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Employment interviewing options for college students who have physical handicaps

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Employment interviewing options for college students who have physical handicaps

Abstract

College students who have physical handicaps, like most college students, can benefit from student services designed to help them cope with the transitions in their lives. Students who have physical handicaps are concerned about the transition from being a college student to becoming a professional employee. They are anxious about interviewing for their first professional full-time positions. An issue that job applicants who have physical handicaps should resolve before they interview for employment is whether, how, and when to disclose their handicaps to the interviewers (Huvelle, Budoff, & Arnholz, 1984). However, little information is available to assist applicants who have physical handicaps in deciding whether to discuss their handicaps during employment interviews.

EMPLOYMENT INTERVIEWING OPTIONS
FOR COLLEGE STUDENTS WHO HAVE PHYSICAL HANDICAPS

A Research Paper
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by
Barbara Eileen Weeg

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College students who have physical handicaps, like most college students, can benefit from student services designed to help them cope with the transitions in their lives. Students who have physical handicaps are concerned about the transition from being a college student to becoming a professional employee. They are anxious about interviewing for their first professional full-time positions. An issue that job applicants who have physical handicaps should resolve before they interview for employment is whether, how, and when to disclose their handicaps to the interviewers (Huvelle, Budoff, & Arnholz, 1984). However, little information is available to assist applicants who have physical handicaps in deciding whether to discuss their handicaps during employment interviews.

There is no one correct set of statements or behaviors that college students who have physical handicaps should exhibit in employment interviews. These college students have numerous possible statements and behaviors from which to choose, including whether and how they discuss their handicaps. The purpose of this paper is to explore employment interviewing options so that counselors can assist college students who have physical handicaps in making choices that are appropriate for them.

A Difficult Transition

Making the transition from being a college student to being successfully employed is a difficult step for college students who have physical handicaps. Studies which have examined the labor

market experiences of college graduates who have physical handicaps indicate how difficult it is for such individuals to be hired. Lonquist (1979) studied the employment status of college students who had severe physical handicaps who had graduated from the University of Missouri-Columbia between 1960 and 1977. The unemployment rate of students who had severe physical handicaps who had graduated with a bachelor's degree or an advanced degree was 16%. College graduates who used wheelchairs had an unemployment rate of 18.6%. Graduates who had used personal care attendants while at the University of Missouri-Columbia had an unemployment rate of 40%. In contrast, the national unemployment rate for all individuals was 6.9% at the time of Lonquist's survey (Economic Report of the President, 1988). College graduates who had severe physical handicaps, particularly those who used wheelchairs or personal care attendants, experienced comparatively high rates of unemployment.

Fewer college graduates who have work disabilities are employed full-time compared to college graduates who do not have work disabilities, according to a survey conducted by the Bureau of the Census (McNeil, 1983). Only 48% of the 25- to 64-year-olds in the labor force who have work disabilities and who have completed four or more years of college are employed full-time. In contrast, 79% of the nondisabled college graduates are employed full-time.

The employment interview is a bridge between college

students who are seeking professional positions and potential employers. Unfortunately, the interviewing methods and decision-making processes of employment interviewers are often unreliable and invalid and may be discriminatory. Researchers who have reviewed 70 years of employment interview research have concluded that the employment interview, as it is conducted by most employment interviewers, lacks both reliability and validity (Arvey & Campion, 1982; Reilly & Chao, 1982). Because the employment interviewing process is so subjective, employment interviewers who have negative attitudes toward hiring job applicants who have physical handicaps may evaluate the applicants unfairly. According to Schweitzer and Deely (1982), employment interviewers who have negative attitudes may make erroneous assumptions about the abilities of individuals who have physical handicaps, may avoid asking the applicants legitimate questions, or may even terminate the interviews prematurely before they have gathered enough information from the applicants. The ultimate result of negative employment interviewer attitudes is that job applicants who have physical handicaps may be discriminated against for reasons unrelated to their ability to do the jobs.

