

UMA

My Background:

- Hon B.Sc. in Anthropology and Business Management.
- My last job was within the field of Personal Support Service
- Type of disability: Sensory

How I disclose or have disclosed in the past:

If I do not feel that my disability would effect how I perform my duties, then I do not disclose until I think I need to. I try not to disclose until I have been offered a job just because I do not want me having a disability to affect my ability to get a job.

In one summer position, I chose to disclose to my coworkers. In this case, my manager knew and I wasn't sure if she would tell my coworkers too. To be certain my coworkers understood why I was getting accommodations and why I carried around a magnifying glass, I told them so they'd have accurate information coming from the source. In my present position, I did not disclose to anyone because my disability in no way interferes with my work.

I believe that I have an advantage since my disability is invisible. This way I can be more confident that having a disability will not affect my chances for employment. Once I have the job I can disclose because I know that the employer cannot let me go based on my disability.

The barriers I've faced and how I've dealt with them:

At school it was very difficult to learn to advocate for myself because there did not seem to be any other student there to advocate for the things I needed. It was also difficult to approach some professors for the first time because I did not know how they would react. I had some really great professors who were very understanding, many professors who had to be reminded a lot, and a few who frustrated me to the point where I wanted to drop their class. But most of my professors were amazing because they got to know me after a few classes together. I needed to be accommodated outside of the class as well, so that made me uncomfortable sometimes.

My biggest concerns have to do with the workforce. Since I will be entering the world of work very soon, I am really nervous about being dismissed from a job because of my disability. It's happened to me before – during a summer job. In this summer job, I worked as a cashier but was having difficulty operating the cash register because the buttons and print were small. When I went to my manager to explain my issues, she said they would

look into getting a register with larger buttons. I knew these registers existed because I saw them in other stores. In the meantime, my manager took me off cashier duties. While off duty, I did my own research to see what kinds of machines I might be able to use. One day, the manager called me into her office and said they had to let me go because they couldn't find a suitable register for me. I was shocked and saddened by this. Shocked because I knew it wasn't right for the company to let me go because they couldn't accommodate me. And saddened because in all other aspects of my life, I've always been able to accommodate myself or find someone to help me – my disability had never been the reason for not achieving to my fullest. I really didn't know which way to go. This entire episode was a slap in the face.

The first thing I did was call the AccessAbility Resource Centre on campus – they've been a tremendous amount of support through my years on campus. The staff was always available to point me in the right direction or listen to my concerns. We ended up contacting the Canadian Centre for Rehabilitation and Work for advise. After some discussion with my manager, they decided to hire me back on, but in a different position. Though I enjoyed this new position more than the cashier position, I still felt like I had to prove myself in every aspect of my position. Sometimes I felt a little paranoid as to whether I received the same type of training as my coworkers. Some people understand the importance of accommodating, and then there are others who don't see it as their place/problem.

Since this incident, I find that I tend to work with companies that support people with disabilities. I think this just makes me feel assured that I would not be dismissed because of my own disability. But I know I can't continue in this line of work forever. This transition makes me extremely nervous. I feel that persons with disabilities have to work harder to prove them themselves to most employers.

One thing I've found really helpful to deal with my emotions and feelings is to make myself available to volunteer or assist fellow students with disabilities. Just talking to others and sharing our experiences is comforting – there are so many experiences and concerns we all share, though our disabilities are different.

How I prepared for the world of work:

I think that I did not participate as much as I would have liked on-campus because I am very self-conscious about my disability. More specifically, I feel more uncomfortable disclosing my disability to my peers. I volunteered a lot because it was a great way for me to get involved on campus without having to feel the peer pressure of being different. I also worked part-time in the field of personal support.

Before applying to jobs, I try to find out which companies advertise themselves as 'equal opportunity employers,' and especially with specific mention of employees with disabilities. This information can usually be found on company websites under sections called "about us' or "our goals/visions." I target my worksearch in this way. One really useful worksearch service is AbilityEdge, since it caters specifically to people with disabilities. All the employers are also committed to diversity – which is reassuring. I'll actually be starting a year-long internship with a bank through AbilityEdge. I think it'll be a really great way to get some real-world experience.

My advice:

I really don't have much advice. (Actually, I kind of need some myself right now.) But what I have learned is that, it is very important to take every opportunity to learn and grow as a person. Volunteer, get involved, join clubs.... anything. The skills you develop are transferable and will help you in the working world. If you know you are qualified for a job, go for it. Don't allow your disability to interfere with your career goals.