Sharing Information with Employers regarding Disability

Cathy: Hello and welcome to our podcast on sharing information with employers about your disability or health issue, when applying for jobs. My name is Cathy and my colleague Lynne and I are both careers advisers with the OU. Sharing information with employers about your disability or health issue, can feel challenging and students have many questions about whether to do this and if so, when to do this and how.

Lynne: So today, we are discussing these issues. We are going to look at each issue from a range of viewpoints and we are doing this, so you can consider what is right for you and can make a confident and informed decision about whether to tell a prospective employer and if you decide to do this, whether to tell a prospective employer about your disability when you are applying for a job vacancy.

Deciding to share information about your disability is a matter of personal choice. You are under no legal obligation to do so, and it’s for you to choose if and when you tell an employer.

Cathy: Lynne is going to present the case for sharing this information with an employer and I am going to challenge this and ask the questions which I know students have asked me in the past.

So Lynne, convince me, what is the point of asking for adjustments and telling an employer about your disability or health issue when applying for a job – won’t it just put them off?

Research by Great with Disability showed that 77% of people with disabilities were apprehensive about telling an employer in case of discrimination.

Lynne: The aim of telling employers is to level the playing field, so the applicant has neither an advantage nor disadvantage. Sharing relevant information with an employer during the recruitment process ensures that the candidate can perform to the best of their ability. Once the adjustment has been made, the candidate can then be assessed on an equal basis with their peers. Let’s listen to what some of our employers said about this:

Employer quote from IBM

‘I would say any student out there who has any type of disability at all, if you feel comfortable and confident to do so please do let us know as early as possible um where we can help you. So if it is something for example like dyslexia where in the past students um with that disability would perhaps have more time at test or exam periods, or maybe more time to write essays or something like that, we will give you exactly the same treatment that you would have got when you were at school or college as well in terms of giving you extra time. So early on in the application process you can let us know if you want to. There’s no pressure to. If you feel like it’s not going to influence anything and it’s not - you don’t need any extra time or any adjustments at all then obviously it’s up to you completely if you want to disclose that to us. But if you do feel like actually um by getting perhaps extra time to do the online test or maybe extra time during one of the assessment activities um if it’s going to be beneficial then do. Just let us know. We will always keep it confidential within our team - just the people you are working with directly in the recruitment team. But I would say that’s very – very helpful and even later in the process if you maybe didn’t want to tell us immediately um when you applied but actually perhaps your assessment centre or your interview is coming closer and you think it would be beneficial to let us know then do. Um when you are
in our process you will have a contact point so you can always get in touch with them at any point and let us know and we will do our best to make sure that we give you extra time or whatever it might be that you need from us. ‘

**Employer quote from Gradconsult**

‘I think the key one for me as a top tip is to disclose your disability. I found it extremely frustrating as an employer and recruiter over many years when having asked candidates if they would like to disclose a disability at multiple points in their recruitment process I’d then have people at an assessment centre coming out of exercise saying ‘oh by the way I – I have dyslexia. Please could you make adjustments in your marking?’ And that’s simply not possible at that point in time. It’s unfair to all of the other candidates in the process. If we’d know up front we could have made those adjustments and we could have dealt with everybody fairly. So the key for me is disclose and disclose early. Be up front and honest about the adjustments that you need and that will allow you to be assessed fairly. ‘

**Cathy:** But aren’t we talking about two different things here? Some people may need to ask for reasonable adjustments during the recruitment process, as well as in the workplace, but others may just want to ask for adjustments once they have started the job, they may be ok with interviews for example.

**Lynne:** Yes that’s right, and that’s why it is so important to be clear about what your needs are. If you don’t know what your needs are, it is difficult to tell others and difficult to recognise if you need adjustments during the recruitment process.

**Cathy:** So how would you work out what your needs are? Some people listening to this, may be crystal clear about their needs and how to meet them, but others, for example if you have dyslexia or mental health issues, well, it isn’t always straightforward. I suppose one way to identify needs and how to meet them, is to look at your experience as an OU student.

**Lynne:** Students don’t always realise this. The fact that they have achieved a degree through distance learning, proves to an employer that given the appropriate support, they can achieve great things. A good example is the note taking strategies which often have to be developed by students with dyslexia, who develop skills in noticing and prioritising the important points in a ream of information. This could be useful in the workplace, in being able to identify important points in a project, or to write reports effectively.

An OU degree really says so much more about you than academic ability alone.

**Cathy:** Yes, I agree with that, I am sure students recognise OU study proves they have initiative, good problem solving skills, commitment, self-motivation, self-discipline, determination, excellent organisational and time management skills, good communication and developed IT skills, to name just a few.

I bet every OU student listening to this, can recognise these skills in themselves and if not, I hope you do now!

Ok, so OU study can prove a range of skills and is also evidence of what you can achieve given the appropriate support. That makes sense.

**Lynne:** So would you feel comfortable sharing this information with an employer? There are benefits about being open about a disability: it means you can demonstrate your full potential; make sure you get the adjustments you need; you have honesty from the beginning of your relationship with the employer, and you can draw on your disability to answer interview questions, to show you can overcome challenges.
Cathy: That sounds great and I understand those advantages, but my concern is that as soon as I disclose my disability in an application form or in a covering letter, it will give an employer a reason not to short list me for an interview, as they may think I’ll cause problems for them, when I know I won’t. So for me, timing is everything, I feel it is important to tell an employer at the time which feels right for you. For example, if you need adjustments for a job interview, maybe you are hearing impaired for example, then you need to let them know beforehand.

