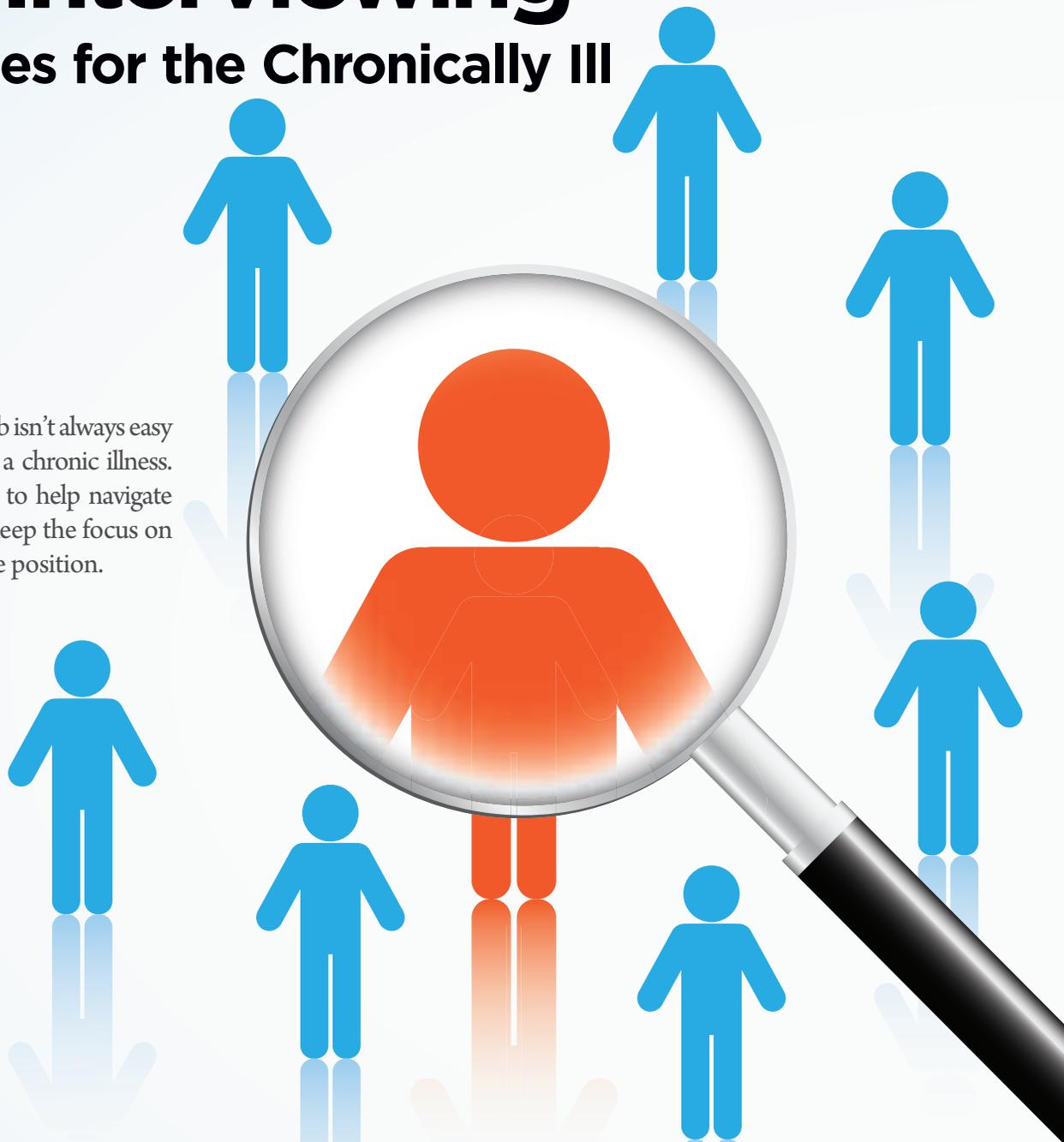


Job Interviewing

Strategies for the Chronically Ill

Interviewing for a job isn't always easy for candidates with a chronic illness. Here are some tips to help navigate the interview and keep the focus on what to bring to the position.



By Dana Martin

RECENTLY, FAST COMPANY asked Art Markman, professor of psychology and marketing at the University of Texas at Austin, if people with an invisible disability should disclose their illness before being hired for a job. His advice is that candidates should showcase their work and social skills and hold off on sharing information about their disability until after a job offer is made. “Anti-discrimination laws exist because there is a human tendency to discriminate in a number of ways. We often

react negatively to people who are different from us and to things we don't understand, often unconsciously,” he says. “Chronic illnesses can have both of these characteristics for potential employers, even those well-trained in what the law protects.”

But not everyone who has an invisible chronic illness chooses to withhold that information. In addition, chronic illness can take many forms, including both visible and invisible components. Those with rare diseases and autoimmune conditions treated

with immune globulin therapy illustrate this fact. These conditions are diverse — and growing more diverse all the time. Therefore, job interviewing strategies won't necessarily be the same from person to person. Instead, they will depend on each person's situation and comfort level. Other factors also need to be taken into consideration such as where candidates are interviewing and how open those companies are to recruiting and hiring people with chronic illnesses.

Following are nine tips that candidates can use to determine how to approach their own job search.

