

Chapter 9: Education & Finding a Job

In a global economy where the most valuable skill you can sell is your knowledge, a good education is no longer just a pathway to opportunity it is a prerequisite.

– President Barack Obama

Finding a job is hard enough. Finding a job and having a disability is even more challenging. Having every possible advantage when returning to the workforce only increases your chances of landing the job you want. If it is just reading a book, passing an exam, obtaining a license in a particular field, or getting a two- or four-year degree, anything you can do to further your education will only benefit you and reduce your challenges in life.

College

If your goal is to go onto college, you may be a little intimidated about where to begin or how you would even navigate college life. After creating your plan with VR, you will need to gather more information, both for yourself and your plan. The first place to start is the campus resource office or better, the disability-services office of the college you would like to attend. Every college should have a disability-services department in some form. They can help guide you through everything you need to know about starting the college process, making classrooms accessible, getting priority registration, and can help with things like taking notes or providing extra time on exams. On campus, disability-services can also answer questions about medical services and dorm accommodations.

I started at a community college, then transferred to Southern Oregon University, where I received a bachelor of science degree in computer science. I knew I wanted to go to college. Starting out, though, I was intimidated, had lots of questions, and did not even really know if it would be possible to keep up with schedules and homework. I had good experiences with disability-services at both the community college and the university.

Beginning at the community college, disability-services showed me around campus and answered all my questions. I was left with a feeling that even with a disability, it would be possible to continue my education. Starting out, there were three things I needed

from the on-campus disability-services. First, by having a disability, I qualified for priority registration. Priority registration means that you can be one of the first students to register for the classes you want before they fill up. Second, the desks in the classrooms were not accessible. In each of my classrooms, a table was placed so that I would have a work area. Third, disability services provided an assistant who could take notes for me and help me between classes. It's a win-win! The assistant helps me, and in return they get paid for their work through the college.

I remember my first assistant. She was nice, a little older than me, and had two energetic young boys. She would help me do little things like get my lunch out of my backpack and rotate my books so I could be ready for my next class. She would help me and at the same time try to keep her two Tasmanian devil boys out of trouble. It did not work! One day, while she was distracted with helping me, one of the boys went over to the front entrance door and pulled the fire alarm. The entire college evacuated out onto the streets.

By the time I made it to the university, I only needed a few accommodations. I was more nervous though. The community college I went to was like a glorified high school, but now I was at a university. Again, on-campus disability-services reassured me that this next step would be possible. I met the director of disability-services and remember her showing me where my classes would be around campus. We would become friends, and eventually she gave me a job overseeing and updating all disability-services web pages for the university. We are still friends today.

As for accommodations, I no longer needed a note-taker, since I could do it on my own with my trusty pen through my fingers. I still took advantage of priority registration, but now I only really needed two types of accommodations. I needed the classroom relocated if the original location of the room was inaccessible. Also, I needed extended time on tests, since I wrote and typed slower.

Government Jobs

The [USA.gov](#) Jobs and Education for People with Disabilities page is great for someone looking for information about getting a federal job. According to [USA.gov](#), there are three advantages of government jobs for people with disabilities: “The federal government has job openings nationwide in many different fields, uses a Schedule A, an optional, non-competitive hiring process that is faster and easier than the competitive hiring process, and provides reasonable accommodations to qualified employees.”

The [U.S. Office of Personnel Management](#) (<https://www.opm.gov/policy-data-oversight/disability-employment/getting-a-job/#url=Schedule-A-Hiring-Authority>)

defines a Schedule A hiring authority as a “special (excepted) hiring authority for people with disabilities.” Basically, to apply, you and your doctor will need to fill out a Schedule A Letter, which is proof that you do have a disability. You must have your doctor or qualifying service agency fill this letter out for you. When applying for a federal job, you must submit this letter and be qualified for the job for which

you are applying. Here's where you can find the [Schedule A Sample Letter](https://www.opm.gov/policy-data-oversight/disability-employment/getting-a-job/sampleschedaletters.pdf) (https://www.opm.gov/policy-data-oversight/disability-employment/getting-a-job/sampleschedaletters.pdf) and [Schedule A Guide](https://www.eeoc.gov/abcs-schedule) (https://www.eeoc.gov/abcs-schedule).

