

Helping Young Adults with LD Transition to Employment

by Paul Gerber, Ph.D.



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Expert Answers

Helping Young Adults with LD Transition to Employment

Transition to Employment for Young People with LD

The process of transition from school to employment begins much earlier than the waning days of high school. Indeed, with all that needs to be considered and put into action, transition planning should start no later than the first days of high school. Since the vast majority of students with learning disabilities (LD) go straight from school to work (estimates hover around 85 percent), the middle school and high school years become critical to the transition process.

Beyond Academics

There is no doubt that students with learning disabilities should master as many academic skills as possible (reading, writing, computing, and math) and learn about the myriad issues related to careers and the workplace. It is also during high school that other important competencies such as pre-vocational skills — time management, taking instructions from supervisors, and others — must be fully addressed, in order for the young person to be ready to navigate in the world beyond school, particularly in employment settings.

When an individual with learning disabilities makes the most of the transition process, successful job entry is the probable outcome. However, this initial stage of employment can only be successfully accomplished if the whole transition process is viewed as an interactive one among the young adult making the transition, his co-workers, and the employer.

Transition to employment must also be a process in which the responsibility for success chiefly falls on the young person with LD himself. So, he needs to have a clear notion at all times of what to do, in order to be in control of the ever-changing circumstances of his world. Just as important, he needs to have a sense of how to adapt to the variety of work environments and diversity of tasks that present themselves in competitive employment. If these two competencies can be learned and used effectively, then there is a good likelihood that a young person will make a successful transition to employment.

“Reframing” One’s Disability

Without question, one of the mandatory elements of the transition process is for the young adult to come to grips with the learning disability itself — the learning disabilities literature call this “reframing.” Reframing involves a number of phases. First, the person with LD must have a clear understanding that he actually has a learning disability. That means that any issues of denial must be dealt with — for example, the belief that LD is “just a problem when I’m at school.” Moreover, this acceptance infers that learning disabilities are real and will persist in the years past schooling, although they might take different forms in various adult contexts — including employment.

Second, in order to adjust to the workplace, a person with learning disabilities must develop a firm understanding of his profile of strengths, weaknesses, and challenges, beyond the basic psychological processes such as memory, processing, and organization. Moreover, the young person needs to

“Adults with learning disabilities say over and over again in interviews that once they accepted their learning disability and its challenges, they were ‘freed up’ to take on the many demands of the workplace.”

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know how to emphasize and celebrate his strengths, and deal with weaknesses using compensatory strategies, and “tried and true” accommodations such as calculators, spell checkers, and the like. With a self-inventory of strengths and weaknesses, the young person with LD should have the wherewithal to figure out how his learning disability will affect performance of job tasks and social interactions in the work environment. Most important, a young person must constantly work on a full understanding of his learning disability, as each task, interaction, and workday yields new information. **In effect, understanding one’s disability is an ongoing, ever-changing process.**

Third, in order to deal effectively with his disability beyond the school years, a young person needs to have a healthy degree of acceptance of having an LD. He must accept it as a part of everyday life, which can emerge at any time, and which has to be dealt with in an efficient manner — for example, an inability to remember details, or difficulty with setting task priorities. Therefore, in order to compete, accomplish tasks, and succeed in employment and life, a young adult must accentuate his strengths and bypass or accommodate his weaknesses. Adults with learning disabilities say over and over again in interviews that once they accepted their learning disability and its challenges, they were “freed up” to take on the many demands of the workplace.

“ A transition program that does not focus on social skills will put a person with LD at risk for failure in employment.”

Adaptation in Employment Settings

The other challenge of successful transition is being adaptive to employment settings. It is important for a person with LD to be vigilant about orchestrating an environment where he can succeed — by either adapting himself to the work situation, making the work situation adaptive to him, or both. **Individuals with LD need to be able to think creatively in order to alter work situations so they can perform more effectively and efficiently.** For example, an alteration might be finding a quiet place to work, using computer software to help manage a task, or asking a colleague for assistance.

With self-knowledge about his learning disability, and a creative approach to adapting to the workplace, the young person can address the challenge of finding the “best fit” between himself and the work. “Best fit” means working in a job role that:

- One is interested in;
- Allows use of one’s strengths (with possibilities for reasonable accommodations for task challenges);
- Provides a supportive supervisor and co-workers; and
- Offers a work climate that is truly accepting of diversity.

Together, the ingredients listed above comprise a learning disabilities-friendly employment setting. In this kind of work environment, a person with LD can feel comfortable, be effective, and advance.

