Series 4 : Strengths

Ebook 1 : Embracing your strengths



EMBRACING YOUR STRENGTHS

MAKE DISABILITY YOUR 'PLUS' BY IDENTIFYING THE STRENGTHS YOU HAVE GAINED THROUGH MANAGING IT.

myplusstudentsclub.com

MyPLUS STUDENTS' CLUB

INTRODUCTION

When it comes to disability it's very easy to think about all the things you cannot do, or that you can no longer do. However, it is time to think about what you can do and what skills, strengths and competencies you do have. We all develop skills as a result of our experiences and this is also true if you have to manage a disability on a day to day basis in a world that isn't always geared up for it. These are skills that employers are potentially looking for.

In this ebook we will be exploring the additional strengths you have gained through managing a disability and how you can make your disability a 'plus' when applying to jobs. By taking ownership of your strengths and bringing these experiences to the forefront in your application, we hope that your application will stand out from the competition and catch the eye of the recruiters.

This is the first book of the Strengths series. Visit www.myplusstudentsclub.com for careers advice and more information on applying with a disability. Become a member on the website to download more ebooks on topics such as informing an employer about your disability and requesting workplace adjustments.



STRENGTHS: WHAT ARE THEY AND WHY IS KNOWING THEM SO IMPORTANT?

Strengths are talents, interests, abilities and strong character traits that you can leverage upon and use to accomplish your personal or professional goals. Some of these will come naturally to you and others may have been acquired as a result of your personal experiences, including those related to managing a disability.

Understanding your natural talents, as well as the additional strengths you have developed over the course of your life and studies, can provide you with clarity in your job search and accelerate your career development. For example, if you know that you excel at numerical tasks or enjoy interacting with people, you can focus on refining those skills and apply for work experience in specific sectors and job scopes where those skills are relevant. Gaining an awareness of what you do best and what you enjoy doing are the first steps to setting your career goals and achieving them.

Knowing your strengths will also give you the confidence to answer common interview questions, i.e. "Why should we hire you?" or "What sets you apart from the other candidates?" When you apply for a job, employers are interested to know what the skills and unique attributes that you can bring to the role and organisation. Therefore, you should be prepared to talk about your strengths and demonstrate to the employer why you are the ideal candidate for the role.

If you have not identified what your strengths are, it is not too late to discover them at university. It is important to remember that you may not be the same person you were in school or in your first year of college; you actively develop new strengths as a result of your experiences and the day-to-day activities you engage in, such as managing a disability at university, working a part time job or leading a society.



DIFFERENT WAYS TO DISCOVER YOUR STRENGTHS

To start, take a general strengths test

There are many different ways to identify your strengths. Graduate employers often include an aptitude or personality test as part of the recruitment process, and you can find similar strengths assessments to complete for free online.

Here are a few to try:

- **High 5 strengths test:** Learn what you are good at and what activities energise you
- **RichardStep Strengths and Weaknesses Aptitude Test:** Get to know your aptitude and suitable career paths for you
- **VIA Character Strengths Survey:** Find out the 24 strengths in your profile
- **Jung Typology Test:** Understand your personality type and the jobs that you may be interested in

While the aim of these tests is to determine your general aptitude or personality 'type', and suggest suitable career choices based on your strengths profile, remember that it is you who knows yourself best. Hence, you will need to reflect on your own experiences, including those related to your disability, in order to understand where your existing strengths lie and where you have the potential to develop new strengths.

Reflect on your experiences to identify specific talents and character strengths

Now, take time to reflect on your day-to-day experiences and identify areas in your personal life, academic studies and work, where your strengths have enabled you to excel. By finding real examples in your life where you have completed a task well, provided excellent service to someone or overcome disability-related challenges to achieve success, your talents and character strengths will become clearer and you can begin to map out goals for your future career.

For example, in your academic course what do you naturally excel in or do better than your peers? What clubs and societies do you hold leadership positions in? What types of roles or activities do you find most energizing? These questions can give an indication of your analytical ability, visual communication skills, leadership quality etc.

If you are managing a disability or long term health condition on top of your degree, you will have developed additional character strengths such as resilience and determination to deal with a new situation, adaptability to manage changing circumstances, problem solving skills etc.