Finding a Job

I highly recommend pursuing some type of employment. There are jobs out there for everyone. Having a job gives you a sense of purpose and pride. Getting to Friday, knowing you put in a hard week, and receiving that paycheck is a rewarding experience. The following are a few resources you can use to help you start your employment journey.

If you qualify for Social Security and need a good resource or some coaching, here are two programs that can be extremely helpful. The first is the [Social Security Administration's Ticket to Work Program](https://choosework.ssa.gov/index.html) (https://choosework.ssa.gov/index.html), which helps with "Access to Employment Support Services for Social Security Disability Beneficiaries Who Want to Work." The second is called [Employ Reward Solutions](https://employreward.com/) (https://employreward.com/). The ERS's mission is to "coach and assist beneficiaries with finding employment and providing resources for housing, transportation and more."

Another little tool you can use to gain an advantage for getting a job is called the [Work Opportunity Tax Credit](https://www.irs.gov/businesses/small-businesses-self-employed/work-opportunity-tax-credit) (https://www.irs.gov/businesses/small-businesses-self-employed/work-opportunity-tax-credit) The IRS describes this as a

“Federal tax credit available to employers for hiring individuals from certain targeted groups who have consistently faced significant barriers to employment.”

Whether you go to college first or just want to start working, the job-hunting process is still the same. There are numerous resources and job-search sites out there for disabled people who are looking for a job.

Some helpful sites I’ve used in the past are:

1. Abilityjobs.com
2. [Social Security: Opportunities for Individuals with Disabilities \(https://www.ssa.gov/careers/individualsWithDisabilities.html\)](https://www.ssa.gov/careers/individualsWithDisabilities.html)
3. [FlexJobs \(https://www.flexjobs.com/blog/post/flexible-work-for-people-with-disabilities-and-special-needs/\)](https://www.flexjobs.com/blog/post/flexible-work-for-people-with-disabilities-and-special-needs/)

I applied for many jobs and went on many interviews before getting my first job as a graphic designer at a publishing company. Through this process, I got comfortable talking to potential employers about my disability.

Here is the process I usually used for getting a job outside of the home:

1. Once you have found a job you are interested in, look over the hours you will have to work, benefits, and wages it offers.

2. Do some research. Find out if it is a company you want to work for, where they are located, and how much driving time it would take to get to the job.
3. When you are ready to apply for the job, customize your resumé and cover letter to reflect the qualifications of that job. Make both documents highlight your best assets and accomplishments. Neither one of the documents should have anything about your disability, but do not leave out any achievements, such as disability organizations you have worked for or any recognition you have earned for working with people with disabilities.
4. Once you have submitted your resumé and cover letter and officially applied for the job, be ready for a phone call. Be ready to answer a few questions about your qualifications. Know something about their business, and have a few questions of your own to ask.
5. After you have agreed on a time and date for the interview, the very last thing you want to do is ask about accessibility. I always found this to be a good time to mention that I have a disability and to find out if I can even make it into their place of business. I never wait until the day of the interview, show up, not have things accessible, and surprise the employer that I use a wheelchair. So, the very last thing I say in the phone conversation is, “I also use a wheelchair, Is your office accessible?” This makes the employer somewhat aware of

your situation and allows you and them to make accommodations if needed.

6. Once you are in the interview, be confident, emphasize your strengths, and if it comes up, give examples of how you have overcome your weaknesses and obstacles. I also always like to have five or six questions for them. I usually print out the questions so I can hand them the paper to read and answer. At the same time, you can also have another printed document explaining the [Work Opportunity Tax Credit](https://www.irs.gov/businesses/small-businesses-self-employed/work-opportunity-tax-credit) (<https://www.irs.gov/businesses/small-businesses-self-employed/work-opportunity-tax-credit>).
7. If you are successful and get the job, you can then go over reasonable accommodations you may need to perform your job. Vocational rehabilitation might also be a good resource for you if you have accessibility issues. Also, for accommodation questions, the [Job Accommodation Network](https://askjan.org/) (<https://askjan.org/>) is a great free resource.

Always make sure to thoroughly look over and understand what an employer is offering before accepting a job. To explain, always know how the employer's benefits, like health insurance, will interfere or help with your current insurance and services. Also, be aware of how much money you will be making with a new job. Any supplemental income or services you are receiving could be affected by your salary.