

LIVING WITH PARALYSIS

Employment for People with Disabilities



First Edition 2020

This guide has been prepared based on scientific and professional literature. It is presented for the purpose of education and information; it should not be construed as medical diagnosis or treatment advice. Please consult a physician or appropriate healthcare provider for questions specific to your situation.

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Employment for People with Disabilities

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For many people, a job is more than simply a way to earn a living; it can help give structure and meaning to a life. But according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, only 31% of people with disabilities between the ages of 16 and 64 were employed in 2019, compared to 75% of those without disabilities.

Disabilities do not need to limit the pursuit of fulfilling work. Whether seeking a career in an office or building one from home, there are many paths to successful and rewarding employment. Disabilities may affect the shape of a life, but they do not determine what is possible.



HOW TO BEGIN?

The questions of how and when and why to get a job inspire different answers for everyone; a teenager may happily work part-time scooping ice cream while a married mother of three with a law degree will have different career goals. But no matter what stage of life an individual is in, a pre-search self-assessment can help define personal goals and create a realistic plan to achieve them.

Begin by cataloguing interests, skills and education level; are there gaps that need to be filled before you start sending out your resume? Determine what your goal is and figure how to make it work with your disability—where there's a will there's a way.

Young jobseekers may have some idea of what they'd like to do after college or trade school, but others might be undecided. The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics' "Career Outlook" provides an array of information for those exploring career options, from in-depth feature articles and interviews to industry specific overview of pay and employment outlooks.

People with newly acquired disabilities will need to assess whether it's possible to continue with jobs held prior to injury. Will accommodations allow the previous work to be performed or are their skills transferable to a different position within the company or industry?

Don't immediately assume that a disability has insurmountable limits: a roofer who sustains a spinal cord injury likely cannot physically return to that specific role but can instead take his or her knowledge into the field, providing estimates for customers using a drone. A farmer with lower limb paralysis can use a battery-operated mechanical lift to maneuver in and out of the tractor and operate it with hand control modifications.

Finally, don't forget to consider logistics as you target your search. If you plan to work outside the home, establish whether you will be able to drive yourself to and from the office or work site. If not, investigate what public transportation options are available in your community and match the routes needed to potential worksites. A lack of access to reliable transportation has been cited as a factor that prevents people with disabilities from being able to work.

WHERE TO LOOK AND HOW TO APPLY?

Social media and the Internet have expanded the many ways employers advertise jobs. Whether creating targeted searches on LinkedIn or [Indeed.com](https://www.linkedin.com/), following a potential employer on Facebook or scanning Twitter for posted openings, monitor a variety of sites to increase your odds of finding the work you want.

To help employers hire more inclusively, there are also many application avenues, including online job boards, designed specifically for people with disabilities. One of the largest boards, abilityJOBS was launched by Ability Magazine in 1995 to help connect job seekers with employers through its resume bank, employment listings and regular virtual job fairs.

Other recruiting events include CAREERS & the disABLED Magazine's Career Expo for People with Disabilities. Focusing on both general and STEM-centric work opportunities, there are more than a half dozen job fairs held throughout the year with a mission of creating a direct path to employers.

Individuals interested in working for the federal government are eligible to apply for job openings through the Schedule A hiring authority, (Schedule A) an application portal which offers an expediated and non-competitive hiring process for people with disabilities.

Applicants can explore the vast array of federal agencies, ranging from the State Department to the Bureau of Land Management to the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA,) and pursue a career that matches their interests and skills. And, while some individuals may wish to be based in Washington D.C., many federal jobs can also be found throughout the country and overseas.

A letter from your doctor, licensed rehabilitation professional, or a federal or state agency providing disability benefits will be required as proof of disability when applying through Schedule A; the letter does not need to describe specific disability, medical history or need for accommodations.

Schedule A applicants should either apply through [USAJOBS.gov](https://www.usajobs.gov/), the official job site of the U.S. government, or directly to the individual agency's Disability Program Manager or Selective Placement Program Coordinator.

Applying through Schedule A doesn't guarantee getting a job, but regulations created by the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission direct



federal agencies to aim to fill 12% of their workforce with people with disabilities; Schedule A can help both qualified applicants and employers more quickly and successfully connect.