Federal and State Equal Employment Protection

College students who have physical handicaps who are endeavoring to make the transition from student to professional are supported by legislation that is designed to establish and protect their employment rights. Equal employment laws and

administrative regulations specify the types of employment interview questions pertaining to the physical condition of job applicants that are legally permitted and those that are discriminatory.

The Rehabilitation Act of 1973 is the major piece of federal legislation establishing and protecting the rights of job applicants and employees who have physical handicaps. The equal employment responsibilities of federal executive agency employers, employers who receive federal contracts or subcontracts in excess of \$2,500, and employers who receive federal financial or program assistance are delineated in Sections 501, 503, and 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973.

The administrative regulations effectuating the relevant sections of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 specify what types of interview questions are prohibited and what types are permitted concerning the physical condition of job applicants (28 C.F.R. § 41, 1987; 29 C.F.R. § 1613, 1987; 41 C.F.R. § 60-741, 1987). Employers who are obligated to comply with the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 are prohibited from asking job applicants whether they have any physical handicaps. In addition, the employers are prohibited from asking job applicants questions concerning the nature or extent of any physical handicap the employers think the applicants might have. For example, employers may not ask questions such as, "Do you have any physical handicaps?" or "Why are you using a cane?"

These employers are permitted to ask job applicants whether they can meet, with or without reasonable accommodations, the

physical or medical requirements of the specific positions they are seeking. That is, employers may ask job applicants whether they have the minimum abilities necessary for them to perform the duties of the positions safely and efficiently. For example, employers are permitted to ask all job applicants, "Are you able to perform the tasks required in this job?"

The legal rights of job applicants and employees who have physical handicaps are also protected within many states by legislation and administrative regulations developed by each state. In Iowa, two laws protect the employment rights of citizens who have physical handicaps: the Iowa Civil Rights Act of 1965 and the Equal Opportunity and Affirmative Action section of the State Government Reorganization Act of 1986. Employers of more than three people, state government employers, and employers who receive state contracts or state financial assistance are responsible for fairly evaluating job applicants who have physical handicaps and for employing qualified individuals who have physical handicaps.

The Civil Rights Commission regulations which effectuate the Iowa Civil Rights Act of 1965 describe whether and how employers may ask job applicants questions pertaining to physical handicaps (Iowa Admin. Code § 161, 1988). Employment interviewers may ask job applicants whether they have physical handicaps if the inquiries are made in good faith for a nondiscriminatory purpose. Employers may not ask job applicants whether they have any

physical handicaps or how extensive their physical handicaps are unless the questions pertain to physical abilities which are bona fide occupational qualifications.

Although federal and state laws and administrative regulations exist to protect the employment rights of individuals who have physical handicaps, employers may not have adopted nondiscriminatory practices or attitudes. Employers themselves acknowledge that job applicants are likely to encounter employment discrimination. An average of 70% of the 921 business managers surveyed by Louis Harris and Associates, Inc. stated that individuals who have handicaps do encounter employment practices and policies that are discriminatory (The ICD Survey II, 1987).

Student services counselors can help college students who have physical handicaps prepare for employment interviews by helping the students to understand the legal protection available to job applicants who have physical handicaps. Some students who have physical handicaps may believe that employers must offer them the jobs they seek just because they have physical handicaps. However, no employer is required legally to hire applicants simply because the applicants have physical handicaps. Student services counselors can challenge the students' erroneous assumptions and provide the students with accurate information about employers' obligations (Sampson, 1982). Other college students may be uncertain about whether they must inform employers about their physical handicaps. Student services counselors can teach

students that job applicants are not required to discuss any physical handicaps that do not affect their ability to perform the specific jobs they seek.

Fundamental Interviewing Skills

Student services counselors can encourage college students who have physical handicaps to develop effective employment interviewing skills so that the students can emphasize their job-related competencies, achievements, and interests throughout employment interviews to gain favorable hiring recommendations. The primary employment interviewing skill that all college students who have physical handicaps should develop is the ability to communicate well during employment interviews. Researchers have shown that college students who can communicate effectively during employment interviews are likely to be evaluated favorably by employment interviewers (Drake, Kaplan, & Stone, 1972; Kinicki & Lockwood, 1985; Tschirgi, 1972-73). College students who have appropriate verbal, articulative, and nonverbal communication skills are more likely to receive favorable employment decisions than are students who cannot communicate well (Hollandsworth, Kazelskis, Stevens, & Dressel, 1979).

