- [Brian] Hello, this is Brian Warner, I'm a counselor with Iowa Vocational Rehabilitation Services and I'm going to do a presentation today on some strategies for clients that need to disclose a disability to an employer. Just a little bit about myself, I have a disability myself, I'm in a wheelchair so I'm going to reference that a little bit because I do have some experience personally on some of the challenges of trying to disclose a disability and then I'm also going to use some broad examples of individuals that I have worked with in the past. So just a quick overview.

First thing I'm going to say is there is no magic bullet, meaning that there is not one thing that you can give a client that's going to work in all situations. I'm going to refer back to this and most of the bullet points on this slide many times but just because maybe I give an example of a way for an individual to ask for an accommodation does not mean that that's going to work in every situation. Always keep in mind that everyone's disability is different and it affects them differently. I think even us, that are in that profession sometimes tend to cookie cut people, not necessarily intentionally but sometimes you may be thinking well I have this individual and we need to get this person to school, stool, excuse me, needs to get a stool and perhaps that person had a back injury and now you're working with someone else has a back injury so you start thinking, oh I'll just get the same stool that I got the other person and that's not necessarily always going to work. Each person is a little bit different so always make sure that when you're working with a person about disclosing their disability, that you are focusing on the individual and not just the disability on a whole. You have to let the customer or the client steer the ship. You can can up with some of the best things possible for them to say and if they don't have buy in into what you are presenting to them, it's probably not going to work out so always make sure that you are checking in with the client or the customer and making sure are they comfortable with this, what are your thoughts on the situation. If you were going to say, disclose a disability because you needed a school, stool to sit down, what's the best way to do that and always make sure that you're getting their input on everything or it might not work. Finally, remember that everyone's comfort level is going to be different and we need to meet the customer or the client where they're at so again, I'll use an example of someone that I worked with recently that wanted to do some small production, putting some parts together and I knew of a business that does that sort of a thing and I was pretty sure I could get an accommodation to help the individual get some sort of a stool or have extra breaks to sit down and so in my head I'm thinking, oh this is going to be simple, I should be able to do this no problem and I knew the players, I knew the business and what I didn't do, what I should've done is I wasn't meeting the counselor, the client where they were because that person was very self conscious about their disability and even though the stool would work, she didn't want anyone else looking at her differently or wondering why she has a stool and other people don't and so that's something that I had to work for before I could even get to the point where I was going to ask for the accommodation and so again, you got to meet the customer or client where they're at. Some people are going to be very comfortable like myself about talking about their disability and some people are not. It's something that's maybe very private to them or it could be a disability that they have recently acquired and they're still working through what their life is now that things have changed and they might not be able to do everything that they once did so always make sure that you are checking in and kind of a good way also is when someone's talking about their disability, pay attention to some of their non verbals, you know are they making eye contact, do they talk quietly, do they seem depressed, those sometimes are some good keys when they're even talking with us about how comfortable they feel about talking about their disability. So I'm going to give you a few keys here and again, I'm going to be a little bit repetitive in some of the things here but first thing you want to do is know your customer. What is their comfort level so obviously we just talked about that. Again, knowing what somebody's comfort level is is going to make all the difference because you or I may think it's not a big deal to ask for an accommodation for a stool but to somebody else that could be a very big deal so always understand their comfort level. You have to know, is this person going to say too much or too little and by that I would say you have some individuals that when they talk about their disability, they're going to go on and on about all the surgeries maybe that they have had or, I used to work at this place and this happened, that's no longer why I can be here and obviously when you start saying too much, you can possibly scare away a potential employer or give them the wrong impression. Saying too little, you might have someone that will just say well, I had a back surgery and just leave it at that instead of saying, I had a back surgery but I'm now fully healed and I think that I can do the job a way that you want it so you know, when you're rehearsing some of this, make sure that you are kind of identifying are they saying the right thing because saying too much or too little can cause a big issue. And the words that you use matter. This is something that I always tell people. There are certain words that we want to stay away from and I actually probably just used one in the last example but again, I'm just going to use a right now, a back injury. Instead of maybe using the word injury, or maybe even back injury, I would tell them you know, what about saying something like, I had some health issues in the past, these have now been rectified and I feel like I can do the job with reasonable accommodations. Instead of saying some words like injury, surgery, using a lot of words that would seem to show a connotation that you cannot do the job so always say that the words that the people use matter and always make sure that they are using words that are not going to scare away the employer. Know the purpose. So there might be a couple