Communication Strategies in Employment Interviews for Applicants With Disabilities

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For many applicants with disabilities, successful job interviewing is an all-or-nothing battle with prejudiced, nondisabled employers who often operate in bureaucratic support systems and as a result, may have some acknowledged or hidden prejudices (Stone & Sawatzki, 1980). The frustration of job applicants with disabilities has real significance, especially considering the extraordinary unemployment rate of over 70% for the disabled population (Rubin, 1997). Because persons with disabilities, especially those who have the most visible disabilities such as paraplegia, Down syndrome, or closed head injury, are considered less attractive and less employable, they are often left in a perpetual state of social and economic dependency (Albrecht, 1992). This chapter argues that to break from this state of dependency, the applicant with a disability would benefit from using strategic communication during the employment interview to prove that she or he is employable despite the stigma or stereotypes that his or her disability might evoke.
Employing strategic communication strategies to combat prejudicial thinking is justified. The stakes are high. As disability advocate Billy Golfs (Corbet, 1995) pointed out, gimps without jobs are “as invisible as Caspar [sic] the ghost” (p. 42), and without gainful employment are effectively excluded from society. Even though it may seem obvious that employment and personal economic stability are central to disabled persons’ ability to be successful in society (Yuker, 1988), it is apparent that the cliché “getting a job is a full-time job” is neither accurate nor appropriate for applicants with disabilities. Instead, gaining employment becomes a matter of societal “life and death” and, consequently, stigma management strategies are imperative.

Not surprisingly, the effort needed to get out of the dependent state of “unemployability” is tremendous and increases with the saliency of the applicant’s disability (Herold, 1995; Krefting & Brief, 1976; Stone & Sawatzki, 1980). A study by LaPlante, Kennedy, Kaye, and Wegner (1997) revealed that the unemployment rates for different types and degrees of disability seem to range along a continuum of societal prejudice toward disability. Even though there is evidence to demonstrate a decrease in prejudicial treatment for applicants with the most “acceptable” disabilities such as paraplegia and epilepsy (Royerse & Edwards, 1989), employment success for even these applicants is still not comparable with that of their nondisabled counterparts (LaPlante et al., 1997).

In this chapter, saliency is meant to exemplify the societal and prejudicial tolerance of disability the degree to which the disability is defined as relevant and negatively valenced. For example, both a paraplegic who uses a wheelchair and an ambulatory person with spastic cerebral palsy have visible disabilities, but the person with spastic cerebral palsy has the more salient disability and he or she would be considered less socially attractive, and consequently have more stigma management concerns to consider (Goffman, 1963). However, saliency is not limited to the visibility of the disability but also extends to what society might consider threatening, such as manic depression. Johnson, Greenwood, and Schriner (1988) found that potential employers expressed specific concerns about hiring someone with a nonvisible disability such as depression or attention deficit disorder because these types of employees would allegedly require more instruction, might not accept their roles, and might require more supervision.

In this chapter I identify appropriate and effective interviewing strategies for applicants with disabilities, especially considering the impact of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). There are six sections in this chapter: (a) perceptions of employability, (b) stigma management in the employment interview, (c) uncertainty reduction theory and interviewing, (d) self-disclosure strategies and uncertainty reduction, (e) expected employment interviewing behavior and the ADA, and (f) improving employability for persons with disabilities.

**PERCEPTIONS OF EMPLOYABILITY**

Applicants with visible physical disabilities and nonvisible disabilities are perceived as not being employable and thus experience an unemployment rate of over 70% (Rubin, 1997). According to a January 1994 Harris poll, “79% of persons with disabilities who are not working want to work! Eight out of ten of those surveyed expressed their belief that they would have the kind of job they desire if they did not have a disability” (Rubin, 1997, p. 1). This number is disheartening, especially considering that at least 49 million U.S. citizens are persons with disabilities and that they are the largest minority group ever defined (Rubin, 1997). This minority culture (Braithwaite & Braithwaite, 1997; Wiss, 1999) is both economically troubled and stymied (Albrecht, 1992) by a federal government that spends $200 billion annually to support people who are not working as compared with $5 billion spent on preparing persons with disabilities for employment (Rubin, 1997), and by a public sector that is uncomfortable hiring disabled persons (Gouver, Steiner, Jackson, Schlatar, & Rain, 1991; Stone & Sawatzki, 1980). There are several reasons why many persons with disabilities are dismissed as unemployable.

