Civil Service Fast Streamer: Why I wish I had disclosed my disability sooner

Chloe Lianos (BSc in Chemistry, 2012)

I was diagnosed with Crohn’s disease six months before arriving at Sussex. During Fresher’s week I was still coming to terms with what it meant for me and how I felt about being disabled. Not having any physical symptoms, I found it hard to explain to others that I had a disability that needed accommodating. Luckily, the Student Support Unit was excellent in helping me discuss what extra help I needed.

Crohn’s has definitely steered my life in a direction that I didn’t anticipate. Prior to fully understanding my condition I was adamant that I wanted to be a doctor or to start my own social enterprise. Coming to terms with the limitations I face – for example, exposure to stress can lead to intensive periods in hospital and lots of time in bed – was a tricky and uncomfortable journey that ultimately lead me to understanding myself and what drives me in great depth. With the help of my NHS specialist team, the Careers and Employability Centre and the Student Support Unit, I identified what was achievable in terms of work and potential avenues for me to gain a meaningful, challenging, and most importantly, accommodating career.

With a keen sense of public service, the public sector had always caught my eye. I was even more taken with it when I discovered that the Civil Service is a Disability Confident Employer. But what does that actually mean? Well, alongside almost 6,000 other employers, the Civil Service is committed to supporting disabled individuals in the workplace and ensuring that everyone has the opportunity to excel. Support ranges from physical reasonable adjustments in the office, like specialised desks and computers, to flexible working and special leave for health appointments and periods of ill health.

All of these factors encouraged me to apply to the Civil Service Fast Stream. It took me two attempts at the application before I was accepted. The first time I applied I was adamant I would go through the full selection process, which involved multiple tests and lengthy assessment days. It was no surprise that I didn’t make it through as I didn’t do well during the tests – I had a particularly bad day with my Crohn’s. Accepting that the stress of the application may have exacerbated my Crohn’s, I discussed the matter with the Careers and Employability Centre and they highlighted the Guaranteed Interview Scheme (GIS) that the Civil Service Fast Stream offers. The GIS helps disabled individuals through the application process and skips the first stressful hurdles.

The problem for me was the fact that you had to opt into the GIS and that felt like admitting defeat to my disability. Discussing this with the Student Support Unit, I realised that, actually, by disclosing my disability I was giving myself the equal footing I deserved. I’m gutted I didn’t disclose my disability earlier. By keeping it hidden I ended up delaying the start of my career. If I’d been more open from the start I would’ve received the support from the Civil Service I needed during the first application. Who knows, I may still not have had been accepted, but it would have made the whole experience significantly less stressful and therefore limited the flare up of my Crohn’s.

But look at me now! I’m two years into the Fast Stream and I’ve already project-managed the policy of a policing data programme at the Home Office, worked on EU exit farming policy at DEFRA, supported ministers and lords in debates at the Houses of Parliament, and now I’m managing the development of emergency temporary accommodation across London. Throughout my time at the Civil Service my colleagues have been incredibly supportive and understanding, helping me to manage my condition and excel at my work. Be proud of your disability – it’s part of what makes you, you!