For students and recent college graduates, the Workforce Recruitment Program for College Students with Disabilities (WRP) offers a bridge to both federal and private sector employers. WRP participants have found internships and permanent jobs after graduation, including as a transportation specialist at the Federal Highway Administration and a technical writer at the Department of Homeland Security.

The WRP application process happens only once per year. Contact your campus WRP coordinator in the office of career or disability services early in the spring semester to be considered for inclusion in the program.

There are also many state-specific internship and employment opportunities for people living with disabilities; in Illinois, the Interagency Committee on Employees with Disabilities oversees an internship program that places students in professional and technical positions in government agencies in Springfield and Chicago, while Maryland's Special Options Eligible List offers applicants a non-competitive application process similar to Schedule A.

Before you begin your search, take time to determine what programs are available in your state that might support your employment goals.

Some individuals may be reluctant to use job boards, programs or hiring practices specifically created for people with disabilities, worried that they will be hired for the wrong reasons and wanting no one's pity. But Paralympian and Vanderbilt University assistant professor of human and organizational development Dr. Anjali Forber-Pratt urges people living with disabilities to use every tool available to get the job they want—and likely deserve.

“We live in an ableist society and these types of programs are designed to help level the playing field,” she says. “When you think of all the challenges it takes just to get a foot in the door and then add to it the exorbitant costs of living with a disability, any program out there that helps mitigate those stressors and get quality individuals into gainful employment opportunities is a huge win.”

Dr. Forber-Pratt also encourages job seekers to use the communities of support they've likely already created as they've navigated life with a disability.

“It's awkward to put yourself out there, but it's not about the disability,” she says. “It's about saying, “These are my skills, and this is what I'm looking for.” It's about reaching out to people and leveraging the relationships that many of us already have in terms of our stories.”

Along with tapping high school and college alumni networks, someone with a spinal cord injury might also have contacts at rehab hospitals, non-profit groups or from their own volunteer efforts; letting as many people as possible know about job goals can only help the search.

HOW TO RETURN TO WORK WHILE RECEIVING FEDERAL BENEFITS?

Access to federal health insurance and disability payments can be a critical safety net for people who have sustained spinal cord injuries or are living with other disabilities. A fear of becoming ineligible for these benefits — combined with the uncertainty of how a disability may impact getting a job — can become a barrier to seeking employment.

Over the past two decades, the federal government has launched work incentive programs to encourage people with disabilities to return to or join the workforce without immediately losing benefits.

Ticket to Work, created in 1999, provides free vocational rehabilitation and support services to individuals receiving Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI) and Supplemental Security Income (SSI) who wish to return to work; the program serves as a bridge, allowing individuals to get job experience or obtain training for a new career while maintaining their benefits until a certain level of earnings is reached.

Each participant is assigned a “Ticket” to use at any local provider, which can range from non-profits like the National Telecommuting Institute, which helps people with disabilities find home-based employment, to independent living centers such as DAWN Center for Independent Living, which offers employment services for individuals with disabilities in northwest New Jersey.



Tickets also may be used at state vocational rehabilitation agencies which provide intensive training, education and rehabilitation to support employment efforts. While programs vary by state, career counseling, job placement assistance and post-employment support are typically available at most agencies; additionally, in some cases, the programs may pay for transportation and vehicle modification.

All providers offer one-on-one support with job search and placements. Participants are encouraged to interview as many providers as they like before assigning their ticket. Making the right match matters; don't be afraid to keep looking until you find the best partner for your aspirations.

Once the program begins, providers will work with participants to create customized plans that specify how the provider will help achieve targeted goals, whether starting a business or finding a part-time job. Some examples of support services participants may receive include career counseling, interview coaching, job shadowing, tuition and transportation assistance.

Explanations and guidance from benefits counselors, along with resources such as the Ticket's monthly webinars and blogs, can help participants navigate and maintain the supports of federal healthcare and benefits until an equal level of self-sufficiency can be achieved in a new job.

Plan to Achieve Self-Support (PASS) is another program for people with disabilities who are interested in seeking work but worried about losing benefits. People participating in the program can set aside income to achieve a specifically defined employment goal; unlike regular SSI income rules, income put aside for PASS-related work goals will not reduce SSI benefits.