LaPlante et al. (1997) reported that persons with disabilities may not have jobs for one of at least five reasons. The first two of these are most obvious: the severity of their impairments and the social barriers presented by employers. A third reason why persons with disabilities are precluded from work is because they are not well trained. Fourth, persons with disabilities are not as well educated as their nondisabled counterparts. Nondisabled students’ high school graduation rate is 82.4% as compared with only 66.7% for students with disabilities. The disparity in college graduation rates is even more striking: 22.9% for people without disabilities compared with 9.6% for people with disabilities. Fifth, as a consequence of inadequate education, persons with disabilities are three times more likely to live in poverty than are their nondisabled counterparts. For those who are offered an employment interview, the question becomes “what communication strategies will reduce uncertainty and maximize the opportunity for gainful employment?”
STIGMA MANAGEMENT IN THE EMPLOYMENT INTERVIEW

Early in the employment-seeking process a disabled applicant must consider how to combat unreasonable stigmas and stereotypes. The salience variable is central in determining which communication strategies need to be utilized. Disabled applicants are in the unenviable position of having to judge whether they should disclose information about their disabilities, just sell their talents, or advocate their right to fair treatment during an employment interview.

Communication research about disclosure as a stigma management strategy that may be generalized to an employment interview has yielded inconsistent results (e.g., Braithwaite, 1991; Grove & Werkman, 1991; Thompson, 1982), as has other atheoretical advice offered to applicants with disabilities (Marks & Lewis, 1983; Witt, 1992). During, and especially, after a successful initial screening, interpersonal communication skills, an attractive appearance, and demonstration of knowledge and skills required for the position applied for influence employers’ selection decisions. These qualities apply to any applicant, whether disabled or not (Galassi & Galassi, 1978). However, it is clear that presence of a disability damages the disabled applicant’s employability regardless of his or her qualifications (Bordieri & Drehmer, 1987; Gouver et al., 1991; Herold, 1995; Stone & Sawatzki, 1980). Over the past 30 years, advice generated to help reduce the harmful effects of stigma (Marks & Lewis, 1983; Witt, 1992) and improve the unemployment rate of persons with disabilities has been ineffectual, as evidenced by the consistently high unemployment rate of 70% (Rubin, 1997).

Knowing that the employment interview is always a persuasive event (Einhorn, 1981), the answer may seem obvious; do not disclose information regarding your disability. However, there is evidence to show that if a disabled applicant is hired and does not disclose until after the job is offered, the nondisclosure may contribute to a sense of distrust between the employer and applicant. Witt (1992) provided an example of colleagues looking for deficits they expect to find in a co-worker who has disclosed a disability. Their “need to discover” or find proof of the disability is invasive. For those with a visible disability, there is no choice. The “nonverbal disclosure” has already occurred along with a persuasive appeal that implicitly or explicitly contains one or both of the following arguments: that they are excellent candidates in spite of their disability, or that they are excellent candidates because they overcame their disability (Herold, 1995). Although this type of persuasive appeal may appease the interviewer, it often puts the disabled applicant at odds with her or his personal and cultural identity (Shaprio, 1994). An alternative strategy may be to seek protection against prejudicial hiring practices by evoking the ADA. Unfortunately, this strategy, although viable, has potentially explosive consequences on organizational membership (Kreps, 1993, this volume). What is needed, it seems, is advice regarding what type of communication strategies should be employed by whom and when.