Find out what the role requires and match your strengths to the job description

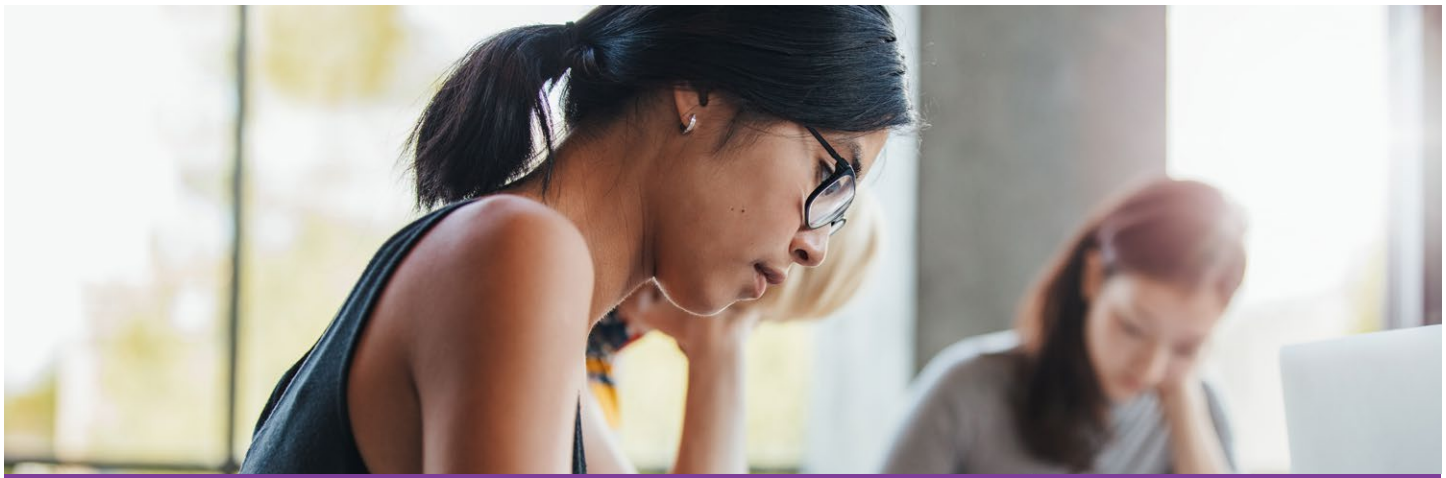
Another way to identify strengths is to read various job descriptions and pick out the types of competencies and qualities that employers are looking for in their ideal candidate and challenge yourself to find examples to back each one up. When advertising a job, employers will be searching for candidates with specific strengths that will enable them to succeed in the role and progress in the organisation, these strengths could be technical competencies, work ethic, team player etc.

Try looking at the list of strengths that are most commonly sought after by graduate employers below and pick five that best represent you:

Adaptable	Accountable	Ambitious	Creative
Communicator	Detail oriented	Leader	Motivated
Positive	Proactive	Problem-solving	Resilient
Risk taker			

The next time you are putting together a CV or completing a job application form, make sure you are able to showcase one or two of these strengths. However, be accurate and ensure you choose strengths that you actually possess rather than just because it is in the job description. You should be able to talk about and demonstrate your strengths with examples to match your own experiences and competencies to those required for the job.

Alternatively, you can think outside the box and identify relevant strengths you have developed through managing a disability and ways in which these can be applied to the role.



BE OPEN TO SHARING YOUR EXPERIENCE WITH OTHERS

Embrace your strengths and be open to sharing your experiences of disability with your friends and family. The people in your network may have qualities and strengths that they admire about you. Thus, having an open and honest conversation about your experience with disability gives you an opportunity to get feedback on your strengths and find out how others see you when you are performing at your best.

Make a list of 5-10 people who know you well and engage with you frequently, these could be your family, friends, colleagues, mentor or manager. You can select individuals from different networks you participate in to gain a broader picture of your strengths and how you perform in various settings.

Ask them to tell you what unique strengths you have displayed when performing at your best. Read and reflect on different stories to identify common themes. You may be surprised by the strengths and qualities that people appreciate about you but you have never considered a strength.

You can then write a strengths profile and reflect on the strengths that you have gained through your experience with disability. Additionally, if you are facing any disability related challenges, being open allows you to seek support from your network.