of different reasons why a disability is being disclosed. The first one, attempting to obtain accommodations. So again, the stool, I had an individual I worked with recently that we were trying to work with modifying the job. He had a fairly significant learning disability in the area of reading and because of that, he could not do the part of the job where he had to do a little bit of the inventory very well because it required him to read and fill out a form and so we were working on how the best way to disclose a disability would be in that area. Sometimes you may want to disclose a disability because of removing the unknown and what I mean by that and I'm going to use a personal example being in a wheelchair if I roll into an interview, somebody's going to see me in a wheelchair and they may not mean to but they're going to start wondering in their head, well why is this person in the wheelchair and obviously we know that employers cannot ask that so sometimes it's important to maybe disclose the disability if the client is comfortable with it to remove some of the unknown because I'm going to go into this topic a little bit later but sometimes there are some preconceived notions about certain disabilities whether they be visible or hidden disabilities and if the client is comfortable by jumping out front and saying hey, I'm in a wheelchair but it doesn't limit me very much. I've read through the job description and I don't think this is going to be an issue. Sometimes taking away that unknown is very helpful. And finally something that I have noticed is some people disclose their disability in an interview because of pride. Some people are very proud of what they have overcome in life and while they should be but again sometimes that can become an issue. An example would be somebody that let's say got injured playing sports and had you know, is now in a wheelchair and had to kind of rearrange their entire life and made it through school. That's something that person should be very proud of but sometimes when people are proud of it it gets to be how should I say, overwhelming in an interview because they want to tell them about every single thing that they overcome and so I've had to work with people before that I'm not saying you should not tell, say this about yourself because this is something that you identify with, you identify as being an individual that had a horrible accident and had the courage and the ability to overcome it and we don't wan to discount that. However, instead of talking about all the surgeries, let's come up with something that's very short and simple. When I was in high school I had a injury that left me in a wheelchair, I had to overcome many obstacles and that has helped me grow as a person and will also help me overcome challenges in the job, I'm just throwing that out there. But something like that so again, sometimes when we're talking with people we're maybe trying to help them come up with things that they shouldn't say and don't always just discount that somebody shouldn't disclose their disability because to them, that might be something that they are very prideful for. You want to know the business that you're going into. You want to know maybe what a reasonable accommodation may be for the business so if they were disclosing for a reasonable accommodation, have an idea of what that reasonable accommodation is before moving forward. Otherwise you're going to be doing kind of one piece of the puzzle without the other and that wouldn't be beneficial to the client. Know who the players are. That sometimes is an interesting one. Depending on again what the person is disclosing, it might not be beneficial to disclose the disability to every single person in the agency that or the business that the person is applying to so who are the people that are going to make the change? Who needs to know about the accommodations? Is it a manager? Is it an HR person? So having an idea where that person can go, can be very beneficial. And sometimes depending on the business, knowing what not to say is as valuable as what to say and what I'm kind of getting at at this point is let's take a business that has a lot of physical requirements and maybe that person knows that they can do that job with accommodations but what we don't want to go in saying is okay, this job has maybe 100 pound lifting restriction and maybe that person had a back surgery 20 years ago but their backs completely fine, I would inform the person, listen you're going to have to be doing a lot of lifting here. If you think that you want to disclose your back injury that was 20 years ago, that could scare them off because you're going to be doing a lot of lifting and they don't want to see you as a liability issue so knowing the job can sometimes effect how you want to disclose the disability. I decided to do a slide here on visible versus hidden disabilities because this is something that I have a little bit of experience with myself. So the approach and the challenges may be a little different and again by visible I'm saying something that when the person comes in you know there's a disability so generally it's probably going to be something maybe a little more physical like being in a wheelchair or maybe a person walks with a limp or has difficulty standing and sitting from a chair. That's what I would consider a visible disability versus a hidden disability which might be, learning, maybe it's mental health, anxiety, something like that. So individuals with visible disabilities must overcome stereotypes and preconceived notions of ability level and I'm speaking here from some personal experience. I've gone into jobs before and I got my masters degree and I'll go and interview for a job and they'll refer to me as, hey sport or they talk to me like I'm five years old and so I think that's because some people think that just because somebody is in a wheelchair that they are a lower functioning intellectually and so that can be very frustrating sometimes to over come stereotypes or again, somebody being in a wheelchair, there's a lot of things that you can do in a wheelchair that maybe not everyone in the general public would know so sometimes again, you have to step out, remove the 10,000 pound gorilla in the room and really be able to sell yourself to show that hey, just because I'm in a wheelchair there's a ton of things that I can do. You need me to get on a stool, look it, I can get right out of my