

## FOCUS ON ABILITY: Interviewing Applicants with Disabilities

As employers well know, the job interview plays a critical role in the hiring process, allowing them the opportunity to identify the individual who possesses the best mix of knowledge, skills and abilities for the position available. Below is information that may assist employers in ensuring maximum benefit from an interview when the person being interviewed happens to have a disability.

### *Preparing for the Interview*

- Ensure that your company's application and interviewing procedures comply with the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), which prohibits asking disability-related questions before a job offer is made.
- Check that your application forms, employment offices and interviewing locations are accessible to persons with a variety of disabilities.
- Be willing to make appropriate and reasonable accommodations to enable an applicant with a disability to participate in the interview, explaining ahead of time what is involved in the process. For example, if an applicant who is blind states that he or she will need help completing forms, provide that assistance. Provide an interpreter as an accommodation or other assistance that is reasonable for an applicant who is deaf, if he or she requests assistance in communicating.
- Provide details or specific instructions to applicants with cognitive disabilities, if this type of accommodation is required.
- Inform applicants ahead of time if they will be required to take a test to demonstrate their ability to perform actual or simulated tasks so that they can request a reasonable accommodation, such as a different format for a written test, if necessary. (Such tests are permitted under the ADA as long as they are uniformly given to all applicants.)

### *Conducting the Interview*

- Relax and make the applicant feel relaxed. If the applicant has a visible disability or reveals a disability during the interview, concentrate on the individual, not the disability.
- Treat the individual with the same respect you would treat any candidate whose skills you are seeking. Likewise, hold individuals with disabilities to the same standards as all applicants.
- Ask only job-related questions that speak to the functions of the job for which the applicant is applying.

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- Concentrate on the applicant's technical and professional knowledge, skills, abilities, experiences and interests.

Do not try to imagine how you would perform a specific job if you had the applicant's disability. He or she has mastered alternate ways of living and working. If the applicant has a known disability, either because it is obvious or was revealed by the applicant, you may ask him or her to describe how he or she would perform the job.

It is important to note that medical examinations are prohibited under the ADA at the pre-employment offer stage. However, a job offer may be conditional based on the results of a medical examination if all employees entering similar jobs are also required to take an examination. If, after the medical examination, the employer decides not to hire an individual because of a disability, the employer must demonstrate that the reason for the rejection is job-related and consistent with business necessity.

### *Tips for Interviewing Individuals with Specific Types of Disabilities*

#### **When Interviewing an Applicant Who Uses a Wheelchair**

- Don't lean on the wheelchair.
- Get on the same eye level with the applicant if the conversation lasts more than a minute or so.
- Don't push the wheelchair unless you are asked to do so.
- Keep accessibility in mind. Is that chair in the middle of your office a barrier to a wheelchair user? If so, move it aside.
- Don't be embarrassed to use such phrases as Lets walk over to the plant.

#### **When Interviewing an Applicant Who has an Intellectual or Cognitive Disability**

- Use simple, concrete language, but don't use baby talk.
- When giving instructions or directions, proceed slowly.
- Be patient, and repeat directions if necessary.
- Ask the applicant to summarize the information you have given to make sure it was understood.
- Give positive feedback whenever possible and appropriate.

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### When Interviewing an Applicant Who is Blind

- Immediately identify yourself and others present; cue a handshake verbally or physically.
- Use verbal cues; be descriptive in giving directions. (The table is about five steps to your left.)
- Verbalize chair location, or place the person's hand on the back of the chair, but do not place the person in the chair.
- Don't be embarrassed to use such phrases as "Do you see what I mean?"
- Don't shout.
- Keep doors either open or closed; a half-open door is a serious hazard.
- Offer assistance with mobility; let the applicant grasp your left arm, usually just above the elbow. Again, ask first, and do not be surprised if assistance is refused.
- Do not touch an applicant's cane. Do not touch a guide dog when in a harness. In fact, resist the temptation to pet a guide dog.

### When Interviewing an Applicant Who is Deaf

- You may need to use a physical signal to get the applicant's attention.
- If the applicant is lip reading, enunciate clearly, keep your mouth clear of obstructions, and place yourself where there is ample lighting. Keep in mind that an accomplished lip reader will be able to clearly understand only 30-35% of what you are saying.
- The best method to communicate is to use a combination of gestures and facial expressions. You may also want to learn how to fingerspell, or, if you are more ambitious, take a course in American Sign Language.
- Don't shout.
- If you don't understand what the applicant is telling you, don't pretend you did. Ask the candidate to repeat the sentence(s).
- If necessary, use a sign language interpreter. But keep in mind that the interpreter's job is to translate, not to get involved in any other way. Therefore, always face and speak directly to the applicant, not the interpreter. Don't say to the interpreter, "Tell her..."

*Information for this fact sheet came from the Office of Disability Employment Policy and the National Center on Workforce and Disability/Adult.*