Social Skills

Social skills are another important underpinning for success in any employment setting. A young person with LD must possess a social skills repertoire that includes conversing, reciprocating, supporting others, and taking responsibility, to name just a few. Without question these social skills should be well honed in competitive employment, which means they must be learned during the transition preparation years in high school, or earlier. A transition program that does not focus on social skills will put a person with LD at risk for failure in employment.

Transition to Employment for Young People with LD

Ultimately, successful transition from school to employment depends on establishing a strong work ethic. This includes basic behaviors like getting to work on time and showing enthusiasm for work, as well as more advanced behaviors such as taking initiative at work and being a good team member. Young adults should learn these routines before leaving school, and should solidly implement them in employment settings, beginning on the first day of work. Practicing such routines means handing in homework on a timely basis, managing one's time, taking responsibility for one's own performance, asking for and using another person's help or advice, and many others.

Lessons from Adults with LD

The message from individuals with learning disabilities who are successful in the workplace is simple: **Because you are learning disabled you must be more conscientious in your work — both to compensate for your disability, and to counter any negative ideas co-workers may have about LD.** That attitude will have a great effect on your work. The words of persons with learning disabilities who have “made it” in employment are pragmatic and instructive. Consider their experience and wisdom when talking with a teenager about preparing himself for the workplace.

“Work as hard as you can so people can see you are really trying.”

“Be to work early and work late if you have to.”

“Anticipate, if you can, so you can be ready for them.”

“Be prepared; that is when you are the most self-confident.”

“Don't take no for an answer; go after it and accomplish it.”

“Reflect on each day's work at 4 p.m. and make a list of the next day's tasks and problems.”

“Use compensation as an ‘anchor’.”

“Take responsibility for yourself.” “You must learn to work harder when you have to.”

“Learn as much as you can about your strengths and weaknesses in the work setting.”

“See failures as setbacks, but use setbacks as goals to conquer.”

“Recognize when someone is ‘extending a hand.’ Be willing to grab it but not abuse it.”

The process of transition to employment is as individual as the young person with LD himself. **There is no one profile that captures the complexity of how a young person with learning disabilities can successfully adapt to an employment setting.** Without question, however, successful transition to employment requires three key elements: A transition program in middle school and high school that is linked to the realities of the workplace; a young person's ability to ‘reframe’ his learning disability; and a young person's willingness to be adaptive and flexible in employment settings. Parents should closely monitor the school's transition program. With parent support, the young person himself should take major responsibility for reframing his disability and learning how to be flexible and adaptable in the work setting.

Expert Answers



Helping Young Adults with LD Transition to Employment

Helping Teens Prepare for Typical Employer Questions

Once a young person with learning disabilities (LD) leaves school and enters the world of employment, she faces a new set of challenges. No longer can the young person count on the relative comfort of school settings where LD is understood and the necessary services planned for. Beyond the friendly confines of elementary and secondary school is a world in which the term “learning disabilities” may be familiar, but is not necessarily well understood.

Challenges typically begin on a young person’s first day on the job, but they can even come into play in the process of seeking employment. This is true across the country, despite the fact that progressive, equal opportunity legislation, namely the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), has been in effect since 1992.

Because employers often don’t understand LD and relevant laws, an individual with LD must understand and be able to articulate a number of issues related to her concept of “self.” Such awareness is consistent with the expectations of adulthood, when one is supposed to become more independent and autonomous in thoughts and actions. To explain effectively the impact of her disability in an employment setting, a young person must understand and act on these three main competencies that relate to self: self-knowledge, self-disclosure, and self-advocacy.

Concepts of Self

Self-knowledge is important because a person with LD needs to have a solid understanding of her profile as a learner and as an employee. That understanding should include the type of LD she has, and how it manifests itself in a variety of tasks. She must understand her strengths and weaknesses, as well as any accommodations necessary in order for her to perform job-related tasks efficiently and effectively. Examples of workplace accommodations are using a calculator or spell checker to perform job tasks, or finding a quiet area to work.

Self-disclosure of her LD is a process that allows a young employee to broach the subject of her disability with a prospective employer, or with a current supervisor or co-worker, and explain how it affects her functioning on the job. **How positively she conveys her ideas about challenges helps frame how positively others think of them in both professional and personal interactions.** When a young adult discloses her LD, it can be viewed by the employer as taking a pro-active stance regarding her disability, which can instill confidence.