A personal example helps to explain the apparent paradox. I have participated in several employment interviews. After initial screening and telephone interviews, I have had to consider whether it was necessary for me to disclose information about my disability. My hemiplegic cerebral palsy can be considered nonvisible because my left side is completely developed. After a lifetime of overcompensating, my left side is extraordinarily strong, while my right side is slightly atrophied and weak. Because of my weak right hand, I often consider the stigma management strategy of fully or partially disclosing information about my disability during an initial interaction, especially if my handshake leaves a “limp fish” impression. When interviewing, I take an immediate inventory of the interviewer’s right hand. I have just an instant to decide whether I have conducted a good shake, and if not, I am prepared to implement my stigma management plan. This is obviously a very conscious process and consequently I am as nervous about the initial handshake as I am about the entire interview process.

Coincidentally, all four of my successful interviews have been with women, while the two face-to-face disappointments have been with men. My right hand generally fits nicely into a woman’s hand and has adequate squeeze strength, but it is often consumed and crushed by a male handshake. I do not claim a direct relationship between my interview success with men and my handshake, but since I am a 6 foot 3 in. and 210-lb male, I suspect that my weak handshake did not leave a favorable first impression. For me, the moment of the handshake determined whether I needed to repair any perceived damage. At the time, this seemed to be the logical thing to do, according to what I had read in popular and research-based literature on interviewing. However, I failed to recognize that an interview is not truly an interpersonal communication experience and thus, many rules simply do not apply (Herold, 1995; Krefting & Brief, 1976). My strategy to disclose information about my disability as a way to alleviate perceived stigmas turned out to be flawed. As I have subsequently discovered through disclosure research, the best strategy for myself would be not to discuss my disability during an interview.
In the field of communication there has been little theoretically driven advice that directly addresses disability stigma management in the context of an employment interview. Dahnke (1982) developed a deductive theory to examine initial interactions, including those between a nondisabled interviewer and a disabled interviewee. Using uncertainty reduction theory as one of his premises, he found that during initial interactions between a disabled applicant and a nondisabled interviewer, the disabled applicant was considered less favorable and produced more anxiety than a nondisabled applicant. The applicant’s disability dominated the attention of the nondisabled person, the nondisabled interviewer was more ambivalent and formal, and as a result, the disabled applicant was either rated more severely or given an overly favorable rating. In addition, Dahnke found that the nondisabled interviewer sat farther away, exhibited less variation in behavior, and distorted his or her opinions to align with the disabled applicant. Most importantly, the initial interaction was terminated more quickly for the disabled applicant than for the nondisabled applicant. Dahnke’s research and my personal experiences with interviewing suggest that the most effective way to approach stigma management is through the use of uncertainty reduction theory.

**UNCERTAINTY REDUCTION THEORY AND INTERVIEWING**

Berger’s (1997; Berger & Bradac, 1982) uncertainty reduction theory (URT) posits that when persons initially meet, they have a need to reduce uncertainty about self and others. Communication research conducted on interactions between persons with disabilities and nondisabled persons (Braithwaite, 1991; Dahnke, 1982; Thompson & Seibold, 1978) indicates that persons who have a visible disability create high levels of uncertainty and may need to concentrate on reducing it. In the initial formulation of URT, Berger and Calabrese (1975) discussed three specific conditions that are especially relevant to interaction with a person with a visible disability: deviation from normalcy, the possibility of future interaction, and the outcome of interaction-related costs and rewards.

It is clear that the saliency of a person’s disability determines others’ need to confirm or disconfirm stereotypes. When a person encounters the novelty of a visible disability it can be predicted that they will act to reduce uncertainty. For the professional interviewer, the disabled applicant presents stimuli that produce anxiousness and uncertainty. Royse and Edwards (1989) reported that even professionally trained persons often feel some uneasiness when in the presence of persons with disabilities. Bordier and Drehmer (1987) found that the more severe the disability or the more the job applicant deviated from the norm, the lower the probability of being offered employment. Stone and Sawatzki (1980) reported that an applicant’s disability can be so unnerving to the nondisabled interviewer that he or she may overlook the interpersonal behavior of the applicant and instead focus on the novelty of the disability.

