

I'm so pleased to be able to return to Researcher's Corner, where I invite LIS researchers to provide an informal look at what they have recently learned about hiring or job hunting.

And I'm even more pleased that the first post is this piece by Gail Betz on hiring and disabilities. In the first iteration of Hiring Librarians, I regularly heard from job hunters with disabilities who were looking for advice on navigating a process that can often be ableist. Gail's research brings together the experience of librarians with disabilities to provide just such advice. It also serves as an excellent window for hiring managers who wish to learn about the barriers they may be creating or reinforcing.

This blog post is a synopsis of an article I published with *In the Library with the Lead Pipe* called [Navigating the Academic Hiring Process with Disabilities](#) in April, 2022. The purpose of that article is to provide strategies and recommendations to librarians with disabilities on how to manage all the complexities that come with the academic interview process. As a way to formally gather insights into people's strategies with navigating the hiring process successfully, I interviewed 40 academic librarians with disabilities about their interviewing experiences. The following is based on the qualitative data they provided as well as my own lived experience of library interviews with a disability.

While this research project focused specifically on in-person academic library interviews, many of the librarians I spoke with had also interviewed in public and special libraries. Many were law librarians, some had previously worked in government libraries or as solo hospital librarians. So while academic library interviews can be distinct from other types of library interviews, I do think some of the strategies people discussed carry over into any interview situation where there is social interaction between potential employee and employer. Much of the experience of disability isn't about the structure of a setting, but the social interactions between people. Another important note is that this research was done immediately before Covid in 2020, so virtual second round interviews were not common. Returning to in-person interviews exclusively is, in and of itself, a barrier for a significant number of disabled applicants.

In the article, I described three themes that surfaced throughout people's interviews- interview day structure, intrapersonal coping methods, and interpersonal coping methods. Interview day structure strategies included things like asking for breaks during the interview, etc.; Intrapersonal coping methods encompassed things that an interviewee could do to best prepare themselves; interpersonal coping methods revolved mostly around how interviewees can interview a potential employer. All of this is subjective of course; what one person considers a deal breaker another person might not even notice.

Some highlights from each category:

Interview day structure:

1. Getting the day's schedule in advance, including breaks. If there aren't any breaks or you need more, ask for them!
2. Tours- asking at the start for an accessible route, using the elevators, or opting out entirely. If you know you'll want to see something specific (like classroom set-up, for example), you should ask to see it!
3. Meals- depending on the length of the interview, you may be given one or more meals. You can ask for the restaurant name ahead of time to look at the menu, the location, the layout, etc. Prep some open-ended, informal questions for the people you will eat with to let them do more of the talking.
4. Getting the interview questions in advance- this is a tricky one. It's hard to ask for this, but if you feel comfortable doing so, you should! Everyone benefits from having the questions in advance as it allows people to prepare ahead of time, give more thoughtful answers, remember all the parts to a question, etc.

Intrapersonal coping:

1. Preparedness- people talked about "overpreparing" for any part of the interview that they felt could be impacted by a disability – memorizing everything, visiting the building ahead of time, picking out several different outfit choices depending on pain levels. This was described as the most time-consuming part, but that it ultimately became an advantage during the interview.
2. "Self-accommodating"- tying in with preparedness, people talked about ways they hid their disability by creating accommodations for themselves. This included things like bringing extra painkillers to offset stairs and walking, bringing allergy medication to offset possible food allergies from provided meals, or sitting in a specific spot in a conference room to enhance hearing or sight.
3. Strategically applying to institutions- also related to preparedness, people did extra research on institutions before applying to see if they had strong track records of anything DEI-related. Searching institutional websites for student disability resources in the library, looking through staff profiles to see if people had any visible differences (whether that's race, gender, disability, etc), and talking to networks to see if people have had positive experiences at specific institutions they are considering.
4. Job "fit"- Unlike whether a person is a "good fit" for an institution, people talked about considering whether a job's tasks were a good fit for their disability. Someone who has a lot of pain from long periods of sitting, for example, realized that a cataloging position was contributing negatively to that symptom. It's important to note with this one that this is personal preference- many things can be "reasonably accommodated" under the ADA, like this person could schedule walking breaks throughout the day, but it is perfectly reasonable to choose a position that eliminates some tasks completely.

Interpersonal coping

1. Navigating social cues- deciding how to handle handshakes, eye contact, or asking someone to repeat themselves were all things that people highlighted as causing

- specific social anxiety around trying to hide a disability (“pass” as able-bodied). Some people used these situations as one way to pre-emptively disclose a disability to alleviate the social anxiety, and some people used these situations to judge how accepting a potential coworker or supervisor might be.
2. Interviewing the institution- people did this in different ways, including assessing social interactions, looking for any visible signs of diversity within the staff, or asking about health benefits and sick leave. This was particularly salient for people who had options about where they wanted to work for a variety of reasons (where they were in their careers, geographic location, savings, benefits from a spouse, etc); people who did not have much choice talked about noticing red flags and just trying to mitigate or reduce them. People who had more choice talked about deciding not to work somewhere based on disability-related red flags.
 3. Boundaries- these were personal and again, some people were able to set boundaries more concretely than others based various aspects of security. One person summarized it with “...hardest part is, you know...where is the line with my dignity versus, you know, enjoying eating every single day and having a place to live.”
 4. Strategic disclosure- people spent a lot of time discussing and considering this and it was very personal. Do you tell a potential employer you have a disability and need accommodations, so that you get what you need and can focus on performing your best at an interview? Or do you hide a disability so as not to risk discrimination and hope everything is fine? People talked about being prepared for both (if it’s feasible to hide a disability, which it sometimes isn’t!) and then deciding at the interview based on how things are going. Some people had very positive experiences with disclosing and discovering that other people at the institution also had disabilities; others had negative stories about discrimination and microaggressions. When people did decide to disclose, this was one of the most impactful ways they said they interviewed their interviewer- what is the response to disclosure?

There’s so much that goes into interviewing for any job and dealing with the implications of disability makes it more complex. Society has reinforced the idea that people with disabilities are “less”- less capable, less useful, less desirable as employees. And the unemployment rate for people with disabilities in the United States reflects those stereotypes, with the unemployment rate being twice as high for people with disabilities as able-bodied people (see [Bureau of Labor Statistics](#) data). However, librarians with disabilities offer a wealth of knowledge and lived experience to our coworkers and patrons – we are creative problem-solvers, we’re empathetic and compassionate, and we understand the importance of community, interdependence, and support.

We all handle hiring processes differently because we all have different needs. And all those needs are valid. Some of these strategies will work well in certain settings and others will work better in other settings, but hopefully what comes through with this research is that library workers with disabilities are valuable employees and we do not need to work somewhere that doesn’t treat us accordingly.

Do you have other strategies that you've used that you'd like to share in the comments below?

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