

4 fundamental questions answered about disability and accommodations at work

If you live with a disability, you're not alone. Globally, 1.3 billion people (or 1 in 6) have a disability—a physical or mental condition that limits a major life function, such as walking, seeing, hearing, thinking, or communicating. In the US, about 61 million adults (or 1 in 4) have one.



Even though many people have disabilities, managers often don't initiate discussions about disability or accommodations for fear of saying the wrong thing. But even if you or your boss hasn't talked about these issues in the past, you can speak up and advocate for what you need to excel at your job.

Note: These answers can help you understand how disclosing a disability and asking for an accommodation typically work—but each person will navigate the process differently, based on their disability, how inclusive their organization is, and how open their manager is to the conversation.

1. When should I consider sharing that I have a disability?

Understandably, it may feel risky to tell others that you have a disability. But it's also potentially risky *not* to share in some situations, since your colleagues might misjudge you or you might struggle if you're not getting the right help to do your best work. Yes, it's possible your co-workers could treat you differently if you disclose, but most people strive to treat those with disabilities equally and with respect.

In the US, you are never legally obligated to disclose a disability. But it might make sense to disclose if:

- **There's a good chance your disability could lead to misunderstandings.** For example, you have hearing loss but colleagues think you're ignoring them. Or you have attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) and you don't want others to judge you as distracted or disengaged. In cases like these, consider opening up about your condition to your boss or team to give people context about how to work better with you (e.g., *"Just to let you know, I have ADHD. So, thanks for being patient if it takes me a little longer to organize my thoughts in meetings."*) Important reminder: If you wait to disclose until you get a write-up or poor performance review, your organization does not have to withdraw or amend that write-up or review.
- **You need an accommodation to contribute on the same level as colleagues without disabilities.** Requesting an accommodation, such as screen-reader software, a wheelchair-accessible restroom stall, or flexibility in your schedule for medical appointments, isn't asking for a handout—it's what you need to participate fully. Telling your organization what you're experiencing is the first step toward getting an accommodation; If they don't know about a disability, in most cases, they aren't bound to accommodate it.

2. If I need an accommodation, whom should I ask and how?

Ask your organization's HR team about getting an accommodation, since they understand the laws and processes involved and will ultimately sign off on your request. Or you can start by approaching your manager if you feel more comfortable with them and/or want to keep them informed about what you need.

You can request an accommodation any time, from your first interview to years after you start your job. Typically, you can do it in person or in writing. Your organization might also have a request form for you to fill out.

To help calm your nerves, spend a few minutes thinking through what to say in advance. Stick to the facts of the situation and highlight the areas of your job where having an accommodation would help. If possible, share an idea or two for an accommodation (including things you've tried in the past), though it's OK if you don't know what would work best. For example, you might say:

"I've been diagnosed with a condition that's affecting my ability to do X and Y tasks. I've talked with my doctor about some things that might help me. I'd like to start the process for getting an accommodation."

You don't have to go into detail about your disability or even name it specifically. Your organization *is* allowed to ask for medical documentation, such as a doctor's note or test results, to back up your accommodation request. But they can't legally use that information (or the fact that you have a disability) to discriminate or retaliate against you.

3. What accommodations can I ask for—and what does my organization have to provide?

There are as many accommodations as there are people who need them. Accommodations could be technological (like noise-canceling headphones), interpretive (like sign language interpretation), adaptive (like an adjustable-height desk), environmental (like a quiet place to decompress if you have anxiety), or something else. It may also be possible to adjust your tasks or hours, as long as you can still do your core job duties. The nonprofit Job Accommodation Network has a [searchable database of accommodation ideas](#) that you can explore and discuss with your manager and HR.

Most organizations are legally required to offer “reasonable accommodations”—though they don’t have to give you exactly what you ask for. In the US, the [Americans with Disabilities Act](#) says that most employers must accommodate people who have a known disability, unless it would cause “undue hardship.” So, determining an accommodation is a two-way conversation, based on what you need and what’s feasible for your organization.

HR will decide whether to grant your request. An organization might deny a request for an accommodation if it would put an undue strain on their budget or operations—or if it would mean changing an essential part of your job (for example, if you’re a call center representative, an accommodation to never take incoming calls would likely not be considered reasonable). If your company refuses accommodations you believe are reasonable—or if they’re not willing to discuss accommodations in the first place—you might approach your medical provider, a local vocational rehabilitation counselor, or an [advocacy law organization that specializes in disability](#) for support.

4. What can I do if I experience resentment or discrimination because of my disability?

Your co-workers might never notice that you have a disability or an accommodation unless you point it out. And even if they are aware, most will be supportive—generally, people want those they work with to do their jobs well.

But rarely, you may run into jealousy because you have an accommodation someone else sees as special treatment (for example, you hear, “It must be nice to leave early on Tuesdays” or “I wish I had a fancy chair like yours”). If you feel comfortable, you could say to someone who voices resentment, *“If you’d like to see if you can get a similar accommodation, here’s how I did it. Maybe the organization can help you, too.”*

You can also tell your manager or HR so they can remind everyone that your organization accommodates people with disabilities—and that employees need to treat one another respectfully.

If you're the target of hostile or discriminatory behavior, such as insults, harassment, or being passed up for important work because of your disability, talk to HR right away. If you don't have a strong relationship with HR, if they can't resolve the issue, or if you just want more support, reach out to an [advocacy law organization that specializes in disability](#) to ask for their opinion. They may be able to give you guidance or help you take legal action if needed.

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