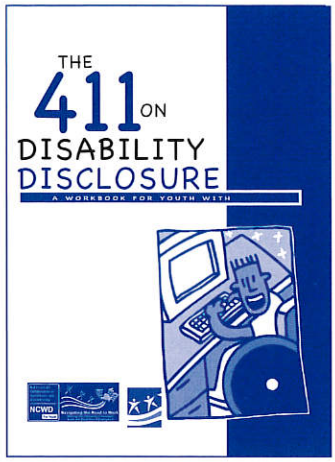
CYBER DISCLOSURE FOR YOUTH WITH DISABILITIES



Introduction

This document is a supplement to *The 411 on Disability Disclosure: A Workbook for Youth with Disabilities,* which helps youth learn about disability disclosure and what it means for them. Since the toolkit was written in 2005, there have been many advances in technology that have changed what youth need to know about disability disclosure.

Search sites like Google, social networking sites like Facebook, and micro-blogging sites like Twitter have added a new element to disclosure. Now it is possible to disclose your disability on the Internet without even being aware of it. This can be as simple as a picture of you using a wheelchair, a comment on your friend's blog about disability, or your profile posted on a disability organization's website. The goal of this document is to provide you with suggestions about how to make an informed decision about your own disability disclosure and to manage your disclosure online.

Definitions

- **Disclosure:** the process of intentionally releasing personal information about yourself for a specific purpose
- **Social Networking Sites (SNS):** web-based services that allow individuals to: (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a system; (2) build a list of other users with whom they share a connection; and (3) view their list of connections and those made by others within the system
- **Accommodation:** an adjustment to an environment, which makes it possible for youth with disabilities to participate equally

Why Disclose Purposefully?

In high school you may have had an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) team to help you decide what accommodations and modifications you need to be successful in school. However, in the adult world the only way to get the accommodations you need is to

ask for them yourself. As an adult, you are eligible for adult services and support based on your disability and your situation only if you disclose your disability.

As *The 411 on Disability Disclosure* mentions, the timing and planning of your disclosure can be very important to getting appropriate supports with the least amount of stigma and other negative consequences. Disclosing your disability to a future employer in a strategic way is vital. However, this may not be possible if there is information about you online that automatically reveals your disability.

Many employers and recruitment agencies use Internet search engines and read SNS, websites, and blogs to learn more about job applicants. This is why it is important to be aware of the information about you that is available to the public on the Internet.

ACTIVITY #1: REVIEWING YOUR DIGITAL PRESENCE

Choose one or more search engines such as Google or Yahoo and type in your first and last name into the search box. Did you find pictures of yourself, your bio, something you said or something you once wrote? Do not limit your self-investigation to just one search engine as they all are slightly different. Also, do not forget to check the "images," "news" and "newsgroup" directories that are available on some search engines.

Look through the results and think about the following questions:

- How many of the results are really you versus someone with a similar name?
- Do any of the results reveal your disability? If so, what specific details are mentioned?
- Do any of the results highlight activities with disability groups or organizations?
- How many pictures of you come up in the results?
- Do any of the pictures highlight your disability?

Reflect on the following questions:

- Did you know what information about you was available online prior to this search?
- If your disability is disclosed in any of the results, how do you feel about that?
- If your disability is disclosed, will the information you share with a potential employer change?

Advantages and Disadvantages of Disclosure

There are both advantages and disadvantages to disclosing your disability on the Internet.

ADVANTAGES

- Marketing yourself as a successful youth with a disability
- Advocating for disability issues through participation in online disability groups
- Empowering the community by discussing your disability in a way that mobilizes others
- Meeting other people with disabilities who can serve as an online support system or peer network
- Giving others, including potential employers, a clearer impression of you and your abilities (e.g. a website talking about your work as a volunteer coordinator or mentor highlights your community involvement and leadership)

DISADVANTAGES

- Having others know about a part of your identity that you may not be comfortable sharing publicly with strangers
- Having personal and sensitive information on the Internet can be extremely difficult and embarrassing
- Having old or outdated information online could lead to misconceptions about your skills, knowledge and personal attributes
- Having people you meet online assume things about you because of your disability
- Having potential employers know you have a disability and not hiring you because of their discomfort with or ignorance about people with disabilities

Disclosure by Others

The ultimate goal of this guide is for you to make an informed choice about disclosing your disability. This decision may change based on the particular person, situation, setting, and need for accommodations. However, with regard to the Internet, there are times when your disability may be inadvertently disclosed by others.

