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## Toward Inclusion: Best Practices for Hiring People with Disabilities

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# Toward Inclusion: Best Practices for Hiring People with Disabilities

Lydia Tang, Bridget Malley, Chris Tanguay, and Zachary Tumlin, SAA Accessibility and Disability Section

Job searches are stressful for everyone, but they can be especially challenging for people with disabilities. According to the US Department of Labor,<sup>1</sup> the unemployment rate for people with disabilities remains more than twice as high as for people without disabilities. People with disabilities encounter obstacles at every stage of their career, from obtaining education and credentials to navigating the job search process to thriving within a job. To encourage building a workforce inclusive of people of all abilities, the SAA Accessibility and Disability Section crowdsourced the following ideas on the prompt: “What should search committees be aware of when filling a position in terms of accessibility and disability inclusion?”

## Crafting a Job Posting

- Evaluate the job description for unnecessarily exclusionary “essential functions” that rely on physical ability. Anticipate potential accommodations for qualified candidates who may have challenges with “typical” archival tasks such as lifting, bending, or climbing to reach high shelving.
- Consider options for flexible scheduling or remote work for tasks such as data entry, reference service, creating digital content, and meetings.

- Link to your institution’s non-discrimination policy.
- Express willingness to provide accommodations and indicate how an applicant can make requests.
- Ensure that the platform for submitting applications is accessible. Have alternative submission options available, such as emailing materials to HR.

## Evaluating Candidates

- Create a rubric to evaluate and select a candidate. Focus on essential qualifications directly related to job duties—avoid judgments based on “fit” or non-essential aspects of their performance.
- Be mindful of implicit bias and ableism. Do you expect someone to sound, look, or behave a certain way? Are you making judgments based on ability?
- **Remember: You cannot ask someone to disclose a disability.** This includes indirectly, such as inquiring about an accent (e.g., the “Deaf accent”) or someone’s health. You can only ask someone if they can do the job with or without reasonable accommodations.

## Conducting Initial Interviews

- Establish a standardized set of specific, targeted questions. Avoid broad, ambiguous questions, such as “tell me about yourself.”
- Offer phone and video conferencing options. Allow the candidate to choose the platform (some are more accessible than others).
- Email the questions in advance (Word documents are preferable to PDFs for screen readers). Display questions during a video conference.
- Instruct candidates to leave their camera off during a video conference so that you focus on the substance of their responses and not their physical appearance.<sup>2</sup>
- Understand that “non-answers” could be disability-related, such as explaining a large employment gap by saying that it was “personal,” “health-related,” or that they had to “be at home.”

## Conducting In-Person Interviews

- Ask all candidates if they need any accommodations.
- On-site interviews can be a barrier for people with disabilities. If a candidate cannot get to the site or requires additional funding to bring a personal assistant, would that disqualify them?

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## Toward Inclusion

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- Use the most accessible buildings and rooms available. Partner with disabled people and campus or community offices/groups to identify accessibility concerns.
- Email all materials ahead of time.
- Schedule regular breaks into the itinerary. Make sure candidates know when breaks will be and where accessible restrooms and drinking fountains are located.
- Secure a space for candidates to store their personal items so they do not have to carry them around all day.
- Respect personal boundaries, such as choosing not to shake hands or maintain eye contact.
- Provide the candidate with a copy of the interview questions in large text during the interview so that they can follow along.
- If the candidate is required to give a presentation, have a chair available if the candidate wishes to sit.
- Be prepared to speak about what your organization has done and is doing related to disability and accessibility, DEI (diversity, equity, and inclusion), conflict resolution, and employee wellness.
- Explore ways for candidates to demonstrate their expertise beyond a presentation and sit-down meetings. Simulate specific job tasks such as developing processing plans, conducting reference interviews, or consulting with donors to assess the performance of job duties and not necessarily the general ease of social interactions.
- Design accessible tours—use elevators, minimize the amount of continuous walking, and drive around larger campuses. Anticipate if there are spaces that can be challenging to navigate or triggering for people with neurological, processing, or sensory issues. Remedy these environments or describe in advance what the candidate will experience (e.g., sudden influxes of bright light, loud background noise, elevators that shake, etc.). Have an alternative route available, if requested.

## Dining with Candidates

- A meal component of an interview process can be the most distressing portion of an interview for candidates with disabilities due to the lack of structure and known variables. Consider: What are the goals of the meal component? What would “failing” a meal interview look like? If the meal component is not part of the formal interview, be clear about this.
- Ask candidates if they have any dietary restrictions in advance. Choose a restaurant that has multiple options available for people with food allergies and dietary restrictions. Include the menu with the interview packet.
- Allow the candidate to choose their preferred seating arrangement. Booths should generally be avoided for mobility reasons.

- Some people may be uncomfortable eating at the interview. Do not negatively judge the candidate if they do not finish the meal nor order a full meal.

## Making the Offer

- Extend the offer through email instead of (or in addition to) a phone call. This accommodates people who are Deaf, hard of hearing, or need additional time to process information. Include a deadline for response and next steps.

## Inclusion Beyond Hiring

Inclusive hiring practices and policies are only that—about hiring—which is only the beginning of an employee’s time with you. Employers must commit to providing ongoing accommodations and maintaining a culture of inclusion necessary for a productive and positive work environment.

Learn more about best practices during the hiring process:

- “Recruitment & Hiring,” Employer Assistance and Resource Network on Disability Inclusion, <https://askearn.org/topics/recruitment-hiring/>.
- Job Accommodation Network, <https://askjan.org/>.
- “Reducing Unconscious Bias: A Resource for Hiring Committee Members,” Las Positas College Campus Change Network, <http://www.laspositascollege.edu/campuschangenetwork/documents/ReducingUnconsciousBiasF09.pdf>.
- “This is How Employers Weed Disabled People From the Hiring Pools,” Wendy Lu, *Huffington Post*, [https://www.huffpost.com/entry/employers-disability-discrimination-job-listings\\_l\\_5d003523e4b011df123c640a](https://www.huffpost.com/entry/employers-disability-discrimination-job-listings_l_5d003523e4b011df123c640a).
- US Department of Labor, Office of Disability Employment Policy, <https://www.dol.gov/odep/>.
- “Job Applicants and the Americans with Disabilities Act,” US Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, <https://www.eeoc.gov/facts/jobapplicant.html>.

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If you have additional feedback or ideas, please get in touch with the Accessibility and Disability Section via email at [adsectionblogsaa@gmail.com](mailto:adsectionblogsaa@gmail.com). ■

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> “Persons with a Disability: Labor Force Characteristics–2019.” US Department of Labor, February 26, 2020, <https://www.bls.gov/news.release/pdf/disabl.pdf>.
- <sup>2</sup> US orchestras adopted the “blind audition” approach in the 1970s, in which those auditioning perform behind a screen so that the committee cannot see them. This practice was adopted to reduce implicit bias and discrimination.