Lynne: I’m not sure it’s as simple as that. Not telling an employer in an application form or covering letter can restrict your choices when giving examples of your skills in a personal statement. How can you show them how you have overcome challenges, or how you can work in a team, if you don’t tell them about your disability?

Employer soundbite

‘I would say if only if a student wanted to they could even use any kind of experience they’ve had of anything like that in their life as examples as long as they felt comfortable doing so and they felt that actually that’s a really good example of one of our competencies about um being driven and kind of a desire to succeed. So if they felt that would be a you know a good example and they were happy to talk about that they could incorporate it there and actually use it as a real positive um to demonstrate what they’ve done, how they’ve overcome things like this. Um but even if the student didn’t want to disclose it to us um we wouldn't view them any differently from any other candidate.’

Cathy: Are you saying that by hiding your disability, you are hiding your true self? Hmmm I shall think about that.

Lynne: It’s important to decide what will meet your needs and to make sure you feel comfortable informing an employer, so you can inform with confidence. Great with Disability are an organisation who support people with disabilities with regards to employment and they say that informing an employer with confidence can be broken down into three simple steps:

Step 1: choose a few words for each of these categories: firstly your disability or situation. Secondly, the implications and thirdly, your requirements

Step 2: turn these words into a short, succinct ‘openness statement’. An openness statement is simply stating these three things: your disability, the implications and your requirements is a straightforward way.

Step 3: Practice delivering your statement – to yourself, or family or a friend – it doesn’t matter but do practice saying it.

Cathy: It makes sense that if you decide to tell an employer, to prepare and do this effectively, rather than blurt out the first thing that comes into your head. In fact, I really like this, these same three steps could be used to decide if you want to disclose and if you decide to do this, at what point during the recruitment process you want to do this. The careers team have produced a webinar on this, called Opening Doors, you can find it on the careers website.

Lynne: Let me give you an example. If you have dyslexia or dyspraxia, then you know that is your disability. The implications of this might be a statement such as: ‘I have a weak short-term memory and I am unable to write comprehensive notes while I am listening. My requirements are that I need to have handouts or information in advance and be able to record conversations, with participants’ permission of course’. Then you could give examples of situations where you have used strategies and support to overcome the issues faced by you.
Cathy: You have touched precisely on my concern. The issue of telling an employer, isn’t one size fits all. People need to think about what is right for them and their situation, they may even vary their approach according to the employer and the vacancy being applied for.

Lynne: Some employers have publically stated they are positive about disability and it is easy to identify them. There are three main ways. Firstly, there is the business disability forum, then there is the two tick symbol and then there are organisations which specialise in supporting people with disabilities into employment. You can read about this on the careers website and in our career planning and job seeking workbook – which you can order or view from the careers site.

Cathy: But the Equality Act covers all employers except the Armed Forces, and if you choose to tell an employer, you are covered by the Act. Having said that, it is a matter of personal choice, if and when to tell and employer.

Lynne: So you are saying that everyone needs to make their own mind up according to their situation and the job being applied for and I’m saying that in general, telling an employer is more beneficial than not telling them, although there is no legal obligation to do so. You need to think about whether your disability raises a health and safety issue for you or your future colleagues, if this is the case, then telling an employer will ensure there is a safe working environment. You may also wish to disclose if you need adjustments, as we’ve discussed.

You are right, once you have told an employer about a disability, you are protected by the Equality Act. This means the employer must take all reasonable steps to provide the necessary adjustments and mustn’t discriminate against them because of their disability.

Cathy: So if you choose not to tell your employer and later underperform, you are not covered by the Equality Act. An employer who was unaware of an employee’s condition can’t be judged to have discriminated against them.

Lynne: The types of adjustment you can ask for include: physical access, use of technology, change to the format of the interview, use of an interpreter, additional time and an orientation visit before the interview. It’s important to remember that when to tell an employer includes once you have the job offer and you can choose who to tell, your line manager or HR and you can ask that co-workers aren’t told, if that is what you prefer.

Cathy: I suppose if your condition affects the way you work, it can be helpful to be open with colleagues, so they understand and can help with any particular needs.

Lynne: That’s right and there are similar points to consider throughout the application process, but if there is section on the application form asking about serious health conditions or disabilities, although you don’t have to disclose your disability here, you mustn’t lie. You can leave it blank. You can also use the personal statement section to tell the employer about your disability.

Cathy: One issue is having a gap in your CV due to the effects of your illness or disability. How do you deal with this? Just hope they won’t notice, or put a vague statement such as ‘personal circumstances to be discussed at interview’?

Lynne: You can use a covering letter to explain this and present it in a way which puts you in a positive light. The careers team can help you with this. If you mention a disability in a covering letter, show how it has further developed the skills and experience you have mentioned in your CV. For example, point to how well you’ve achieved your goals, despite any challenges. Some people prefer talking about it face to face at the interview, where they can more clearly demonstrate their skills. It is up to each individual to make their choice.
Cathy: So we agree people need to think about the implications of their disability or health issue, and what their needs are. If you decide to tell an employer, to have positive examples ready to show how you have overcome obstacles and you have already developed highly effective strategies through OU study.

Lynne: Yes, and to decide when to tell an employer, at the application stage, during the interview or after the job offer. To know exactly what you want to say and practice saying it. The careers team are more than happy to support people with this and there is advice on the webinar Opening Doors about how to tell an employer.

Cathy: So we agree that people need to give some thought to this and make up their own minds.

Lynne: That we can agree on. Thank you for listening to this podcast and remember that the careers team are happy to support students in telling an employer and how and when to do this, if you decide this is right for you. So do feel free to get in touch with us.