Let us look at some examples in which your disability may be disclosed by others through the Internet:

- You may belong or have belonged to a disability organization. It is possible that they may have posted information about you or a picture of you on their website.
- You may have had an employer post your bio on its website that mentions your connection to a disability group. If you have a non-apparent disability, having your name associated with a disability related organization may suggest to a future employer that you have a disability.
- You may have friends who post pictures of you on a personal website or SNS. If you have a visible disability, some pictures might inform any future employer about your disability.

For example, Juan participated in a panel of youth with disabilities at his university, where he discussed the challenges of living with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder. The transcript from the panel, including Juan's name, was posted in the university's website. There was also a reporter from the university's newspaper who attended the panel and wrote an article about the event including Juan's first and last name. The

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university's newspaper posts volumes of the paper on the university's website and archives them online for up to 10 years. Now, and for 10 more years, when a future employer searches Juan's full name they may find both the article and the transcript from this event where he openly discusses his disability. This could impact Juan's chances of getting a job for which he is qualified, if the employer reads about him and is not comfortable hiring people with disabilities.

In another example, Sharmaine recently graduated from a community college as a certified nurse's assistant. She is currently looking for jobs in local hospitals. About a month ago, she participated in a local wheelchair race and won third place. The local paper covered the race and posted a story on its website. Any future employer can search the Internet using Sharmaine's name and pull up the story of her winning third place in a wheelchair race. Along with the positive attention Sharmaine gained from placing third in the race, she also unintentionally disclosed her disability. This information could put hesitation in the minds of potential employers.

Accidental Self-Disclosure

Sometimes information that you believed private may be publicly available on the Internet. It is important to remember that the Internet is a public domain, and that many pieces of information that are believed to be private on sites like Facebook or Twitter can be accessed by doing an Internet search. For example, a Facebook profile picture often comes up in a Google image search with a person's full name. Most information posted on social networking sites is archived. It is important to remember most information posted on the Internet never disappears so be cautious of what you post.

In addition to what you may say on the Internet that could disclose your disability, where you participate on the Internet can also accidentally disclose your disability. There are many disability related blogs that people with disabilities have started to connect with and empower the disability community. Though these can be an important tool, it is important to understand that participation in a disability blog can disclose your disability publicly.

Most information shared in a blog can be accessed by anyone including potential employers. This can also include commenting on public forums and discussion groups on specific disability-related topics.

Controlling your Digital Presence

There are many potential circumstances for disclosure on the Internet that can be controlled. One option is for you to use a screen name or pseudonym to hide your identity. Also you can be careful about revealing any personally identifying information. However, this is not perfect and your real name may be discoverable. Another option is to use privacy settings to control who has access to your personal information when using SNS.

Most SNS like Facebook and MySpace have privacy settings that can be adjusted based on the amount of information the user is comfortable sharing. Privacy settings can be used to limit access of a particular user or group or limit access to particular information. These settings allow you to be very deliberate about who has access to which parts of your profile.

If you have a visible disability, you can use privacy settings to limit access to pictures that disclose your disability. If you are a member or fan of disability groups on Facebook you can limit the visibility of your group participation or choose not to become a member or fan of those specific groups.

Privacy setting capabilities are constantly changing. The potential for privacy keeps improving as technology develops. It is important that you remain informed about how to monitor access to their disclosure information and continue to be the primary decision-maker of how to strategically disclose your disability. Since each social networking site has different privacy capabilities, it is also essential to review the privacy settings on your account before posting disclosing information so you know who will have access to that information.

If you blog, participate in online discussions and forums, or micro-blog on platforms like Twitter, it is important be very careful about what you say. Because of the short length of these posts, it is easy to say something that is misinterpreted and offends others. When discussing highly sensitive and emotionally charged issues like disability it is even easier to cause misinterpretation and distress.

It is also important to never post anything on the Internet while angry. Most comments written when angry reveal information you may later regret sharing. Anger makes people impulsive, which is dangerous. Even if you later delete the comment, the angry post may never disappear.

You may be completely comfortable with having your disability disclosed on the Internet. But, if you are uncomfortable with your information or picture being posted online then, to control your Internet presence, you can ask the organization or friend to remove the information. In some cases it may be possible that the information about you online cannot be removed, and you will have to rethink the way you choose to disclose your disability with future employers.

