

Although most students discover that getting a placement or internship isn't as simple as it first seems, there are a particular series of challenges for those 7.3% of undergraduate students who have a disability. Although the Disability Discrimination Act (DDA) offers some protection, there are those who feel that disabled students are still not on a level-playing field when it comes to jobs – a fact which gives rise to the thorny issue of whether a student should disclose their disability or not.

The Pros and Cons of Disclosure

For most students with disabilities when they apply for a placement or internship it can often be the first time that they've had to consider how they want to approach the subject of disclosure. This is particularly true for the 2,245 undergraduate students who have "hidden" disabilities, according to the Higher Education Statistics Agency.

What About Placements Or Internships For Students With Disabilities?

"Many students might decide not to say anything at all about their disability or health condition for fear of being discriminated against, or being treated differently to their peers," says Sarah Denness from **EmployAbility** (www.eability.org), a not-for-profit organisation dedicated to assisting people with all disabilities into employment. Clearly, all students are not completely comforted by the protection given by the DDA. One complicating factor though is that without disclosing their situation, students with disabilities may wrongly get excluded by recruitment filters.

"It's a really competitive market for anybody at the moment," says Denness. *"It can be extra difficult for a student with a disability who might have taken a different route through education, or perhaps their grades have suffered because of the impact of their disability, if they spent time recovering or having treatment. Sometimes employers filter people out at the initial application stage without understanding that there might be a good reason why an individual has not performed to the best of their abilities. This is a big barrier for disabled students."*



Disabled graduate Ibrahim Bari said that after his enjoyable experiences on an internship with Merrill Lynch his advice is to be open:

"Obviously, it's different for different students and sometimes it depends on their disability, but I think that if you disclose your disability to a company and they're not willing to take you forward then that company is not worth working with anyway. When you disclose, you've met the company half-way. My opinion is that if you give them the information well in advance, then it's up to them what they do with that. If they respond positively then it's good and it allows both parties the chance to shine."

How can a company help if you disclose?

Aside from the spectre of discrimination, many employers are eager for students to disclose disabilities because it means that they can make suitable adjustments to the recruitment process and ensure they are living by their vow of equal opportunities, a promise which many recruiters will have enshrined in company policy (these policies will often be hosted on the company's website). Once the employer understands the situation with a student they can offer a range of assistance such as specially-adapted tests, a longer period of time for assessment or even just help getting to and from interviews. *students*

"Disclosure is a personal choice and it is each individual's decision to do so or not. However, an applicant must seriously think about whether they will be disadvantaged if they do not disclose. For example, if they have adjustment requirements throughout the recruitment process it is advisable to disclose and ensure the support is available. This is where organisations like EmployAbility can help by discussing the options and ensuring the process is fair for applicants with disabilities," says Denness.

Placement Opportunities For Students With Disabilities

Fortunately, there are some progressive employers who have schemes that specifically reach out to students from the disabled community and try and engage them in placements and internships. These include the BBC's award-winning Extend scheme which offers six months placements within the BBC (www.bbc.co.uk/jobs/extend). Interestingly, it is organisations with a rather stuffy image that seem to be taking a more proactive view.

"Generally, employers are very supportive when employing students with disabilities," says Denness. *"Many of our internship and placement schemes tend to be within large firms such as investment and retail banks, other financial institutions and law firms. These industries have been at the forefront of pushing disability higher up the diversity agenda; whereas for other industries it has perhaps not been such a key point on their diversity agenda."*

Bari says he thinks he's spotted a group of employers who could do better: *"From my personal experience it's the smaller companies where you find slightly different attitudes. It's more about the lack of understanding about the time, effort and funding towards any adjustments where the confusion arises, it seems smaller companies still think they would have to fund all the adjustments, which isn't the case."*

What If You Feel You've Been Discriminated Against?

Interestingly, the laws concerning discrimination are valid for those applying for full-time positions as for placements and internships. So don't feel that because you are only applying for a temporary post, that you are left without help. The Department for Education and Skills has designed a Guide for both Students and Employers which gives details of your rights and what help employers are entitled to if they need to make adjustments to their workplace www.lifelonglearning.co.uk/placements. Students can also approach Skill, the National Bureau for Students with Disabilities, for help and advice, www.skill.org.uk and don't forget that your university careers service who will be able to offer advice as well.

For more expert guides like this, visit www.RateMyPlacement.co.uk.

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