Vocational rehabilitation counselors and organizations that support people with disabilities can help participants define specific goals and create well developed proposals in order to be approved for the program. Some examples of how a PASS may be used include buying supplies such as computers or uniforms to start a business, paying for additional education or training, or purchasing a van or wheelchair that is needed for employment. The targeted job must ultimately be one that will yield enough in earnings to reduce or eliminate the need for SSDI and SSI benefits.

In general, knowledge is power. Working with effective providers can help people with disabilities not only understand and make informed decisions about how new jobs will affect benefits, but also obtain a job itself.

WHAT TO SAY? THE ART OF INTERVIEWING

The first step toward thriving on a job is getting one. Interviews can prove critical in tipping the scales between equally qualified candidates. For people with disabilities, they can also provide a chance to remind employers about what matters most: the ability to get the job done.

Taylor Price was about to begin his first year at Georgetown University when he fractured his neck in a diving accident. The injury changed his life's timeline — he deferred admission for one year — but not his dreams. As he pursued a degree in marketing and finance, Price applied for and obtained internships on Wall Street and at the White House; after graduation, he landed a job with the Department of Homeland Security where he remained for eight years until recently moving to the private sector.

Price approached each interview with the factor he believes is critical to success: Confidence.

“This injury doesn’t mean I’m less and it doesn’t preclude me from pursuing the life I want,” he says. Though he centered conversations with potential employers around his accomplishments, detailing his skills and successes, Price wasn’t afraid to talk about his injury.



“ Consider the resilience, the emotional intelligence, the life skills the injury may have brought you. Those are an asset in any job. ”
—Taylor Price



“I think being able to address it shows your confidence,” he says. “This is a part of who you are — and this is a story that’s advantageous to share in some ways. Consider the resilience, the emotional intelligence, the life skills the injury may have brought you. Those are an asset in any job.”

People living with disabilities should prepare for on-site interviews by calling ahead to assess the accessibility of the space; encountering inaccessible buildings at the last minute can cause delays or negatively impact a person’s mindset before the interview even begins.

Take time to do your homework before the interview: understanding a company’s history and goals will help craft potential answers that demonstrate you are the best person for the job. And don’t forget to ask your own questions, not only to gain as much information as you can about the position, but also to demonstrate your own sense of value to potential employers; it’s just as important to decide that the job is right for you as it is to be chosen for it.

The design and details of a workplace matter, especially for people living with disabilities.

Consider the inconvenience of finding supply shelves, breakroom micro-waves, mailboxes and soap dispensers out of reach. Or the challenges posed by entrances without ramps, doors too heavy to push open and bathroom stalls lacking grab bars and the room to maneuver a wheelchair or manage a catheter.

Inaccessible spaces can not only cause frustration but prevent people with disabilities from efficiently and successfully doing their jobs.

Title I of the groundbreaking **Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA)** mandates that reasonable accommodations must be made in the workplace for employees who need them. Accommodations can include making on-site common spaces like breakrooms and restrooms accessible to all employees; providing assistive technology or modifying equipment like desks or telephones; and adjusting work schedules or restructuring jobs to accommodate individual disabilities.

The goal is to remove barriers and allow everyone an equal chance to achieve success.

Identifying and Asking for Accommodations

Employers may not ask about accommodations during the hiring process unless the applicant's disability is visible, or he or she voluntarily shares the information. However, even if the disability is evident, some applicants may be uncomfortable speaking about specific accommodations until an official job offer has been extended and are under no obligation to do so.

Accommodations can be sought at the beginning of a new job and anytime thereafter; there is no time frame or deadline for requests. New employees may not know exactly what they need until they've spent time in the office; others who acquire injuries while already in a job will have to assess how the space and work duties may be changed because of it.

Erin Cobb had worked at Wells Fargo for four years before she sustained a T2 complete spinal cord injury. Before she returned to the same office, she completed an on-site "roll through" to help identify the accommodations she'd need. As a result, heavy doors at the entrance and throughout the building were made automatic. Cobb's wheelchair fit under her desk,

but her keyboard was attached to a new ergonomic stand to better accommodate the weakness in her hands caused by the injury.