College students who have good verbal communication skills can highlight their competencies, make positive, honest statements about themselves, and cope with difficult questions. They are able to make substantive statements about the content areas in which employment interviewers are interested and to use the

terminology customary for their occupation (Galassi & Galassi, 1978). Statements the students make during employment interviews indicate their maturity, sincerity, and motivation. College students who are effective communicators demonstrate their interest in the specific job by displaying knowledge about the employer.

A communication skill that enhances the students' ability to discuss various job-related topics is the ability to articulate their ideas well. Articulate college students are able to speak clearly and fluently in appropriate tones of voice. The college students can converse in well-organized and focused sentences, using standard English. The students are able to use action verbs in describing their accomplishments and personal traits to convey their initiative and enthusiasm (Onoda & Gassert, 1978).

In addition to having good verbal and articulative communication skills, college students who are effective communicators are able to use appropriate nonverbal communication skills during employment interviews (Hollandsworth et al., 1979). The students can behave in a composed, confident manner while interviewing for jobs. They are able to use body postures, hand gestures, and facial expressions to help convey the meaning of their statements.

College students who have physical handicaps which affect their communication skills may need to compensate for their communication difficulties. Employment interviewers may have difficulty understanding some applicants. Student services counselors can help the students enhance their verbal, articulative,

and nonverbal communication skills so the students can compensate for any communication problems they have that might cause the interviewers to assume that the students are not competent.

College students who have speech handicaps that impair their articulative communication skills should be prepared to ease the communication process during employment interviews (Sampson, 1982). The college students should consider taking a written summary of their qualifications or written responses to some expected interview questions to the interviews. The students might consider taking a pen and some paper to the interviews in case they need to write some of their statements to be better understood by the employment interviewers. Sampson (1982) added that the college students should encourage the employment interviewers to ask the students to repeat what they have said if the interviewers have not understood them.

College students who have physical handicaps may have difficulties in using particular nonverbal communication skills effectively during employment interviews. Some students may be able to improve their nonverbal skills, while other students may need to compensate for some behaviors. For example, if students have weak handshakes or are unable to shake hands, they can compensate by making good eye contact, nodding, and offering a confident greeting.

Employment Interviewing Options

College students who have physical handicaps, like all students, need to know how to communicate effectively during

employment interviews. Unlike nonhandicapped students, college students who have physical handicaps have to consider whether and how they might want to inform employment interviewers that they have physical handicaps. College students who have physical handicaps may decide not to discuss their handicaps directly during employment interviews, or they may choose to acknowledge their handicaps, or they may decide to object to employment interviewers who ask discriminatory questions.

Not Discussing Physical Handicaps

One employment interviewing option that college students who have physical handicaps may choose is not to discuss their physical handicaps during employment interviews. Student services counselors can teach these students how to present themselves as capable potential employees. The counselors can suggest to the students that they emphasize their abilities by providing the employment interviewers with tangible evidence of their job-related skills. In addition, the counselors can help the students learn how to turn any discriminatory questions the employment interviewers ask into opportunities to emphasize their competencies.

Tangible evidence of abilities. College students who have physical handicaps can increase the likelihood that employment interviewers will perceive them as capable individuals by providing concrete evidence of their job-related competencies during employment interviews. College students in all academic majors can take tangible examples of their work to employment

interviews. The students can show employment interviewers some of the projects they developed in courses, in cooperative education experiences, or in part-time jobs. For example, Ayer (1970) suggested that college students with physical handicaps who want to be teachers can demonstrate their abilities by taking examples of the instructional materials and teacher aids they have developed to employment interviews and discussing them.