Self-advocacy is an ongoing process in which the person with LD makes a positive, matter-of-fact statement of her specific needs for accommodations related to her LD, in order to effectively meet a job responsibility. To make those accommodations clear to a prospective employer, a young person might describe: how co-workers or technology can support job productivity; how job tasks can be restructured so that they can be performed efficiently; or how alternate approaches to tasks can keep the disability from interfering with efficiency.

When a person with a LD has a firm understanding of these competencies related to “self,” and how they apply to her and her LD, the questions listed below should be easier to respond to in an effective and efficient manner.

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Disclosing One's Learning Disability

It should be noted that **the choice to disclose one's LD in a job setting is a very personal one**. Some individuals decide not to disclose their LD because of the stigma they experienced during their school years, as well as the uncertainties of discussing LD from a personal perspective. Other young people with LD want to disclose their disability because they want to take advantage of the rights and concomitant opportunities afforded them under the ADA. No matter what choice a young adult makes, the decision is mediated by the issues of self listed above.

Without question, if a young person is to disclose her LD in an employment setting, she should be able to discuss fully the kinds of questions below, which employers typically ask. The following ten questions have been derived from years of research and scores of interviews with employers and adults with LD in employment settings. They represent the most basic ideas and concerns of employers. In addition, for each question, commentary is provided to assist a young person to frame her thinking, based on her specific LD.

Ten Typical Questions Employers Ask Applicants with Learning Problems

1. "What exactly is your disability?"

This basic question gets to the heart of the matter. The invisibility of LD is very perplexing for most people, including employers. In essence, if you cannot see it, how can you understand it? It can seem very abstract. The most easily understood disabilities are ones that are sensory or physical in nature. It is easier to comprehend the challenges of blindness or deafness, as well as impairments that require use of a wheelchair or crutches. Moreover, accommodations for those disabilities are easier to grasp, as well. So, it is important to be specific about one's own LD whether it is dyslexia, auditory processing, attention deficit, memory deficit, or another disorder.

2. "What does the term 'learning disabilities' mean?"

"Learning disabilities" (LD) is an umbrella term encompassing many issues. The term has been part of the national conversation for a good number of years, but unfortunately it's still not well understood by the general public. The key for the young person is to know exactly what her learning disability is and be able to describe clearly to an employer how it manifests itself, and which compensations or accommodations she uses to "work around" it.

3. "Aren't learning disabilities the same as mental retardation?"

A 2000 Roper-Starch poll revealed that the majority of people in this country thought learning disabilities were the same as mental retardation. But nothing could be further from the truth. Each is a cognitive disability, but the prospects for adjustment to the demands of daily life are markedly different between the two conditions. By definition, a person with LD has average to above-average intelligence. A person with mental retardation, on the other hand, has below-average intelligence and faces significant challenges in adapting her behavior to meet the demands of daily life. Consequently, the vast majority of persons with LD will engage in competitive employment, while those with mental retardation will not.

“A 2000 Roper-Starch poll revealed that the majority of people in this country thought learning disabilities were the same as mental retardation.”

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4. "What kinds of accommodations do you need when you work?"

Many employers are eager to be good corporate citizens, so they are willing to provide reasonable accommodations for persons with LD. However, they are not LD specialists and they must rely on employees with LD themselves to know or figure out the accommodations they need in order to perform productively at work. Accommodations might include the use of assistive technology, or the kinds of accommodations that worked for learning and testing during the young person's school years.

5. "How can you be most effective and efficient in your work?"

Since all employers have an eye on productivity, they are most interested in facilitating workplace conditions that promote effectiveness and efficiency. **It is the responsibility of the young person with LD to know what she does best, and under what conditions she does her best work.** In addition, she needs to be fully aware of challenges to productivity caused by her learning disability so she can arrange for job accommodations. Employers seem open to new ways to accomplish tasks, but they rightfully monitor how tasks are accomplished in the workplace, in order to maintain smooth processes and procedures.

“In order to be prepared to take advantage of opportunities for job advancement, it is important for a young person to be aware of her interpersonal style, and how it can be used to develop an effective leadership style.”

6. "When we train you, can you tell the trainers how you learn best?"

Employee training is commonplace in competitive employment. Change is constant, and new ways of doing things are frequently introduced to employees. Whether it is new paperwork, more advanced computer applications, or innovative sales strategies, training to update skills is important. **An employee with LD is expected to participate in training and articulate her need for specific training accommodations if necessary.** This knowledge is usually an extension of a young person's understanding of how she learns best, which she probably figured out while in school. For example, she might let the employer know that she learns best by listening to training content, or by seeing a skill modeled. She might indicate that written materials work better for her when they include graphics that organize or emphasize the important points, such as bullets and boldface print.