Not every accommodation was predictable; after Cobb's feet landed in the toilet a few times as she tried to catheterize in the small stall, at her request the company installed a shower bench for much needed support.

“Don't be afraid to speak up for what you need,” Cobb says. “You have the right to be as successful as you're able to be, just like any other person.”

When considering accommodations, employers might seek a note from a doctor to support the request. In this situation, employees need only provide relevant medical information related to the disability; they do not need to report specific or overall medical or mental health histories to receive accommodations. But barring undue financial hardship, reasonable accommodations must be made and paid for by the employer, not the employee.

Depending on the employer or size of the company, employees might request accommodations from direct supervisors but if there is a human resources department, it's a good idea to loop them in, too.

Document your efforts — save requests made on paper and via email and take notes, with dates, of verbal conversations — in case there are any problems that need to be referred to an enforcement agency.



All requests need to be specific, describing the work challenge as it relates to the disability. For example, a security guard with muscular dystrophy who needs to frequently rise from his or her chair might request a lift cushion as an accommodation, while someone with quadriplegia can request that all-staff meetings not be held in buildings without accessible entrances.

Not every request qualifies as reasonable. An employee with a spinal cord injury whose morning routine includes complicated bowel and bladder management cannot demand a late start at the same wage; however, he or she can ask for a modification of overall hours in order to both start and end work later in the day.

Where to Go for Advice?

The **Job Accommodation Network (JAN)**, based at West Virginia University and funded by the U.S. Department of Labor, is a free, confidential and invaluable resource for both employees with disabilities and their employers.

Staffers — including a dedicated motor team specializing in accommodations for mobility impairment — field thousands of questions each year by phone, email and live chats in both English and Spanish. JAN's comprehensive and clearly organized website includes an ADA library, an accommodation request letter template and an archive of blog posts and newsletters on subjects ranging from sign language to service dogs to strokes.

But for many of the millions who visit the website annually, the most useful tool is likely the A-Z list of disabilities and accommodations. Whether searching a specific disability like paraplegia, limitations like tremors, dizziness or fine motor control, or workplace functions like parking or temperature, there are hundreds of potential challenges and suggested solutions. For individuals struggling with tremors, a search immediately yields more than three dozen accommodation ideas, from alternative keyboards to doorknob grips to a hands-free telephone.

Overall, JAN's database is vast, practical and provides encouraging evidence of the many creative ways to overcome barriers in the workplace.

Assistive Technology: Tools and Modifications That Can Help

Technology and design have experienced incredible leaps since the ADA was passed in 1990. Together, their advancements have helped transform workplaces and expand what is possible for people with disabilities.

Once futuristic innovations such as voice recognition software and eye tracking devices are now commonplace accommodations that help people with limited mobility operate their computers. Other frequently used devices that allow keyboard control despite dexterity limitations or paralysis include alternative keyboards, adaptive mouse designs, and tools such as mouth sticks, head wands and sip and puff switches.

New products designed to support and encourage inclusivity continue to arrive on the market, from screen reader software programs for the visually impaired to voice amplification systems for those with speaking limitations. But assistive technology can be low-tech, too. Building ramps and tennis balls cut in half and placed on the bottom of a walker to make it glide more easily count, too, as does every tool or product that improves and expands the capabilities of a person living with a disability.

JAN's staff and extensive library can provide ideas for employees and employers regarding potential assistive technology accommodations for workplace challenges. State vocational rehabilitation centers sometimes offer loans of assistive technology; take advantage of these services if available in your state to test out what products best support your needs.

FIGHT FOR YOUR RIGHTS

It is crucial to understand your rights while navigating the world with a disability. The ADA prohibits employers from discriminating against qualified applicants with disabilities when making hiring decisions. Arriving to an interview in a wheelchair is not a reason to be eliminated from consideration.

Discriminatory practices are banned in the workplace, too. If hired, a person with a disability cannot be harassed, fired or paid less because of it. Accommodations must be made to ensure employees are able to perform the job to the best of their abilities and have equal access to the space and office life as their colleagues.

