

# Encouraging Employees with Disabilities to Self-Identify

In recent years, corporate America has undergone significant shifts in how it talks about disability and employment, with leading companies now actively incorporating it into their workforce diversity and inclusion goals.

In 2014, updates to Section 503 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 (Section 503) added further fuel to these shifts.

Section 503 requires covered entities, namely federal contractors and subcontractors, to take affirmative action to hire people with disabilities. The 2014 updates strengthened these requirements, creating, for the first time ever, measurable goals. They also set a requirement that covered employers invite applicants and employees to self-identify as people with disabilities.

Self-identification is an important tool that employers can use to achieve their goals under Section 503. It is also an important tool for the U.S. Department of Labor's Office of Federal Contract Compliance Programs (which enforces Section 503), because it produces the data needed to measure disability employment progress on a national scale.

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The Employer Assistance and Resource Network on Disability Inclusion (EARN) is a resource for employers seeking to recruit, hire, retain and advance qualified employees with disabilities. It is funded by the U.S. Department of Labor's Office of Disability Employment Policy under a cooperative agreement with The Viscardi Center. For more information, visit [AskEARN.org](http://AskEARN.org).

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## Six Tips for Encouraging Self-Identification

Research conducted in recent years has brought to light a number of strategies employers can use to foster an inclusive work culture, one in which applicants and employees with disabilities feel comfortable and supported in self-identifying. These include:

- 1** | Communicate why you are asking employees to disclose. For example, if the company will benefit from having a workforce that mirrors the company's target market, which includes people with disabilities, explain such. Share the ways that self-identification will benefit the company as a whole and invite employees to be part of the company's journey toward greater inclusiveness.
- 2** | Provide disability etiquette and awareness training for managers and employees at all levels to promote acceptance and understanding of disability. In turn, this will help develop a "disability confident" workplace.
- 3** | Communicate the definition of disability as set forth by the Americans with Disabilities Act and share illustrative examples with employees throughout the application and employment process. One of the reasons employees with disabilities don't self-identify is that they may not realize they qualify as having a disability.
- 4** | Ensure that employees have multiple avenues to disclose their disabilities, allowing for anonymity or self-identification by name, and regularly refer to these avenues in company communications about diversity and inclusion.
- 5** | Be up front about the ways in which the information will be used if an employee discloses that they have a disability and explain how anonymity or confidentiality will be protected. Monitor that these protections are maintained.
- 6** | When asking employees with disabilities to self-identify, be sure to communicate the ways in which disclosing disability can benefit them. Unless employees are seeking accommodations, they may think long and hard about the risks versus benefits of self-identifying, even anonymously. As such, companies should be able to explain the benefits, including access to resources, accommodations and a community of other employees with disabilities.

It is important to note that invitations to self-identify as individuals with disabilities are permissible only when the question is being asked for affirmative action purposes such as those prescribed by Section 503 or a voluntarily adopted program.

For more information about disability self-identification, see the following:



***Do Ask, Do Tell:  
Encouraging  
Employees with  
Disabilities to  
Self-Identify***

This report, published by The Conference Board with support from the Employer Assistance and Resource Network on Disability Inclusion (EARN), was developed based on a survey of 98 companies and in-depth interviews with disability experts. It is available on the EARN website at [AskEARN.org](http://AskEARN.org).



***Inclusion@Work  
Framework,  
Component #7:  
Measure Success:  
Accountability &  
Self-identification***

This component of EARN's Inclusion@Work Framework for Building a Disability-Inclusive Organization explores how organizations can measure and grow the success of their workplace disability inclusion efforts, including through initiatives to encourage employees with disabilities to self-identify. It is available on the EARN website at [AskEARN.org](http://AskEARN.org).