According to Berger’s (1997) interpretation of URT, persons more intently monitor their interaction when there is a reasonable expectation that they will interact with the person again. Goffman (1963) argued that a person’s physical disability is discrediting to such a degree that when nondisabled persons have to interact with persons with a disability they tend to avoid giving any suggestion of an impending long-term relationship. This means that an offer of employment may be problematic because it suggests the development of a long-term relationship. Sussman’s (1986) research demonstrates that future interaction serves as the dominating feature of increased anxiety. In a job interview for an applicant with a disability, this is very important because the decision for offering a second interview or a job may depend on the level of uncertainty of the interviewer.

From the perspective of the disabled communicator, the possible rewards or costs of the interaction during the job interview are quite clear—namely, an offer of employment. Berger and Bradac (1982) argued that when communicators perceive their interaction to be of value, they become more concerned about reducing uncertainties. As Coleman and DePaulo (1991) noted, “because of incoherent communication, a lack of shared information, negative attitudes, stereotypes, or stigma, a disabled or ablebodied person may become frustrated or hostile” (p. 63), and some may ultimately resort to terminating the interaction (Sabsay & Platt, 1985). However, there are strategies available to reduce uncertainty.

Berger and Calabrese’s (1975) theory postulates that people use three specific ways to increase information and reduce uncertainty: passive, active, and/or interactive strategies of information seeking. The interactive strategy of self-disclosing may be most effective because the disabled interviewee is best equipped to dispel myths and reduce uncertainty (Rice, 1972; Thompson, 1982). This strategy is effective when disclosure is not elicited, but instead is disclosed voluntarily, as the ADA requires in an interviewing situation. The applicant with a disability needs to consider his or her self-disclosure not as part of a reciprocated act, but instead as an offensive strategy (Berger, 1997) that utilizes his or her
"information power" (Dahnke, 1982) to reduce an interviewer’s uncertainty.

It is important to note that the notion of information sharing is based on an interpersonal model where rules of reciprocity exist. For example, participants in an interpersonal communication situation may feel compelled to share information on an equally intimate level. Braithwaite’s (1991) research on disclosure by people with disabilities demonstrated that people who are made uncomfortable by a person’s disability want to ask questions to reduce uncertainty and in interpersonal settings many do indeed ask such questions. In response, many persons with disabilities provide information, depending on several situational factors. Although it is extremely useful in interpersonal contexts, URT (Berger, 1997; Berger & Calabrese, 1975) does not explain how anxiously can be reduced in a setting where the rules of interaction are formalized and restricted, like an employment interview.

Spitzberg (1994) recognized that persuasion and uncertainty reduction are unlikely if a relationship is not coequal; an employment interview is such a context. Based on Spitzberg’s findings, it is suggested that the non-disabled interviewer is in a powerful position in an employment interview and, depending on his or her competency and motivation to reduce uncertainty, will seek or expect information to be disclosed by the less powerful and presumably less competent disabled interviewee. However, seeking the desired disability information is restricted by the ADA. As a result, if the questions that the interviewer would use to reduce uncertainty are left unanswered, high levels of uncertainty will persist and the applicant’s employability may be jeopardized. Information-sharing behavior may be used to reduce uncertainty and also to persuade or gain influence over the target person (Berger, 1997). This suggests that information sharing may be utilized to help convince the potential employer that a disability is not a liability. An examination of the specific strategy of self-disclosure in relation to URT should provide more helpful information for persons seeking employment.

SELF-DISCLOSURE STRATEGY AND UNCERTAINTY REDUCTION

Numerous studies have shown that participants who disclose information that directly disconfirms stereotypical myths are perceived to be significantly more attractive (Cozby, 1972; Hastorf, Wildfogel, & Cassman, 1979; Kleck, 1968; Thompson & Seibold, 1978; Worthy, Gary, & Kahn, 1969).

Of particular importance to the present essay are several reports that when applicants disclose information to combat stereotypes, their ratings of employability significantly improve (Heilman, Martell, & Simon, 1988; Tosi & Einbender, 1985), and this trend is also observed when the applicant has a disability (Hastorf et al., 1979; Jackson, Peacock, & Smith, 1980; Tagalakis, Amsel, & Fichten, 1988). Self-disclosure as a strategy to reduce uncertainty appears to be promising and in only a few circumstances would it cause damage or create a negative image (Thompson, 1982). There is, however, some evidence to show that self-disclosure may elicit negative reactions in certain situations.