Health insurance can be more complicated. The ADA does not require companies to cover pre-existing conditions or all medical expenses related to a disability (though thanks to the Affordable Care Act, insurers have been required to cover pre-existing conditions as of January 1, 2014.) The ADA mandates only that employees with disabilities receive equal access to the same insurance coverage offered to other employees.

If you believe your rights have been violated, you may file a charge of discrimination with the U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission or your state fair employment practices agency. It is illegal for employees to be punished or retaliated against for reporting violations.

HOW TO THRIVE IN THE WORKPLACE

Whether starting a new job or returning to an old one, spend your first few months learning as much as you can and demonstrating what you can do. In the workplace, what matters most is the work itself.

Consider joining professional organizations specific to your industry and those related to your disability as a way of expanding your network. Groups such as the “Society of Healthcare Professionals with Disabilities” or the “Foundation for Science and Disability” can help connect people with similar experiences to share resources and offer support.

When Erin Cobb rejoined Wells Fargo after her injury, she participated in events with others in the company’s disability network.

“It was amazing,” she says. “I met incredible people from all over the company and I left inspired.”

These colleagues reminded her she wasn’t alone, that it was possible to navigate workplace barriers and that a disability didn’t define who she was or what she could do.



If you are looking for more information on employment with disabilities or have a specific question, Reeve Foundation Information Specialists are available Monday through Friday, toll-free at 800-539-7309 from 9 am to 5 pm EST.

The Reeve Foundation offers comprehensive resources and booklets on hundreds of topics related to living with paralysis, including:

Reeve Foundation Employment Web Page <https://www.christopherreeve.org/living-with-paralysis/costs-and-insurance/work-and-benefits>

For more resources, see the above section of the Reeve Foundation website.

Reeve Foundation Employment and Benefits Fact Sheet

<https://s3.amazonaws.com/reeve-assets-production/Employment-and-Work-Programs-9-20.pdf>

Includes a list of job boards for people living with disabilities.

Additional resources related to employment for people with disabilities:

AbilityJOBS <https://abilityjobs.com>

American with Disabilities Act <https://www.ada.gov/index.html>

CAREERS & the disABLED Magazine's Career Expo for People with Disabilities
<https://www.eop.com/expos.php>

Council of State Administrators of Vocational Rehabilitation: Vocational Rehabilitation Agency by state

<https://www.csavr.org/stateagencydirectory>

Job Accommodation Network (JAN) <https://askjan.org>

Maryland Department of Budget and Management:

Maryland Special Options Eligible List

<https://dbm.maryland.gov/jobseekers/Pages/Disabilities.aspx>

National Assistive Technology Act Technical Assistance and Training (AT3) Center: Assistive Technology Programs by state

<https://www.at3center.net/stateprogram>

Social Security Administration: Plan to Achieve Self Support (PASS)

<https://www.ssa.gov/disabilityresearch/wi/pass.htm>

Social Security Administration: Red Book

<https://www.ssa.gov/redbook>

Social Security Administration: Ticket to Work

<https://choosework.ssa.gov/index.html>

State of Illinois: Interagency Committee on Employees with Disabilities

<https://www2.illinois.gov/sites/iced/programs/Pages/Intern.aspx>

U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, Career Outlook
<https://www.bls.gov/careeroutlook/about.htm>

U.S. Department of Labor: Workforce Recruitment Program for College Students with Disabilities
<https://www.dol.gov/agencies/odep/employers/workforce-recruitment-program>

U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission
<https://www.eeoc.gov>

U.S. Office of Personnel Management: Selective Placement Program Coordinator (SPPC) Directory
<https://www.opm.gov/policy-data-oversight/disability-employment/selective-placement-program-coordinator-directory>

Schedule A Information:

U.S. Department of Labor: Sample Schedule A letter
<https://www.dol.gov/sites/dolgov/files/odep/wrp/schedulealetter.pdf>

U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission: ABCs of Schedule A
<https://www.eeoc.gov/publications/abcs-schedule-tips-applicants-disabilities-getting-federal-jobs>

USA Jobs: Schedule A Hiring
<https://www.usajobs.gov/Help/working-in-government/unique-hiring-paths/individuals-with-disabilities>



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