1. Know one's rights under the current disability legislation.

Susan Herrin, director of employment services at The Whole Person, a nonprofit organization offering a range of community-based services for people with disabilities, says the first thing candidates need to empower themselves is an understanding of what constitutes a disability. She points out that the Americans with Disabilities Act Amendments Act (ADAAA) of 2008 changed the landscape in this regard. "Under the ADA, disability was stated as interfering with daily activities of life, whereas under the ADAAA, the definition was broadened to include perceptions of others as being a person with a disability, as well as how the disability affects everyday life, so it's really expanded on that definition quite a bit," Herrin says. Also, having a history of a disability, even one that has been treated and no longer affects a person to the same degree every day, also constitutes a disability.

If candidates do have a condition that meets the requirements for a disability, Herrin says the next step is to arm themselves with knowledge. They should learn their rights under the ADA, the ADAAA and the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC). They should go into interviews knowing what kinds of questions can and can't be asked in relation to their condition. And, they should be aware that they don't have to divulge anything about their condition if they don't feel comfortable doing so.

2. Learn how to approach potential employers about illness.

Herrin points out that attitude is critical when finessing the interview process. Many employers will have good intentions but won't necessarily know how to accommodate those with visible or invisible disabilities. Rather than going into the situation feeling defensive or putting the onus entirely on the employer, candidates can help employers by having a good sense of what they need as an accommodation, both for the interview process itself and during employment. This might mean knowing not only what accommodation is needed, but also how the organization can put that support in place. Herrin says this might include educating the employer about resources available to them such as vocational rehabilitation services and tax credits designed to help companies support their employees with disabilities.

3. Reframe illness as an asset. Too often, as Markman mentions, candidates believe their disability will make them a victim of unconscious discrimination. But, that's not necessarily the case. There are companies that actively pursue employees with disabilities, and there are even others that want to attract those candidates but aren't quite sure how to go about doing so. Herrin advises candidates to find those employers by looking for signs that they want to be inclusive. For instance, these companies' websites and marketing materials can be reviewed for language and images that speak to inclusion. Many of these companies have an EEOC or diversity specialist in their human resources departments. And, many of them take part in community job fairs that are inclusive of people who have disabilities. Organizations that serve people with disabilities can identify these organizations.

4. Integrate illness into one's professional marketing campaign.

Markman's observation that candidates should focus on their work and social skills during the interview is accurate. This can be done whether or not a disability is divulged. The key is for candidates to know how to market themselves, and that can include marketing their illness. One way to do that is by focusing on soft skills, says Herrin. This includes the ability to get along with co-workers and customers. It can also mean being an ambassador for the employer as a person with the empathy needed to interact well with the diverse customer base the employer serves.

5. Address health needs head on. If candidates know at the outset that they will need to take a day off once a month for IG therapy, for example, Herrin says it's best to be up front during the interview. "I would just be honest about it because it's going to come up," she says. Approaches include asking if there is any flexibility in the schedule or the potential to have coverage from another employee. Candidates don't have to say why they need



Preparing for Your Job Interview



- Know your rights
- Approach employers with a good attitude
- Make your illness an asset
- Know how to market yourself
- Be up front about your health needs
- Fill gaps in your resumé
- Use vocational rehab resources
- Consider part-time work
- Expect the unexpected

the time off. Herrin points out that people need time off regularly during work hours for all sorts of reasons that have nothing to do with a disability. In an inclusive environment (one that accommodates all its employees — not just those with disabilities), she says, there will usually be a way to work out any scheduling issues.

6. Fill gaps in employment. When approaching an interview, a gap should never be left on a resumé. That time should be filled with something relevant. This might include volunteer work or some other form of community service. It could also mean stating that a personal situation created a need to be at home. Herrin has seen candidates be even more frank, stating: “I had an illness. I’m fully recovered now and ready to go to work.” This type of statement can be included in a cover letter or on a resumé. Leaving a gap leaves the recruiter wondering, which isn’t going to put candidates in a strong starting position.

7. Take advantage of vocational rehabilitation. Sometimes a chronic illness, especially one acquired in adulthood, can necessitate a career change because of new physical limitations, to preserve health or for other reasons. In this case, making use of vocational rehabilitation resources is the best route to take. “They can provide on-the-job training. They can help with college. They can help with job support, artificial limbs, transportation reimbursements, those kinds of things,” says Herrin. Vocational

rehabilitation also works with other community organizations such as those that assist with job placement for people with disabilities to make sure people being served have the suite of services needed to not only enter the workforce but also to achieve success over the long term.

8. Consider part-time work. Sometimes people with chronic illness feel they can’t work because they can’t work full time. But, part-time work can be beneficial both for companies and people with chronic illness. Herrin urges people to consider part-time options, especially if they are entering the workplace for the first time or after an absence due to their condition.

9. Learn how to handle unexpected interview obstacles. Despite the best preparation, issues can still arise during the interview process. For example, the testing process might include elements that are hampered because of a disability. In cases like these,

Herrin says candidates can explain that they didn’t realize a particular aspect of the interview process would come up, and they can ask for an accommodation at that time. Candidates can also follow up after the interview with the hiring supervisor and someone from the employer’s human resources team to address the issues that created a potential barrier to employment.

Just as there is no single chronic illness, there is no single way for candidates with a chronic illness to approach interviewing. Complicated, multifaceted illnesses require deep consideration with regard to how to approach job interviews. While the decision to reveal or withhold health information during the interview is personal, all candidates with chronic illness should enter the job search with an understanding of their rights and the tools needed to best negotiate each interview. This information, coupled with a positive attitude and a desire to support the employer’s efforts at supporting candidates, will lead to the most successful outcomes for everyone involved. ■

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Sources

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