7. "Can you work well with people?" "Can you work on a team?"

A lot of what happens in the workplace has social and interpersonal underpinnings. Whether interacting with colleagues and supervisors or communicating with clients and customers, social skills are very important. The learning disabilities literature is filled with research that demonstrates that, from childhood to adulthood, persons with LD demonstrate deficiencies in social skills. In employment settings this can determine whether a sale is closed, an order arrives on time, or a bottleneck in production is cleared up.

Employers are very interested in social skills, and they track them from the interview process on. **It is important for an individual with LD to understand her social and communications styles and to demonstrate proficient social skills during the interview and on the job.** For example,

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during a job interview, it is important to be able to establish rapport with the interviewer, to listen carefully, and to stay on point when responding to a question.

8. “Can you be given a lead role in a work group?”

Not surprisingly, much of the transition literature focuses on getting one’s first job. Yet once hired, an employee is often expected to eventually take the lead on some projects, which opens up the possibility of job advancement. Therefore, it is important for employees with LD to see beyond their initial job role and to envision taking the lead when asked.

9. “Are you an organized person?” “Can you describe your organizational style?”

Because workplace efficiency leads to greater productivity, organizational style becomes an important criterion for hiring an employee, as well as for evaluating her performance. A young person with LD should be able to articulate her style, whether in time management, task management and tracking, or meeting deadlines. The key is to know one’s style and be able to describe it in order to show how individual organizational style will mesh with the tasks or overall purposes of the business or organization.

10. “Can you work as well as the next person?”

When an employer asks a question like this, the challenge for the young adult with LD is to be able to hear the question behind it, without becoming upset or defensive. What employers often wonder — perhaps unconsciously — is, “Am I taking a risk in hiring this young person?” It’s up to the young adult to approach the question positively and matter-of-factly. The key is to communicate self-confidence, as a means to instill confidence in the prospective employer or boss. In order to do this, the young person must understand, be articulate about, and be able to convince the employer of, her strengths and abilities, and her knowledge of effective ways to “work around” her LD in the job setting.

Competence, Self-Awareness Key

It’s important to remember that, even if a young person brings the Americans with Disabilities Act to bear on the employment process, there is no guarantee that she will be hired. ADA is an equal opportunity law, whose purpose is to provide job applicants with LD a “level playing field.” It is not an affirmative action law. Whether the young person with LD has the qualifications to do the job (with reasonable accommodations, if needed) is the ultimate criterion for hiring her and, subsequently, for evaluating her job performance.

These questions that employers typically ask can serve as a partial “checklist” of important job search and employment skills for a young person with LD. In order to answer them effectively, young people in middle school and high school should be encouraged to think about and become competent in self-knowledge, self-disclosure, and self-advocacy, particularly in relation to their LD. They must understand and be conversant about their LD as it applies to productivity in the workplace. Young people who are able to master these competencies are more likely to be competitive in job seeking, and successful as an employee.

Expert Answers

Helping Young Adults with LD Transition to Employment

Finding the “Best Fit” for Young People with LD in the Workplace

Many famous people in history are thought to have been learning disabled. Such names as Albert Einstein, Leonardo da Vinci, Winston Churchill, and John D. Rockefeller are examples. Today there are living examples of successful people with learning disabilities (LD), such as Charles Schwab (Founder and Chairman of The Charles Schwab Corporation), John Chambers (President and CEO of Cisco Systems), and Gaston Caperton (President of the College Board). Their perseverance, intellect, and leadership provide motivation to all those who have LD and who aspire to success despite the odds.” Without question, these famous people became successful through their own trials and tribulations. Yet their success offers an example for anyone with LD. These individuals with LD found the “best fit” between their particular strengths, skills, and interests, and the goals they pursued in their adult life.

It is important to understand that the journeys of tens of thousands of “ordinary” people with LD are just as challenging as the paths taken by individuals with LD who have become household names. In a practical sense, however, anyone with LD can succeed by sticking to some basic guidelines that facilitate a smooth job entry and foster opportunities for job advancement.

“Best Fit” in the Work Environment

Research on success in the workplace makes it apparent that finding the “best fit” is key to a good start toward a satisfying employment experience. That is one of the perks of life beyond school: One can carve out a “niche of competence,” rather than be confronted by daily academic tasks that are too challenging because of a learning disability.