College students who have physical handicaps can use additional methods of documenting their skills. The students can develop videotapes in which they demonstrate their work-related abilities. The students could view their videotapes with the employment interviewers during the interviews or encourage the interviewers to view the tapes with the potential employers later so that the employers can see that the students are competent aspiring professionals. For example, college students with physical handicaps who want to be teachers might consider being videotaped while they taught a class or demonstrated selected teaching skills. According to Ayer (1970), effective videotapes provide vivid evidence of the students' abilities.

In addition, college students who have physical handicaps can provide employment interviewers with visual evidence that they are physically able to accomplish the jobs they seek. Job applicants can use the impaired part of their bodies during employment interviews (Prazak, 1969). For example, applicants who have a hand prosthesis may show the interviewers that they are

dexterous despite their handicap by picking up a pencil with their artificial fingers and writing. When the applicants use the parts of their bodies that appear to be impaired, the employment interviewers realize that the applicants are quite physically able.

Turning discriminatory questions around. Employment interviewers might confront college students who have physical handicaps with discriminatory questions about their handicaps even if the students are communicating effectively and providing tangible evidence of their abilities during employment interviews. Jablin and Tengler (1982) reported that many of the college placement directors they surveyed stated that it is extremely difficult for job applicants to answer discriminatory questions directly without harming their chances for positive employment decisions. Sampson (1982) recommended that if college students are asked unlawful questions about their physical handicaps, the students should respond by discussing their abilities. By emphasizing their abilities, the students are able to answer the interviewers' questions in a positive manner while addressing the interviewers' underlying concerns about their abilities to perform the jobs they seek.

College students who have physical handicaps can turn any discriminatory questions they are confronted with into opportunities to emphasize their competencies and accomplishments by using the techniques outlined by Lobodinski, McFadden, and Markowicz (1984). The applicants can translate the interviewers' unlawful questions

into lawful ones in their minds to help them answer the questions appropriately. For example, applicants would treat unlawful questions such as "Are you crippled?" as if they had been asked, "Are you able to meet the physical requirements of this job?" Job applicants can turn unwarranted questions around more easily if they ignore any loaded words that employment interviewers have used. The applicants would endeavor to maintain their composure by being tolerant of any condescending words or expressions used by the employment interviewers. The job applicants would then respond to discriminatory questions by providing information that answers the intent of the interviewers' questions (Lobodinski et al., 1984). The applicants would provide the interviewers with realistic information about their abilities to perform the physical aspects of the jobs they seek.

Discussing Physical Handicaps

Another employment interviewing option that college students who have physical handicaps, particularly perceptible physical handicaps, might choose is to discuss their handicaps during employment interviews. Student services counselors can help college students who have physical handicaps explore the reasons why the students decide to discuss their handicaps with employment interviewers. Some students may have rational reasons for this decision. For example, they may decide to provide the interviewers with accurate information about their physical conditions to correct the interviewers' misconceptions. If the

students feel comfortable with their decisions, they may be better able to explain their competencies. Student services counselors can teach students who decide to discuss their physical handicaps how to phrase and place their disclosures effectively within employment interviews.

Contents of disclosure. College students who have physical handicaps should discuss only those physical skills that are needed to perform safely and effectively the specific jobs they seek. Professionals agree that the contents of any disclosures the applicants decide to make about their handicaps should be related to bona fide physical requirements of the positions for which they apply (Iverson, 1985; Lobodinski et al., 1984; Sampson, 1982). The students should strive to provide the employment interviewers with just enough information about their job-related physical abilities so that the interviewers can learn that the applicants are able to perform the physical tasks of the position.

Student services counselors can help students learn how to analyze job advertisements and position descriptions to determine what physical skills are needed for each job they seek (Sampson, 1982). To help the students anticipate the concerns employment interviewers might have about their physical abilities, counselors can help the students assess their physical appearance objectively. The students would then consider how they might discuss their handicaps in relationship to the specific requirements of the job they seek. For example, if students who

are quadriplegic are seeking jobs that entail report writing, the students would learn to anticipate that one concern employment interviewers might have is whether the applicants have the physical capability to write or type reports. By anticipating this concern, the applicants would be prepared to disclose how they have written reports in the past.