As reported by Worthy et al. (1969), self-disclosure can have negative effects when it is presented in a context where reciprocation is not likely—such as an interview—only adding to uncertainty rather than reducing it. In addition, self-disclosure may serve to crystallize the stereotypes of disability as a sickness and thus increase anxiety (Glideman & Roth, 1980). Disclosure may also misrepresent the non-disabled counterpart that the person with a disability is preoccupied with his or her disability (Belgrave & Mills, 1981) and is likely to disclose about the disability to anyone (Derlega & Chaikin, 1977). Other discrediting effects of self-disclosure are that it may lead to loss of self-esteem, possibly alienate others, indicate a loss of control, and project a negative attitude (Steele, 1975).

Inconsistencies about the effects of self-disclosure are puzzling. Thompson and Seibold (1978) found that although disclosure reduced levels of tension and uncertainty, it did not contribute to increasing levels of acceptance. As a result, the central question becomes, what contributes to these inconsistencies in research findings? Without an answer, the confusion as to whether to disclose or not remains.

The following six explanations explore why URT and the self-disclosure strategy may not effectively account for the phenomena that occur in the context of a formal interview. First, URT (Berger, 1997; Berger & Calabrese, 1975) suggests that when attempting to reduce uncertainty communicators need to gather information about the other person. However, in the context of an interview, there are many restrictions on reciprocal information gathering. Even with self-disclosure on behalf of the applicant with a disability, the interviewer may not have enough information to reduce uncertainty.

Second, URT suggests that we attempt to reduce anxieties about whether we can predict or explain another’s behavior by asking questions and by disclosing information about ourselves. In the context of an interpersonal interaction, self-disclosure is expected and helps to model
reciprocated behavior, whereas in an interview context the interviewer is expected to do virtually all of the questioning and not to model appropriate disclosure behavior. Ironically, a successful applicant is expected to exhibit appropriate self-disclosure behavior without the aid of the interviewer’s modeling behavior. As a result, the applicant may exhibit inappropriate behavior and jeopardize his or her credibility in the employment interview.

The third reason why uncertainty reduction may not occur is that interacting with a person with a disability deviates from normalcy. URT suggests that uncertainty increases when behavior deviates from what is considered normal. Interacting with an applicant with a disability in the context of an interview is a unique situation. In the context of the interpersonal setting, awkwardness and discomfort may exist, but the communicators are able to adjust to the situation more effectively. In the interview setting, communicators have more restrictions due to the formality of the interview.

Fourth, previous self-disclosure strategies focused on the simple process of disclosure while ignoring the power of strategic information (Dahlof, 1982). The literature shows that if the disclosure includes information that directly attacks typical stereotypes, the likelihood of reducing uncertainty should improve, and more precisely, it may help to improve ratings of acceptability, something previous studies did not find (Thompson, 1982; Thompson & Seibold, 1978).

Fifth, previous studies have largely ignored the impact of the content of disclosed information. Self-disclosure of messages that specifically address stereotypes about the disability rather than messages that only disclose general personal information is likely to have very different implications. This means that applicants with either a nonvisible or visible disability should control their own personal boundaries by presenting information that depicts them as being “normal,” well adapted to their disability, and able to fulfill the job requirements.

Sixth, suggestions for effective interviewing strategies are based on the severity or visibility of the disability or on the context of the interaction event. Very little of this advice has been empirically tested. The inconsistent advice on self-disclosure as a way to reduce uncertainty may be due to the lack of specificity in regard to the intended manipulation of disclosure. For example, in an interpersonal setting, self-disclosure may be used to develop attractiveness or to squelch an inappropriate request for disability information (Braithwaite, 1991), whereas disclosure in an employment interview is almost always meant to create a positive impression (Stewart & Cash, 1997).