“Best fit” goes beyond knowing the strengths and weaknesses of the person with learning disabilities, however. It also means seeking out employers in the private or public sector who are “disability friendly.” Many businesses in communities all around the United States believe in a diverse workforce that includes all people with disabilities — and those with learning disabilities specifically. These employers believe they have a responsibility to be good corporate citizens. They have human resource departments and supervisors who are trained to work with the issues of disabilities, and they believe that people with LD can contribute to the mission of their business enterprises. Examples nationally of such businesses are the Marriott Corporation, IBM, Southland Corporation (7-11), and McDonald’s. To identify local examples of disability-friendly workplaces, contact disability advocacy groups and selected state, county, and city governmental agencies.

“Best fit” also involves making sure one fits within a work group. While a disability-friendly business organization is important, one’s co-workers and colleagues are also important contributors to job satisfaction, to support, and ultimately to productivity. Contrary to popular belief, the research indicates that persons with LD who go straight from school to work most often find a job through “word of mouth.” It is very common for them to hear of job openings from friends, family, or neighbors, as well as from employees within the business.

“The young person with LD needs to look beyond the point of job entry and take a long-term view of transition to a workplace where change can be constant.”

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This informal job search process provides the opportunity for a person with LD to ask about the spirit of the company, the disposition of the boss, possible job supports, and the climate of the work group where there is a job opening. That is valuable information about what really is happening in a job environment. This knowledge allows a person with LD to envision her fit, beyond just the specific skills needed to do the job adequately.

It is important to find the best fit possible between the young person with LD and a job. However, work environments can change from one year to the next. In fact, a young adult should anticipate a changing work environment. For example, a new supervisor can be assigned to a work unit, or job roles can be restructured, according to the changing needs of the business. These are just two of the many realities of competitive employment. So, people with LD must be vigilant about their job situation and monitor it very carefully. Attending work unit meetings and seeking out the opinions of co-workers on work-related issues are examples of monitoring one's work situation. To respond effectively to workplace change, flexibility is very important, as is the ability to be an effective self-advocate.

“Anyone with LD can succeed by sticking to some basic guidelines that facilitate a smooth job entry and foster opportunities for job advancement.”

Self-Disclosure and the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA)

Within the framework of a changing workplace are further options for employees with learning disabilities. Those are self-disclosure and the use of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). The decision to disclose one's disability to an employer or to invoke one's rights under ADA brings a new set of dynamics to the employment experience. They place learning disabilities “front and center” in a very important life activity.

Research shows that most individuals with learning disabilities do not disclose that they have a learning disability at the point of job entry, or even during the first few years of employment. There are a number of reasons for this, including fear of being stigmatized, lack of knowledge in society about learning disabilities, and feeling that there is more risk than benefit associated with self-disclosure, even when accommodations guaranteed under the ADA can aid in employment adjustment and success. If a young person with LD can successfully advocate for herself, by articulating how the demands of her work are affected by the manifestations of her learning disability, then she can deal with change effectively and efficiently.

With the choice of self-disclosure and the ongoing process of self-advocacy, the ADA becomes a very important “tool” for the young person with LD, not only for equity, but for support for workplace efficiency and productivity. It's important to remember, however, that the employee with LD must disclose her disability and thereby invoke her rights under the ADA, in order for reasonable accommodations to be mandatory.

ADA is an equal employment opportunity law, and LD is one of many disabilities the law covers. ADA is not, however, an affirmative action program. Therefore, a person with LD cannot be discriminated against in employment because of a disability issue, but she must compete for the job on an equal footing with other candidates. So, in order for her to be protected by the ADA, it is imperative that she be “qualified.” That means she must have the “essential functions” (knowledge and skills) to do the job. “Essential functions” is a key aspect of the concept of “best fit” mentioned above.

Finding the “Best Fit” for Young People with LD in the Workplace

“Reasonable Accommodations”

After a young person has established her qualifications for the job and competed successfully to get the job, then she can request “reasonable accommodations,” which help provide an even better fit for the job. Reasonable accommodations means that the environment, the employment process, and the job tasks, either individually or in combination, are modified in order to minimize the effects of a learning disability.

Once on the job, it is important for employees with LD to be resourceful in countering any effects of LD that interfere with satisfactory job performance. Therefore, the mantra of adults with LD comes into play: Always be looking for resources for workplace support because the workplace is an ongoing journey of adjusting to a multiplicity of ever-changing demands. An invaluable and free-of-charge support is the Job Accommodation Network (JAN), which has a website (<http://www.jan.wvu.edu/>) and a toll-free phone number (1-800-526-7234). Their services are intended for adults with learning disabilities and/or their work supervisors. Most important, the consultants at JAN are particularly skilled at solving LD-related job problems, in order to facilitate job success.

