

PROTECTED TOMORROWS

HOW TO LAND THAT JOB! INTERVIEWING TIPS FOR SPECIAL NEEDS INDIVIDUALS

BY CICILY CORBETT

You've located an interesting job and you know you have the skills to perform it. However, the prospect of selling yourself to a potential employer can be daunting. For many people, the job interview ranks somewhere between outrunning an angry bull and getting up to sing in front of a large audience. The key to a success, in this case as with everything else, is preparation. Follow these tips and you'll approach your interview with confidence:

Do your homework. "You need to find out about the company and what the job is," says Brenda L. Moore, Director of Connecticut's Bureau of Rehabilitation Services. Knowing the company's history, the products or services it provides, its mission statement, and so on, will enable you to know how you can help the company and prepare good questions to ask the interviewer.

Practice. Visit a location like a One-Stop Career Center where job seekers can access job training, education, and employment services. Thousands of these centers, created by the Workforce Investment Act of 1998, exist throughout the U.S. Sign up for a practice interview. "We have excellent workshops," says Richard Berrena, Outreach Specialist for FutureWorks Massachusetts One-Stop Career Center. "We also offer one-on-one orientations if a person feels more comfortable that way."

Be on time. Punctuality and good attendance are repeatedly listed by employers near the top of the list of workplace essential skills. If you have a good record of attendance and punctuality in previous jobs, at school, or in training classes, be sure to point it out.

Know your rights. Title I of the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 prohibits private employers, state and local governments, employment agencies and labor unions from discriminating against qualified individuals with disabilities in job application procedures, hiring, firing, advancement, compensation, job training, and other terms, conditions, and privileges of employment. See below for a link to the U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission's website detailing the provisions of this act.

Focus on the job, not the disability. If an employer asks questions about the disability, bring the conversation back around to the job. Say, "Could you please tell me how this pertains to the position I'm being considered for?"

"Stress the positive; minimize the negative," emphasizes Moore. "Focus on strengths and abilities. If it's a disability that's hidden, and there's a gap on your resume, be able

to explain it. For example, if you have done volunteer work or internships, make sure you explain the working duties you performed.”

Don't share diagnoses. Say, “I use a computer screen magnifier,” not, “I have cerebral palsy and poor vision.” Say, “I need a height-adjustable desk,” not “I have multiple sclerosis and have to use a wheelchair.” Focus on the requirements of the job and how you will meet them, not on your personal history.

Don't leave the employer with concerns or questions. “If you have an obvious disability,” stresses Moore, “try to give as much information as possible to ensure the employer understands you can perform the essential functions of the job.”

“Discuss reasonable accommodation if pertinent,” continues Moore. Employers often assume an accommodation will be expensive. In fact, according to statistics compiled for the U.S. Department of Labor's Job Accommodation Network, most accommodations cost absolutely nothing. The average cost for those that do have to be made is around \$600. Certain programs may pay for some of these, and in any case the savings realized from job accommodations are considerable. "Using the average (mean) cumulative figures," JAN says, "for every dollar spent to make an accommodation, the company got \$34.58 in benefits."

With preparation and practice, you should have the confidence you need to present yourself well in an interview. Don't be afraid to ask questions. If you don't know the answer to a question you're asked, offer to get back to the interviewer promptly with the information. Follow up with a written note thanking the interviewer. Even if you don't land the job, know that you've done your best, and that every job interview is good preparation for the next.

Resources:

The federal government has a one-stop Web site for information of interest to people with disabilities. On it are listed state and local employment resources:

<http://www.disabilityinfo.gov/digov-public/public/DisplayPage.do?parentFolderId=47>

U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission
Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990

<http://www.eeoc.gov/types/ada.html>

The Workforce Investment Act of 1998: A Primer for People with Disabilities

http://disability.law.uiowa.edu/Lhpdc/rrtc/documents/storen/Workforce_Primer.doc

The Job Accommodation Network is a free service of the Office of Disability Employment Policy of the U.S. Department of Labor:

<http://www.jan.wvu.edu/>

Sources:

All of the above, plus:

“Workplace Essential Skills,” U. S. Department of Labor
<http://wdr.doleta.gov/opr/fulltext/00-wes.pdf>

<http://www.jan.wvu.edu/media/Stats/BenCosts0799.html>

Interview with Brenda Moore, Connecticut Bureau of Rehab Services
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Interview with Richard Berrena, Outreach Specialist
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