wheelchair and hop on a stool to be on the line just like anyone else so that's something to if you have a visible disability that can be a barrier. As far as a hidden disability, I put that they might have to overcome disbelief and or suspicion and what I mean by that is sometimes people that, let's use my example that I used a slide or two ago about my individual that had to do some inventory and had the reading disability. When we were working with that business, one of the things that we were running into is the managers just thought that the kid was lazy and not trying very hard. He didn't necessarily believe that this person had a learning disability and with the clients permission, I contacted the business and explained to him that he does have a documented disability, we've been working with him in the past so that can be something to and obviously that can be again, very frustrating and maybe somewhat embarrassing if somebody has to go out and explain the reason why this job isn't getting done the way that the boss wants it and sometimes some employers, maybe not intentionally, but they just think that they're using an excuse to get out of the job or they just think that they are lazy, not trying hard enough. So just some things to think about when you're working with people that visible versus a hidden disability. The way you approach it might want to be a little different, depending on what your client has for a disability and of course, there are definitely people that have both visual a visible and hidden disabilities as well. Sometimes it's not how but it's when. So as you can see by my picture here this penguin picked a really bad time to jump off this glacier and so what I'm getting at here so once you figure out what you want to say or how you want to ask, how you want to disclose the disability then the key becomes now when do I do it. And that again, there's no magic bullet. Depending on what the situation is, you could do it a little bit differently so before the interview, why would you disclose a disability before an interview? I guess what I would say, generally I tend to tell people to go through an interview because sometimes you just do not know until you get into an interview but I guess if there was something where you wanted to work for a farming company and you knew they had a ton of silos that you might have to climb up but you really wanted to work for that farming company, then maybe you would call that farming company and say hey, I'd really love working for you, you're a great organization, I heard a lot of great things, is everything that you have climbing up silos? And you might not even necessarily have to disclose a disability there, you could maybe just leave it at that but I maybe the person could say, I have no ability to climb up the silo. So that would be maybe a reason why you would want to disclose before the interview. During the interview, an example I would give is again, maybe someone with a back injury and you're going through an interview and it comes up that you have to lift certain things that was not listed on the job description. That might be something where then you would want to disclose the disability because if you're pretty sure that is not going to work, the job is not going to work, then there's no use kind of wasting everyone's time so that might be where you would say, boy I didn't know that I had to do all that lifting, is that something that is going to be required all the time because I do have a back injury. Myself personally, I have my social work degree and I remember one time I went into an interview and the job description never said anything about home visits but I got in there and low and behold you had to do home visits and obviously not everyone is going to have an accessible home for me to get into and so that's when I just kind of had to stop the interview and obviously being in a wheelchair, they were thinking the same thing and say well listen, is there any way around this otherwise, this isn't going to work so that might be a reason why you would do it during the interview. During the job offer. This is usually the one that I recommend the most just because even though we obviously know that employers are not allowed to discriminate based on disability, we want the individual to be hired because of the traits that the individual has and not be rejected because of maybe some concerns. So if a person is getting, going through a job interview and 95 percent of the things sounds good and there's one thing that maybe they're a little concerned about, I would tell that individual you know what, wait till they offer you the job. They're going to probably ask you, can you do the job with or without reasonable accommodations and as long as you think that you can, then say yes and then if they call you back and offer you the job, you can go back and say well, I would love to accept this job but first I was a little concerned about some of the computer skills, I have carpel tunnel syndrome and I was just wondering, would it be possible for me to have a special keyboard that would allow some support for my wrist and that's usually how I would recommend a lot of the people do it is during the job offer because that's a good time to figure it out because now you know that they want you because of you and they're not concerned about any disability issues and we know already that they want to hire this person so then they are obviously bound to make that reasonable accommodation. After the job has started, I guess this would probably be one where the person maybe thought the job was going very well and then once the job started, it wasn't or you know, it just wasn't as it appears and then after the job started if the person was struggling, that's maybe when you would want to disclose the disability. So again, that's kind of a key to and every situation again, is going to be different so I can't say you know, if somebody had a physical disability, this is when you should disclose it or someone is asking for extra breaks due to some anxiety, this is when you should disclose it. But just kind of keep in mind, once you come up with how the best way to disclose the disability or what that best way is, then the key is to figure out when do you want to disclose the disability. Thank you for listening, hopefully you didn't mind me rambling too much. I did put my email down at the end if you ever want to email me any questions. Thank you very much.