Literacy centers are another support that can promote the development of skills to improve job performance, such as reading, writing, and computing. Research shows that the great majority of adults with learning disabilities do not go on to post-secondary education. Literacy centers can provide skill acquisition on a short-term basis and with one-on-one instruction. Their services provide the employee with LD an opportunity to upgrade her skills without placing too many demands on her employer.

The destiny of persons with LD is competitive employment. Recent employment reports describe an ever-changing job market. It is not uncommon for an employee in the U.S. to have as many as eight jobs in the first ten years of employment. The young person with LD needs to look beyond the point of job entry and take a long-term view of transition to a workplace where change can be constant. Under current labor market conditions, finding the best fit at job entry is an important ingredient of success. The other key ingredient is constantly being adaptive to the changing demands of the workplace.

Expert Answers

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Self-disclosure of Learning Disabilities in the Beyond-School Years

When a young adult with learning disabilities (LD) leaves school and begins to experience the demands of adulthood, she faces a major decision: Whether or not to disclose her LD in a post-secondary education, training, or employment setting. In the school-age years a student with LD is typically identified formally so that appropriate instruction and services can be identified. In this environment, the complexities LD are largely understood. As a result, opportunities are rare during school years for a teenager to practice self-disclosure of her LD.

Conversely, the beyond-school years present a young person with many situations where she must decide whether or not to self-disclose her LD. Since the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), the mandatory federal special education law which requires the “label” of LD, no longer applies after high school, a person with LD no longer has to be identified as learning disabled if they do not want to be! The young adult with LD must grapple with two central questions: Why would I want to disclose my LD? What are the risks and benefits of that decision? If her high school has offered little transition preparation and practice in the strategies of self-disclosure of LD, a young person might feel that it's easier just to forget about being learning disabled altogether. It might seem more convenient to think of her LD as a condition that's only relevant until high school graduation, having little to do with her future in college, job training, or employment.

To disclose or not to disclose: that is the question

The decision about whether to disclose one's LD merits very serious consideration. In the beyond-school world, the term “learning disabilities” is not well understood. Unfortunately, a shocking number of the public equate LD with mental retardation. Those who **do** understand the difference in cognitive ability between LD and mental retardation often do not understand the varied range of learning issues, such as dyslexia, attention problems, or processing disorders. To add to the confusion, since learning disabilities are invisible, the behavior of people with LD is often misinterpreted by people with whom they interact in the beyond-school world.

Before the young adult makes the decision about whether or not to disclose her LD, she must consider carefully the pros and cons. There are many reasons why a young adult might think that self-disclosure of her LD is **not** an option:

- Adults with LD typically recount that the stigma attached to LD during the school-age years was the most painful part of their childhood. By not disclosing one's LD in adulthood, they hope to avoid the stigma of that label in their adult years.
- Oftentimes LD is viewed as purely an educational issue, having little to do with the adult years. In adulthood a person with LD has more freedom to pursue interests that stem from her strengths, as opposed to being forced to learn or perform school tasks that are difficult or impossible because of her LD.

“Disclosure of one's LD is not an end in itself. It is just the beginning of a series of challenges a young person addresses as she matures, including self-awareness, self-knowledge, self-advocacy, and self-determination.”

Self-disclosure of Learning Disabilities in the Beyond-School Years

- It is common for a person with LD not to understand what LD is, what her specific LD profile is, and how to explain the profile to others. (An LD profile includes such things as a person's strengths and weaknesses in learning and performance, ways to compensate for the LD, and ways to seek or structure the school or workplace accommodations appropriate to her LD.) So, lack of general understanding of LD, and of one's specific LD profile, is a deterrent to self-disclosure.
- Young people with LD often lack knowledge about two federal laws that can be very beneficial in their beyond-school years. In the area of employment, one needs to know the basic rights and benefits of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). In the area of postsecondary education and training, Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act can trigger accommodations for learning and testing. A young person can miss important opportunities if she does not understand the accommodations and protections offered by these laws. Unfortunately, instruction on these laws, and how they can be used effectively in the beyond-school years, is not typically included in high school transition curriculum.

“It is common for a person with LD not to understand what LD is, what her specific LD profile is, and how to explain the profile to others.”