The employment interview is a “play” where both the applicant and interviewer have certain roles (Ralston & Kirkwood, 1995). There are scripts to follow, and these scripts allow for little deviation (Tullar, 1989), so the applicant who engages in risky behavior such as disclosing information about a disability may, in fact, not impress the interviewer. Baron (1989) contended that excessive and risky behavior negatively impacts the interviewer’s judgment of the candidate. Disclosure about a disability may also make the interviewer uncomfortable if the high intimacy message indicates that reciprocity is expected (Berger, 1997; Berger & Bradac, 1982; Berger & Calabrese, 1975) or because it emphasizes differences between the nondisabled interviewer and the disabled applicant. The discomfort created by disability-related information may actually contribute to an interviewer judging an applicant more severely, and may even trigger negative information recall about the candidate (Bolster & Springbett, 1961).

When candidates decide to discuss a visible or nonvisible disability, they need to be conscious of the level of intimacy that they may be forcing in the interaction. Formal relationships such as that between the interviewer and interviewee are not conducive to intimate disclosure. Braithwaite (1991) noted that the able-bodied interactant (in this case, the interviewer) will likely not know how to react to disclosure about a disability and will not be able to respond with the same level of intimacy. For example, in one interview where I decided to talk about my disability, the interviewer apparently felt it necessary to talk about his or her sore back, and this caused feelings of embarrassment or inequity for both of us. This interaction is certainly not part of the expected employment interview script. This experience may contribute to a perception that the interviewer is losing control of the interview and result in a subsequent loss of respect for the applicant (Smart, 1989).

Ralston and Kirkwood (1995) wrote that “although each party in an employment interview hopes to gain valid information about the other, the interviewing literature does not advocate authentic self-disclosure by either party” (p. 82). The obvious suggestion is that applicants only provide positive information (Downs, Smeyak, & Martin, 1980). Most important, applicants with disabilities should recognize that any disclosure about their disability will be perceived as negative (Herold, 1995). Krefting (personal communication, March 17, 1995) suggested that the interviewee should
never challenge or embarrass the interviewer and should even aim to comfort the decision maker. She contended that it is the obligation of applicants not to show off their credentials, but to pacify and put the interviewer at ease. By introducing the topic of disability, the applicant may be inadvertently raising concerns of compliance with the ADA and contributing to the interviewer’s anxiousness and discomfort. Even though it seems reasonable from an interpersonal uncertainty reduction perspective that disclosure may help, in all likelihood it will contribute to an unsuccessful employment interview. Advice based on interpersonal communication appears less appropriate when one considers the rules of the interview. For instance, Thompson (1982) wrote:

while disclosing information about oneself in general creates positive reactions, disclosing information about one’s handicap creates even more favorable reactions for handicapped individuals. Talking about the disability may communicate that the bearer of the disability is comfortable with it, so others can be comfortable too, and can feel free to ask questions about it. (p. 199)

Just the opposite may be true in an employment interview. When we consider that interviewers are not to engage in “unnecessary” talk about the candidate’s disability, then we should conclude that disability disclosure may actually highlight violations of normative interview behavior, even though it seems reasonable to disclose information about disability. In the context of an employment interview the ADA rules are unclear and bring into question whether the interviewer should ask any questions about disability.

The most subtle reason that disability disclosure may be ineffectual is the confusion created by the ADA law. Ironically, a law aimed at protecting the rights of the disabled may inhibit the search for employment. It appears that disability talk is considered off limits in an interview, and may be seen as unnecessary in the “don’t tell, don’t ask” mode within which many employers operate. In fact, disability-related disclosure may signal to the interviewer that the disabled candidate is not only knowledgeable about the ADA but may be willing to exercise his or her rights.

