skills which might be useful in the workplace? And, that you might be able to brag about when presenting yourself for a job? Often, having a disability teaches a person new skills or makes certain skills better or more complete. A disability challenges you to plan more carefully; to develop you remaining strengths and capabilities more completely; to problem-solve in more complex ways; and, to help others better accept and understand disability by educating them about it. These might be:

time management; setting priorities; program or project management; supervision; payroll, bookkeeping; educating and persuading people; determination and hard work; and more.

- Self-advocacy in the workplace – Self-advocating in a community movie theatre is one thing (I need ramp). Here you might simply file a complaint with a city official about the lack of access. However, it may be very different when it comes to self-advocating for yourself in the work place. So, how can you professionally assert your nondiscrimination needs in a workplace situation? For starters, try not to make the subject confrontational. Don't get visibly upset or angry. Don't make harsh and threatening demands. Don't immediately file a disability complaint with EEOC or threaten to sue. Sure, you are likely to be angry and disappointed as well as right, but do not openly display that anger in the work place. To do so may be how you feel, but it might negatively affect your workplace standing. And, in order to keep you in good standing with your fellow workers as well as the boss, you must bring-up and pursue the subject in a professional way.
- With rights come responsibilities – Why should these two words always be together? We have legal rights for people with disabilities; however, people with disabilities hold an equal responsibility to pursue those rights correctly. That is to say, don't abuse these disability rights. Don't make demands about your disability rights without making a commitment to do the right thing and to do your best to meet your responsibilities to perform. Disability rights depend on the good will of the public. If we are not responsible in the way we use them, or if we abuse them, we could lose public's support and the good will that created them in the first place. We must always use our disability rights responsibly in order to preserve these rights for future generations. In addition, these rights were hard fought by our disability rights leaders. Many brave and heroic men and women with disabilities endured hardships and discrimination in order to win these rights. The best way to thank them for all that have done for us is to honor their memory by exercising our rights in a responsible way. In a work context, these rights should not be used to either get out of work or to hide your failure to perform. Meet your responsibilities to perform and your rights will be better respected. Out of respect for these rights, always do the right thing. Let's commit ourselves to safeguarding these rights with the dignity and respect they deserve.

4.) Key Disability Values

Disability names and definitions approach the subject from the perspective of what a person can't do, rather than from the perspective of either what they can do or do in a different way. Disability definitions assume the way people without disabilities usually do things is the right, typical or only way. What if you are a "neuro-diverse" person (on the autism spectrum) and you tend to concentrate on one aspect of your environment and tend to ignore or fail to recognize the cues of the people around you, is that a disability which should be viewed as abnormal or is it just a different way of sensing your environment? And, can it be further described as an enhanced ability to concentrate and observe things more completely than others? What about people with dyslexia who either can't or have great difficulty reading the printed word? When their books are in electronic format and they can use assisting software programs, they can usually read and learn as well as everyone else. Plus, as a result of dyslexia, they might be able to observe patterns more readily and "see" or imagine things in the abstract better than those who can easily read the printed word. The point is people with disabilities are individuals

with different styles, techniques and capabilities. We should think and talk about our individual (disability) differences in these new ways. This is how we do things. We can do things. We just do things in our individual way or style.

5.) Accommodation Strategy

As soon as you announce your disability accommodation needs, you must be prepared to describe them with specific job accommodation solutions which are likely to work in this particular job setting at a reasonable cost. Be sure to include the name of the equipment or describe the technique clearly and in full detail. Indicate the manufacture (if equipment) make, model, where it can be found and what cost. Don't just give general accommodation ideas or solutions. Describe job specific job accommodation solutions which fit well with the job in question. Answer any and all possible question about how this can work immediately. In order to do this in a professional manner, you must prepare yourself, in advance of your revelation to the employer, by consulting with others about workable accommodation solutions for this particular job. One great resource that you should contact (it's free) is the Job Accommodation Network (JAN). Ask them to help you build your job specific job accommodation statement. Call them on 1-800-JAN-7234.

6.) Disclosure Strategy

There are two ways that disability disclosure can unfold. It depends on whether your disability is visible (can be seen or observed) or invisible (not apparent or obvious). If it's visible, as soon as you enter the interview room the employer or interviewer will see your wheelchair, white cane or hearing aids, etc. If this is how you present, know that as soon as you enter the interview room the employer is already asking himself or herself many questions about your visible disability. And, you must realize, they cannot ask you these questions out loud because it's might be against the law to do so. If you have an invisible disability, that is the employer can neither see nor knows about it, unless you mention it, your strategy will be different. The difference will be around the question, "Do I think I will need a job accommodation for this job?" The minute you think that you are likely to need a disability related job accommodation, it is time to speak up. If you have an invisible disability and you don't perceive any disability related job accommodations are needed in the job you are interviewing for, then there seems to be no need to disclose or bring it up. You might skip the subject for now.

7.) The Emotional Response

Let's start by understanding that an employment quest is going to produce a level of anxiety whether we have a disability or not. The trick to this unavoidable fear is to recognize it and learn to how to manage it. So, let's start by saying that it's normal and to be expected to be afraid of it all. And, therefore, these fears need to be respected and dealt with or else they may shut us down. One more thing to realize about the emotional response is that these fears are really anchored in the fear of failure. What if no one likes me? What if I don't graduate? What if I can't get a job? When failure is possible, the mind and body readies itself for action. In a state of fear of failure, our body releases adrenaline into the blood stream and our instincts give us two primal choices to select. These are: "fight or flight". Do we run from the thing that is scaring us (flight) or do we stand-up to it and fight it? If we run, we reason that we'll get away from what is frightening us and it will go away. While this might be true if we were facing a bear in the woods or a lion in the jungle, it's not the better choice when it's the

subject of this book. Yes, we need to pick the “fight” option when we find ourselves afraid and avoiding the subject of our work futures. And, in this case, “fight” means to fight this fear head on and take positive steps and actions to meet the challenge. If you are talking or thinking about this now, you should be very proud of yourself for choosing the better option. So emotions aren’t bad, nor are they to be denied. They are to be expected and embraced. Use your emotional feelings in a constructive way. They can help to motivate you, drive you to action and encourage you along the way.

8.) Why Choose Work?

It would seem like given all the negativity that exists around disability and employment, you have a good excuse not to seek a job and career. Maybe nobody is pushing you. In fact, some might be signaling or even suggesting that it’s not possible for you. Let’s look at the value and importance of working.

- Working can bring greater meaning and purpose to your life. This is especially true if you have a cause or passion that can be best followed by having a job or career.
- Working is more likely to give you a greater sense of accomplishment, even if it’s just a daily feeling of accomplishment and a job well done.
- Working gives you extra money to buy things you want, maybe own a home and have a family.
- Working can make you a proud and contributing member of society.
- Working can expand your circle of friends and improve your social life.
- Working demonstrates to family, friends, as well as the general public, both your abilities as well as the abilities of other people with disabilities.
- Working can make you feel better about yourself.
- Working often leads to a healthier lifestyle than not working.
- Working can give you better control over your economic security than being on public support programs.
- Working is the fullest expression of disability equity, inclusion, independent living and empowerment.

Certainly, working is work – so, it’s likely to be harder than not working. But, then again, physical fitness or wellness requires exercise and a good diet – and that also takes work. So, in the short run not working (or not exercising and not eating well) may seem easier, but may not be easier over time.