Self-awareness promotes successful self-disclosure

Research supports the important roles of parents and educators in helping a young person build the foundation for successful self-disclosure during the school-age years by engaging the child in the processes of “demystification” and “reframing” of her LD (Gerber & Price, 2005). Demystification involves taking the mystery out of the term “learning disabilities” by recognizing its manifestations in daily life. Reframing is a related process in which introspection and self-reflection guide the young person to make decisions that make use of her strengths, to create a fit between her LD and a task, a job, or an environment.

Demystification and reframing of her LD allow a child or adolescent to gain authentic insights into her LD by providing a way to reflect on both achievements and setbacks associated with her LD. Over time, these insights provide a young person with knowledge of her strengths and weaknesses, and which compensations and accommodations she needs in order to perform well in school, training, or employment. Ultimately, demystification and reframing provide the wherewithal to think about her LD in real terms.

Coupled with demystification and reframing, a young person needs a clear understanding of her LD “profile” and how to adapt successfully to the variety of environments in which she must function. With this self-knowledge a person with LD learns to interpret and adjust to the demands of various employment and social situations, and when a young person decides to disclose her LD, self-knowledge about her LD will help her to communicate that information clearly and with self-assurance.

Understanding the context of self-disclosure

Self-disclosure is not an all-or-nothing process. In fact, the decision to disclose one's LD may be based on the various contexts of adult life. For decision-making purposes, these contexts fit into two broad categories:

- **Formal** contexts, such as employment and education
- **Informal** contexts, such as those involving family, friends, community, and leisure

Self-disclosure of Learning Disabilities in the Beyond-School Years

When a young person considers disclosure of her LD in a **formal context**, such as employment, or postsecondary training and/or testing, it usually involves legal protections mandated by the two federal civil rights laws mentioned earlier, the ADA and Section 504. In fact, in order to set in motion the provisions and procedures of these laws, a person **must** disclose her LD, usually from the very beginning of the education or employment relationship. To get the best results stemming from disclosure in these contexts, she must be constantly alert to new challenges, opportunities, and accommodations, and be prepared to advocate on her own behalf.

In **informal contexts**, self-disclosure is purely voluntary, and the choice about when, how, and why to disclose one's LD is a very personal one. Unlike disclosure in the context of school and employment, when it comes to disclosing one's disability in the contexts of family life, friendships, community activities, and leisure pursuits, there are no legal mandates and, therefore, no guarantees that people will look on LD positively or be willing to make allowances for the LD.

In some employment or social situations, a young adult might make a strategic decision to self-disclose her LD after having first established herself **as a person** — after a couple of months on the job, after becoming certified for CPR, or after a third date, for example. After she has some history with co-workers or friends, a young person can then introduce herself further **as someone who happens to have an LD**. Interestingly, in our research, preliminary reports by those who have disclosed their LD using this two-stage strategy indicate that they have experienced a greater degree of acceptance from others and fewer feelings of stigma (Gerber & Price, 2005).

“The young adult with LD must grapple with two central questions: Why would I want to disclose my LD? What are the risks and benefits of that decision?”

Assessing Risk: “Potential gains” versus “acceptable losses” of self-disclosure

As mentioned earlier, a young person who consciously decides to disclose her LD in a job, education, or social setting takes a risk in doing so. While gains are possible, so, too, are losses. The ultimate question for the young adult with LD is, “What’s in it for me?” In all of these contexts some key questions can help her sort out whether self-disclosure is worth it:

- What can I potentially gain by disclosing my LD in this setting—in the short-term and long-term? (Example: Accessing accommodations that lead to better job performance, and then to job advancement.)
- What might I lose by disclosing my LD in this setting? (Example: My boss and colleagues may mistakenly perceive me as less competent than I actually am.)
- What might I lose by **not** disclosing my LD in this setting? (Example: When my LD affects my job performance, my boss or colleagues may perceive me as inconsistent or unreliable.)
- Are the potential losses “acceptable”? (Example: Can I live with being a team member, but never advancing to be a team leader?)
- Do potential gains of self-disclosure outweigh the “acceptable” losses? (Example: Should I just keep struggling with reading, or should I risk disclosing my dyslexia—even though my boss isn’t the most understanding person—so that I can use assistive technology to improve my work performance?)

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- If I don't disclose my LD, am I putting myself at a disadvantage by not accessing accommodations that can improve my performance? (Example: If my job is restructured, will my lack of workplace accommodations make me less able to adapt to new job demands?)