College students who decide to discuss their physical handicaps during employment interviews can learn how to emphasize the physical abilities they do have. The students can learn that employment interviewers are more likely to form favorable impressions of them if they discuss the functional abilities they do have using positive terms instead of discussing their limitations using negative terms (Iverson, 1985; Lobodinski et al., 1984). The applicants can learn to emphasize their physical capabilities by referring to the specific job-related tasks and procedures they can master. For example, if applicants who use a cane when walking are applying for jobs that entail some walking, the applicants could make a positive disclosure such as, "I'm sure I could handle the walking involved in this job because lately I have been walking several miles per day for exercise" (Iverson, 1985, p. 39). In addition, job applicants can learn how to describe their physical abilities using affirmative statements (Iverson, 1985). The students may be accustomed to discussing their handicaps with limiting terms, such as "only," "just," or "usually." The students can learn to reduce the number of

self-depreciating statements they make. For example, students who have prolapsed spinal disks who are accustomed to saying, "I can only lift things weighing less than 50 pounds" can learn to say "I can lift things weighing up to 50 pounds."

Job applicants who have decided to discuss their physical handicaps during employment interviews should not use medical terminology when referring to their handicaps (Iverson, 1985; Lobodinski et al., 1984). Since most employment interviewers are not medical experts, the interviewers might conclude that the applicants' handicaps are more severe than they actually are, or might become skeptical of the applicants' abilities, if the applicants use medical terminology. The students can develop nonmedical explanations of their physical handicaps. The students should each develop a functional definition of their handicaps that includes job-related examples of the physical tasks they can perform.

Some students who decide to discuss their physical capabilities may want to mention the cause of their handicaps. Researchers have found that employers evaluate applicants whose physical handicaps were caused by external factors, such as being hit by an automobile, more favorably than they do applicants who caused their own handicaps (Bordieri & Drehmer, 1986; Florian, 1978). When employers do not know the cause of the applicants' physical handicaps, employers appear to assume that the applicants are personally responsible for their handicaps and give the applicants poorer evaluations (Bordieri & Drehmer, 1986).

Counselors can explain to students whose physical handicaps were caused by external factors that employers may regard the students more favorably if the students mention how their handicaps were caused. Indeed, student services counselors should explain to students whose physical handicaps were caused by external factors that employers might evaluate them less favorably if the students do not disclose the cause of their handicaps. The students can learn how to mention the external cause of their handicaps in a calm, brief, and nontechnical manner. Counselors can suggest to students whose handicaps were caused by their own actions or negligence that they might not benefit from volunteering information about the cause of their physical handicaps.

In addition to discussing their own achievements, abilities, and work behaviors, college students who have physical handicaps may choose to discuss their work potential by referring to valid studies which have investigated the work achievements of employees who have physical handicaps (Dailey, 1982). Student services counselors can encourage students who have physical handicaps to become familiar with studies which have examined the work behaviors of individuals who have physical handicaps. The students can inform employment interviewers that valid studies using a variety of research methodologies have shown that employees who have physical handicaps are at least as productive, safe, and reliable as other employees (e.g., Bressler & Lacy, 1980; E. I. du Pont de Nemours and Company, 1982; The ICD Survey II, 1987).

Timing of disclosure. Students who decide to disclose information about their physical handicaps during employment interviews should consider when they will make their disclosures. Since many employment interviewers may regard information that the applicants have physical handicaps as negative information, the placement of the applicants' disclosures within interviews can affect the employers' evaluations. Researchers have studied how the temporal order in which interviewers learn about the positive and negative characteristics of job applicants affects their evaluations (e.g., Belec & Rowe, 1983; Farr, 1973; Farr & York, 1975). Employment interviewers prefer job applicants whose interviews begin and end with positive information, regardless of whether the interviewers make one overall evaluation at the end of the interviews or make numerous evaluations throughout each interview (Farr, 1973).

Student services counselors can recommend to students that they use their communication skills to greet the interviewers confidently and to discuss their job-related abilities and achievements. The students could then acknowledge their physical handicaps briefly by emphasizing their physical abilities. The students would limit the discussion of their physical abilities by ending their disclosure with positive statements about their other competencies.