YOUR 'PLUS': STRENGTHS DEVELOPED AS A RESULT OF HAVING A DISABILITY

We mentioned at the beginning of this ebook that you will have developed additional strengths / skills through managing a disability. Thus, being able to identify these strengths and articulate the disability-related challenges you have overcome to gain these strengths will enable you to stand out as a candidate with a 'plus'.

Helen & the MyPlus story

Director of MyPlus Students' Club, Helen Cooke set up MyPlus with a mission to ensure that having a disability or long term health condition doesn't prevent anyone from having the career they want to have. Not only does she want disabled individuals to realise their career ambitions, she also wants employers to benefit from the unique talents and strengths that disabled individuals can, and do, bring to an organisation.

Helen uses a wheelchair as a result of a childhood spinal injury. After graduation, she completed a management programme at M&S and 3 ½ years later moved to Mars, where she cut out a career in HR. Not only did this ignite her passion for graduate recruitment, it also gave her the grounding she required to set up MyPlus Consulting.

When asked about the impact her disability has had on her career, Helen said:

"I don't believe I am any more special than anyone else. But I do believe my disability has given me something extra."

Helen tells us the strengths she developed as a result of her disability include:

- "**Determination** – to overcome the barriers in front of me and do what I want when others are trying to stop me
- **Problem solving** – to get around daily challenges and obstacles such as lack of access or lifts not working.
- **Communication** – to articulate to others what I need when I can't do it myself.
- **Interpersonal skills** – to build relationships with others, particularly when I need them to assist me."

These strengths that Helen acquired through managing her disability enabled her to apply successfully to Mars and enjoy a long and fulfilling career at the firm. Today, those same strengths drive her desire to help individuals and organisations realise new possibilities.

What is your 'plus'?

We encourage you to discover your 'plus' or the additional strengths you have gained through disability. These could be:

- Determination: to go to university despite a sickness or disability-related challenge
- Flexibility: to adapt to and manage a new condition
- Organisation skills: to coordinate medical appointments and academic work
- Resilience: to cope with disability and the judgements made.

Aim to identify two or three key strengths and skills, and for each of these you need to be able to provide a couple of examples related to your disability to demonstrate why they are a strength. Ideally each skill will have been developed by a different experience.

Start by considering what you have to do on a daily basis that your non-disabled friends don't. If you're looking for inspiration, head to the Faces of MyPlus page on www.myplusstudentsclub.com and read how disability confident graduates discovered their strengths and 'plus'.

Examples

"My 'plus' is determination to overcome obstacles. The determination to show other people who suffer from the same condition you can still live a normal, content life, without assuming that an Inflammatory Bowel Disease will hold you back. I have suffered from Ulcerative Colitis (UC) for the last 11 years."

Gabriella was the first in her family to attend university and obtain a degree, and the first to apply and work on a graduate scheme. **Read how her 'plus' enabled her to persevere and succeed.**



"My 'plus' is that I'm organised; having a disability means that I need to be organised in order to go about my day-to-day life. I used to view these extra tasks I had to do negatively and as a waste of my time, however it recently occurred to me that the organisational skills I have developed are actually very valuable in the world of work and enhance the academic skills I developed during my time at university. "

Dean Chaffer has been able to apply his 'plus' to work more efficiently. **Read how he changed his perspective regarding disability as 'plus'.**







"My stammer was not something I had really addressed until I went to university. Over time, the network I established gave me the confidence to eventually join the student radio setup, and during my final year I took the step to co-host a weekly show which was broadcast throughout the campus. My 'plus' is resourcefulness; my university experience has equipped me with the confidence to manage my disability and not let it hold me back."

Chris' 'plus' led him to a summer internship and eventually a full time job.
Read how he did it.

TOP TIPS

- Take a strengths test, reflect on your own experiences and read job descriptions to identify the relevant strengths.
- Choose strengths that will enable you to stand out rather than those that just about anybody could claim.
- Develop at least one example or 'story' to illustrate each of your strengths.
- Be accurate and ensure your choose strengths that you actually possess rather than just because it is in the job description.

CONCLUSION....

We hope this book has inspired you to discover your strengths, as well as the additional skills which you have developed as a result of your disability. As you embark on your early career, taking ownership of your disability and knowing your 'plus' will enable you to pursue new opportunities and achieve your highest potential.

For more advice and information, become a member on **www.myplusstudentsclub.com** to download ebooks on topics such as informing an employer about your disability and requesting workplace adjustments.