In defining "acceptable loss," a young adult decides either consciously or unconsciously to accept the school or job situation "as is," and not take the risk of revealing her disability and asking for accommodations, even though that might provide opportunities to improve her performance. In social situations, a decision not to disclose may mean that a young person gives up being her "true" self with others, even though doing so could lead to more satisfying relationships. Sometimes a young person defines acceptable losses "by default" because she's not willing to acknowledge even to herself that she has an LD, or because she's avoiding dealing with the challenges of her LD. In other cases, she makes a conscious choice not to "push the envelope" by disclosing her LD in school, training, or employment. In essence, acceptable loss is what a young person decides she can live with or accept as the status quo. To identify "**potential gains**," a young person must examine her personal values, motivations, aspirations, and goals, to identify and pursue the social, learning, or employment gains that are most important to her.

The young person's assessment of risk drives the entire decision-making process about disclosing her LD. This process is context-specific and requires the young person to consider many factors, including:

- the **particular demands of the context**, for example, organization, dealing with stress, computer skills, multi-tasking, or reading skills;
- the **effects of her own strengths and weaknesses** in the context of school, employment, or social relationships, for example, being trained in job skills or taking college classes that make the best use of her strengths
- and, most importantly, the **personal characteristics of the boss, co-worker, or teacher to whom she is disclosing her LD**, for example, the person's capacity for understanding, flexibility, or professionalism.

Disclosure of one's LD is not an end in itself. It is just the beginning of a series of challenges a young person addresses as she matures, including self-awareness, self-knowledge, self-advocacy, and self-determination. Self-disclosure is part of navigating the trials and tribulations of being an adult with learning disabilities. Meeting these challenges is part of becoming fully adult — autonomous, independent, and speaking for oneself. It is also during the beyond-school years that some of the greatest opportunities for people with learning disabilities emerge. Effective self-disclosure is one of the keys to meeting the challenges and accessing the opportunities.

Expert Answers



Helping Young Adults with LD Transition to Employment

Resources & References

Transition to Employment for Young People with LD

Books

But What if I Don't Want to Go to College? A Guide to Success through Alternative Education, 3rd Ed.

<http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/0816065586/ref=nosim/>

By Harlow Unger

Websites

Overcoming Obstacles (LD on the Job)

<http://www.nclld.org/index.php?option=content&task=view&id=353>

Ed.gov

U.S. Office of Vocational and Adult Education

<http://www.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ovae/index.html>

SnagAJob

<http://www.snagajob.com/>

Cool Works

<http://www.coolworks.com>

StudentJobs.gov (Government Jobs)

<http://www.studentjobs.gov/>

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Reiff, H.B., Gerber, P.J. and Ginsberg, R. (1997). *Exceeding expectations: Highly successful adults with learning disabilities*. Austin, TX: PRO-ED.

Helping Teens Prepare for Typical Employer Questions

Websites

National Collaborative on Workforce and Disability

Definitions of Common Terms

http://www.ncwd-youth.info/resources_!!!_Publications/definitions.php

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Gerber, P.J. (1992). "At first glance: Employment for people with learning disabilities at the beginning of the Americans with Disabilities Act era." *Learning Disability Quarterly*.

Resources & References

Helping Teens Prepare for Typical Employer Questions *(continued)*

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Price, L.A. & Gerber, P.J. (2001). "At second glance: How adults with learning disabilities are faring in the Americans with Disabilities Act era." *Journal of Learning Disabilities*.

Finding the "Best Fit" for Young People with LD in the Workplace

Books

What Do I Like to Do?

<http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/1416400494/ref=nosim/>

By Janet E. Wall

Websites

Finding the Right Job (LD on the Job)

<http://www.ncld.org/index.php?option=content&task=view&id=354>

The U.S. Department of Labor

Workforce Investment Act websites in all 50 states

<http://www.doleta.gov/usworkforce/onestop/onestopmap.cfm>

Occupational Outlook Handbook (2006-07 Ed) Online

<http://www.bls.gov/oco/home.htm>

Job Accommodation Network (JAN)

<http://www.jan.wvu.edu/>

Toll-free phone number: 1-800-526-7234

Job Profiles: Job descriptions by category; career choice

<http://www.jobprofiles.org/index.htm>

Career One-Stop: Job search and training

<http://www.careeronestop.org/>

Association for Career and Technical Education

Get Career Skills

<http://www.acteonline.org/career/skills/index.cfm>

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Self-disclosure of Learning Disabilities in the Beyond-School Years

Websites

Disclosure (LD on the Job) — National Center for Learning Disabilities
<http://www.nclد.org/index.php?option=content&task=view&id=35>

National Collaborative on Workforce and Disability
Definitions of Common Terms

http://www.ncwd-youth.info/resources_!!_Publications/definitions.php

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