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# Disability Disclosure During Recruitment - The Elephant In The Room



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The disability community is full of talented individuals, but they are up against many barriers during the job recruitment process. This means that they are systemically disadvantaged when it comes to entering the world of work... and the issue is particularly complex for people with less-visible disabilities, such as Energy Limiting Conditions.

Generations of disabled people have been advocating for equality during recruitment for decades. Finally, the rest of the world is beginning to recognise the challenges faced, and consider potential solutions. We're living in a time when non-disabled employers and recruiters are realising just how much value disabled people can bring to their workplace, and the importance of improving disability representation within their organisation. Thankfully, attitudes are beginning to change.

However, a desire to improve disability inclusion isn't enough without meaningful action. That's why it's so important that employers and organisations are informed and educated on the topic of [inclusive recruitment](#) – especially the unique challenges faced by people with long-term conditions who have often been omitted from the broader conversation.

## What Are The Hidden Barriers To Recruitment?

Here at [Astriid](#), we know all too well that many outstanding individuals are unable to apply or feel discouraged from applying for the majority of mainstream roles, even those they are over-qualified for. Our recent research, soon to be published, has identified the following barriers, as well as many more...

- A lack of understanding from employers about long-term conditions.
- Reduced numbers of job ads that specifically advertise flexible working.
- Inflexible hours and/or a lack of part-time roles to apply for.

**Thankfully, these barriers are becoming more central in conversations about inclusion in the workplace. However, there's one key barrier that remains the Elephant In The Room... and that is when and how a candidate should disclose a disability to an employer.**

## Disability Disclosure – The Elephant In The Room

When is the right time during the recruitment process to disclose a disability? Will disclosure make me less likely to secure the role? Should I highlight it on my application form, or wait until I'm speaking directly with an interviewer? Perhaps I should try and conceal my condition and avoid the conversation altogether?

These are just some of the internal questions that many disabled people have contended with as they tried to enter the world of work. As well as the physical demands of applying for jobs and adjusting to new circumstances, we also spend a huge amount of cognitive energy trying to work out when it is the 'right' time to disclose our disabilities... and whether a universal 'right' time exists at all.

Experiences of disclosing a disability vary greatly from person to person, and from role to role. It's a subject that many disabled people have mixed opinions on, as was highlighted by [Astriid's 2021 Invisible Talent Pool Report](#).

Participants reported mixed experiences of disclosing their health condition during job applications and interviews. The most common response we found was that people sometimes disclose, and the timing deliberately varied too – **35% had experience of disclosing their disability on a job application form, and 34% chose to do so during the interview stage**. This indicates that the decision is made depending on the specific context – one participant who chose to disclose during interviews did so because they could better 'gauge the employer's attitude to chronic health conditions' when speaking face-to-face, and this helped to inform their approach from there.

When this data collection took place in 2021, it was encouraging to see that some people recalled positive experiences of disability disclosure. One participant was grateful to be asked "what [their diagnosis] means and how it affects me and my work life", because they felt the employer was trying to get a true picture of their situation and how they could support them. Another respondent felt "able to discuss my illness and working requirements completely openly without any judgement".

However, others reported more negative experiences that highlight how much needs to improve for recruitment to truly become a level playing field. These ranged from awkward situations in professional areas ("Initially it seems they see me as intelligent, competent and professional, but once my disability is disclosed, they often begin talking to me as if I'm stupid or incapable") to unacceptable personal remarks and unsolicited advice ("... an employer told me to try weight watchers as she had previously had chronic fatigue syndrome"). One interviewee, after enquiring about how flexible the hours were, was "told by a recruiter to be careful not to come across like I only care about the time off and benefits". Hearing these examples, it's unsurprising that so many people fear disclosing their disability in a professional environment.





## Fear Of Discrimination

Many people feel uncomfortable disclosing during recruitment due to fear of discrimination, or that it would affect their chances of securing the role. This led to some respondents categorically choosing not to disclose - as one respondent reports, “choosing to do this has prevented me from getting jobs I was more than qualified for” in the past.

**However, long-term illness and Energy Limiting Conditions are life-altering.**

No matter how much we might want to, it’s very difficult to conceal the impact they have on our lives – including our work and career trajectory. Many survey participants felt they had no choice but to disclose due to the nature or severity of their long-term condition. One respondent shared that **“it’s a difficult balance as many people feel they have been discriminated against when they disclose [but] I think I’m so ill now that I would need to disclose in order to get the help I need”**. Others agreed, feeling that **“the level of adjustments I need mean that it’s worth disclosing ASAP because if it’s not going to be accessible for me, I think I’d rather know as soon as possible.”**

Astriid’s team of Candidate Coordinators, who help connect talented people with long-term conditions with inclusive roles, agree that the situation is complex:



***“I would say that most candidates I speak with would prefer to be able to disclose and have an up-front conversation about their needs and reasonable adjustments.”***

***Some don’t want to talk about it, and just want to be treated ‘normally’ like everyone else and would be quite upset if their health was brought up at interview – but for the majority, I think they would prefer to be able to disclose and talk about it openly. All fear discrimination because of it, either way.”***