Objecting to Discriminatory Treatment

Another employment interviewing option college students who have physical handicaps can exercise if they have been asked

discriminatory questions by employment interviewers is to object to the interviewers' treatment of them. College students who believe they have been asked discriminatory questions may complain to the employment interviewers directly or they may file formal complaints against the interviewers and their employers.

Complaining to employment interviewers. Lobodinski et al. (1984) outlined how job applicants can use subtle methods or more direct techniques to object to the interviewers' questions. Some job applicants may choose to suggest tactfully to the employment interviewers that they do not believe the interviewers' questions are relevant to determining whether they can perform the jobs they seek. Other job applicants might directly ask the interviewers to explain how the interviewers' questions relate to assessing their abilities to perform the jobs. The most direct technique job applicants can use in objecting to interviewers' questions about their physical handicaps is for the applicants to decline to answer any questions they believe to be discriminatory. The applicants would decline to answer the interviewers' questions by explaining that they believe the questions have no relevance to evaluating whether they are able to perform the jobs they seek. The applicants would assert that they are not going to respond to the interviewers' questions about any physical handicaps they might have. Lobodinski et al. (1984) stressed that even if job applicants decide to ask the interviewers to justify their questions or decline to answer certain types of inquiries, the

applicants should cope with the interviewers' questions by emphasizing their job-related competencies.

Filing formal complaints. College students may choose to file formal complaints against employment interviewers and the interviewers' employers if the students have been asked discriminatory questions during the employment interviewing process. The employment interviewers must be associated with employers who are obligated to comply with federal or state equal employment opportunity laws in order for the college students to receive employment protection.

If the students have been discriminated against by employment interviewers who are employed by companies that must comply with the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, the students may file formal complaints against the employers. Students may also seek protection under state laws. Some state equal employment laws cover more types of employers than do federal laws. In Iowa, for example, all but the smallest employers must comply with the state's anti-discrimination laws.

After the students have filed their formal complaints, the alleged discriminatory acts are investigated. In general, if the investigators determine that discrimination has occurred, the employers will be required to eliminate the discriminatory employment practices and to remedy the situation. The employers may be required to hire the students and to pay the students the salaries they would have earned if they had been hired. If the

investigators do not find that employment discrimination has occurred, or if they do not process the complaints in a timely manner, the students may choose to file lawsuits in the appropriate federal and/or state courts.

Student services counselors can inform all college students who have physical handicaps about the legal recourse available to job applicants who have suffered discrimination. When counselors introduce students to the legal process for filing complaints, the students are able to make wiser decisions about the choices available to them (Dailey, 1982). Although student services counselors should be familiar with the relevant federal and state laws and regulations, counselors should recommend to students that they consult with attorneys who have expertise in the area of employment discrimination.

Conclusions

Helping college students to prepare for employment interviews is important in today's competitive job market. Helping college students who have physical handicaps to learn effective employment interviewing skills is particularly important since the unemployment rate for college graduates who have physical handicaps is alarmingly high. Employment discrimination often begins when college students who have physical handicaps first make contact with potential employers in the employment interview.

Student services counselors can help college students who have physical handicaps prepare for employment interviews.

Counselors can encourage students who have physical handicaps to consider their employment interviewing options. Some students may decide not to discuss their physical handicaps, while others may choose to acknowledge their handicaps. Student services counselors can advise students to emphasize their physical abilities, not their handicaps, in any disclosures they make. Although students may have decided not to discuss their physical handicaps during employment interviews, interviewers may still confront them with discriminatory questions about their handicaps. Student services counselors can help students learn how to treat these unwarranted questions as opportunities to discuss their job-related abilities. Some students may choose to object to discriminatory questions. Counselors can refer students who believe they have been discriminated against to attorneys who have expertise in employment law.

College students who have physical handicaps can become successfully employed in professional positions. By emphasizing their job-related competencies, achievements, and interests, college students who have physical handicaps demonstrate that they will be valuable employees.

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