ACTIVITY #2: CONTROLLING YOUR ONLINE PRESENCE

- Employers may use SNS to seek out additional information about you. If you have a Facebook, MySpace, or other SNS account, go on that site and spend 15-30 minutes exploring and adjusting the privacy settings. When you think you have arranged all the privacy settings to protect the information you would like to remain private, log out. Read over the new version of your profile. Are you comfortable with the amount of information that a potential employers can see?
- Review some of your online comments on blogs, SNS, or micro-blogging systems such as Twitter. Are there any comments that you want to remove because they reveal information you had not intended to share? Could any post you wrote be easily misinterpreted? Are there any comments that you may want to delete after considering what impression it gives of you?

Enhancing your Online Presence

While participation in a disability blog, discussion forum, or SNS can be an empowering experience, it is important to be aware of the public nature of these sites. Your posts can be like writing an editorial in any major newspaper where everyone in the world can read your opinion. The Internet is even easier to access now than some newspapers. If you participate actively on the Internet, providing identifiable information, you need to be comfortable with your mother, cousin, teacher, little sister, grandmother, mentor, or potential employer reading that information.

If you are comfortable having your disability disclosed on the Internet, active participation in online communities is an opportunity to market yourself as a youth with a disability. A well-written, engaging blog post or twitter comment can help bring you together with other youth around a shared characteristic, like disability. The Internet offers the chance to be an agent of change, allowing you to connect to other people regardless of location and time.

As an example, Maris has a disability and volunteers at a local disability organization doing Internet searches on disability legislation. Maris has a personal blog where she writes about what she has learned about disability laws and how she has worked to change a law for to help youth with disabilities, like her. For a future employer, Maris' blog may disclose that she has a disability, but it also shows that she understands policy, is enthusiastic about her work, and is a good communicator. Maris was able to use her Internet activities to promote herself.

Creating a blog or simple website can give you the opportunity to gain control over the results that show up when someone searches on your name. If it displays your resume, articles, press mentions, or awards, it can highlight your experiences and successes for potential employers — just like Maris.

ACTIVITY #3: ENHANCING YOUR ONLINE PRESENCE

- Make a list of the specific information, attributes, events, photos, resume, or news articles that you would like to highlight.
- Make a list of potential opportunities to include this information in various online activities that you participate.
- Consider if you want to put this plan into action and actively work to enhance your online presence.

KEY LESSONS

You have to be aware of everything you say and do on the Internet. There are some general guidelines for Internet activity that are important for all online users including youth with disabilities to keep in mind.

Review your Digital Presence

- Know what information about you is available on the Internet. Check various search engines every few months.
- Be aware of what you say and do on the Internet to make sure it does not unintentionally disclose your disability.
- Check the privacy settings on any online discussion group or SNS to ensure that you are not disclosing information that you would like to keep private.

Control your Digital Presence

- Do not post anything on the Internet that you would not want published in a newspaper and remember that such information or pictures may never disappear.
- Depending on the kind of information, article, or site on the Internet, if you find something you do not like, you can request that your information or image be removed.
- Avoid attacking other individuals or entities. Your commentary can impact your career far into the future.
- Be thoughtful and accurate in your posts, and be respectful of how other individuals may be affected.

Enhance your Digital Presence (Optional)

- Create a website that highlights you as a professional, including your resume, achievements and other positive attributes that you want a prospective employer to discover.
- If you have a personal profile on a SNS, consider creating a "professional" profile that is public and reflects information that you are comfortable sharing.
- Seek out forums, discussion groups and opportunities online where your posts and comments illustrate your expertise in a specific subject to a prospective employer.

Take Action

Now it is your turn to decide when and how to disclose your disability online. When, how, and if you disclose is completely your decision. It is important to think about whether your image on the Internet is how you would want a potential employer to view you.

The National Collaborative on Workforce and Disability for Youth (NCWD/Youth) is composed of partners with expertise in disability, education, employment, and workforce development issues. NCWD/Youth is housed at the Institute for Educational Leadership in Washington, DC. The Collaborative is charged with assisting state and local workforce development systems to integrate youth with disabilities into their service strategies. This Supplement was written by Kristen Schiavone and Day Al-Mohamed.

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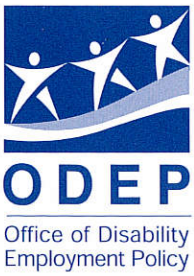
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