Braithwaite and Labrecque (1994) observed that, because of the ADA’s intentional vagueness, those mandated to comply feel frustrated and may resent the same disabled community that the law is designed to empower (Shapiro, 1994). On the other hand, for many of us who are disabled, the vagueness of the ADA allows the chance to pursue previously unrecognized discrimination. For example, an interviewer might comment that their company could not offer a traveling sales position to a paraplegic applicant because the position requires a lot of driving, but could offer the same applicant a similar position as a telemarketer based at the home office. The ADA obviously does not address this situation directly. While the employer has attempted to offer a comparable position to accommodate the applicant, the applicant may choose to utilize the ADA to acquire the traveling sales position.

Braithwaite and Labrecque (1994) also argued that the ADA may provide the impetus for change. However, marginal improvements in employment, housing, and education suggest that the political movement is still in its embryonic state (LaPlante et al., 1997). Disability rights and advocacy groups send a clear message that empowerment is a grassroots movement that best gains strength through individual participation (Braithwaite & Labrecque, 1994; Golhus, personal communication, May 18, 1998).

**IMPROVING EMPLOYABILITY FOR PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES**

This chapter argues that it is the individual with a disability who must learn to effectively assert that he or she is employable based on competencies, and should not include reference to the disability in persuasive messages. Persons with visible and nonvisible disabilities should never disclose their disability until after the job offer has been secured. At that time, requests for reasonable accommodations should be presented. To ask for accommodations or to question a company policy before the job offer is made will likely put your candidacy at risk.

Arguably, an employer may be surprised or even angry that you did not disclose about a disability before being hired. At this point, however, the conversation can be considered an interpersonal communication event. In this context, disclosure is acceptable and could result in an open and honest relationship between co-workers. It may be beneficial to explain the ADA at this point and note that you did not want to cause uneasiness or jeopardize your chances in the interview.

This chapter advances five main points. First, recognize that the interview, no matter how casual, is not an interpersonal communication experience, and so advice stemming from that context does not necessarily apply. Second, it is important to recognize that an employment interview is mostly about keeping the interviewer comfortable. Third, knowing that your disability will likely contribute to the interviewer’s discomfort, it is
important to realize that you may be violating expected interviewing behavior. Fourth, recognize that disability disclosure is the ADA taboo. As an applicant, you have the power to reduce disability-related anxiously by engaging in expected interviewing behavior. Fifth, and most important, make certain to align yourself with the organization for which you are applying by arguing that your competencies and talents are what make you a good fit for the particular organization. It seems that it is best to save the talk about awkward handshakes for interpersonal situations after having secured your job.

Future research in this area is needed and strongly encouraged. The lack of generalizability of communication research from the interpersonal context to the interviewing context underlines the need for future research to look at varying types of disabilities in different contexts. A careful look at the unemployment figures shows that employment opportunities for persons with nonvisible and less salient disabilities are improving ever so slightly, while the outlook for persons with severe disabilities continues to be very bleak. I challenge others to contribute to research that will provide answers to the employment challenges being faced by persons with disabilities.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Based on Herold’s arguments that URT’s strategy of self-disclosure as a way to manage stigma is less than effective, what communication strategies would you suggest an applicant with a disability employ?

2. After the job has been offered, what interpersonal and organizational benefits are there for a nonvisibly disabled employee to disclose information about a disability? What are the interpersonal and organizational consequences?

3. Persons with disabilities have an extraordinary unemployment rate. Not surprisingly, those with the most severe and those with developmental disabilities experience the highest rates of unemployment. There has been almost no work in the communication field that examines the phenomena of developmental disabilities. Why? Can macro and micro theories and concepts of communication be generalized to this population?

4. A recent observation advanced by several prodisability constituencies is that persons with disabilities have much improved employment opportunities because of computers. As a matter of fact, some suggest that the disabled applicant take advantage of computers and sell themselves as essentially “at home” employees. In one sense it is argued that computers have made the playing field even because the disabled employee will not have to worry about commuting and other accessibility issues. On the other hand, while organizations get a great employee and do not have to worry about expensive accommodations, are they not essentially contributing to segregation of disabled employees? What are the concerns on both sides of the issue? What ethical or moral questions should organizations consider?

5. The ADA law is very ambiguous. How do applicants with disabilities and employers benefit or suffer due to this ambiguity?

REFERENCES