## How Could This Barrier Be Removed?

Interestingly, candidates seeking work through Astriid have frequently told our Candidate Co-ordinators that their motivation for signing up with a specialist organisation like ours, with subject expertise on long-term conditions in work, is to 'get that elephant out of the room': **"They feel relief at knowing the employer already knows they have an illness... so they don't have to address that issue themselves, and can openly mention it."**

**This reflects our further survey findings on participants' perceptions of employers – a staggering 89% of respondents felt their employer could be better informed about disability, especially the specific challenges of long-term illness.**

Time and time again, we've seen that disabled talent gravitates towards job roles and organisations who are welcoming and proactive about inclusive recruitment. More recent research by Astriid has highlighted that those with long-term conditions specifically seek out flexible working opportunities, as well as job ads that clearly state that disabled people are encouraged to apply and will be suitably accommodated in their organisation.

This tells us that one clear solution to tackling this elephant in the room, is to **work with employers directly**. The more organisations who recognise the importance of creating a safe and supportive environment and having confident conversations about disability, the more likely it is that people will feel able to disclose their condition.

Not only that, but ensuring employers and recruiters are more informed in this area removes some of the onus on disabled people themselves. Having to seek out inclusive job advertisements, research the organisation and use cognitive and emotional energy figuring out when to disclose can all take a toll on those with long-term conditions... before the recruitment process has even got underway!



## But What About The Equality Act?

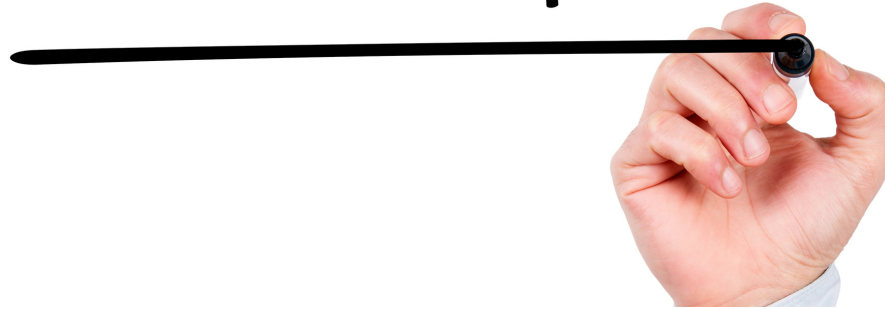
There's another important angle to discuss here – recruiters have their own fears about disability disclosure. **The 2010 Equality Act specifically states that 'employers cannot ask job applicants about their health or disability until they have been offered a job'**, unless there are specific circumstances where information about a person's disability is necessary for the application process or a requirement of the job.

**Many recruiters are trained to abide by the Equality Act. This means that even if a candidate appears to want to disclose or tries to disclose their disability, there may well be fear on the other side of the table too, as employers fear risking a charge of discrimination against themselves simply by having the conversation.**

It's a complex issue, and in the past, official guidance hasn't done much to tackle or clarify how this information should be used in practice. However, [Acas has recently produced new guidelines](#) that provide clarity on how to use positive discrimination to recruit more disabled people. This means it is clearly stated that in some circumstances, you can use protected characteristics to help a disadvantaged or an underrepresented group become part of your workforce. As well as acquiring disabled talent and the right person for the role, this can also help your organisation to become more diverse and representative. Employers can specifically advertise for and recruit a disabled person for a role, without the risk of disability discrimination, and use 'positive action' to use a protected characteristic (such as disability) as a reason for hiring one person over another.

This can be a useful approach for employers who want increase representation of disabled people in their workforce and welcome more skilled individuals to their team. The challenge now is ensuring employers understand how and why they should be mindful of the challenges of disability disclosure, and the importance of being informed and able to have confident conversations. In doing so, we can greatly reduce the hidden barriers of recruitment that so many people with long-term conditions feel oppressed by.

# We are here to Help



Do you want to welcome talented disabled people into your workforce, and find skilled individuals for your roles? If so, the first step is to understand not only the challenges of disability disclosure, but the many other hidden barriers to recruitment that people with long-term conditions face.

Here at Astriid, we are here to help. Our organisation is led by disabled experts by experience in long-term conditions at work, and [we help forward-thinking employers to become more disability inclusive](#). Let our [Astriid Consulting](#) team partner with you to transform the challenge of long-term conditions into an opportunity for your organisation to flourish.

Registration is now open for our bespoke courses, including our ground-breaking [Inclusive Recruitment Training](#). During this training, you will...

- Be introduced to the business case for employing people with LTCs and their value in the workplace.
- Learn all about the barriers faced by candidates with invisible disabilities during recruitment, as well as those returning to work after ill-health career breaks.
- Position your organisation as an employer of choice for talented people with long term conditions and disabilities.
- Become skilled in responding appropriately to disclosures of health and disability during recruitment, so you can foster trust and confidence in candidates alongside complying with anti-discrimination law.
- Ensure your platforms and processes are accessible and inclusive.
- Develop creative solutions that genuinely level the playing field for people with long-term conditions and disabilities... and plenty more!

If you'd like to find out more, [sign up for our free newsletter](#) and [get in touch via Astriid Consulting](#). We look forward to hearing from you!