



COMMUNICATION

Tool 2: Disability Etiquette

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ESTABLISHING COMMUNICATION NEEDS

Establishing Communication Needs

The first and most effective way of ensuring your organization's communication is accessible and inclusive, is by asking employees about their communication needs and requirements. This will allow you to understand what their communication needs are and make any required adjustments. [1]

Engaging in Accessible and Respectful Communication

Etiquette [2]

Language is important. So is behaviour. We must be mindful and respectful in our actions when interacting with persons with disabilities. Here are some general suggestions you can follow:

- Speak directly to a person with a disability, even when an interpreter or support person accompanies them.
- Ensure only one person is speaking at a time
- When applicable, offer your assistance but wait until your offer has been accepted before you help.
- Always listen to a person with a disability whom you have offered to help and follow their instructions.
- Do not make assumptions, ask your employees to learn more, but remember, it is not their job to teach you.
- Be mindful of the language you use.
- Respect personal space.
- Your interactions will not always go as planned. If you make a mistake, apologize, and take the opportunity to learn about that person's preferences or needs.
- For employees who have service animals, if the animal is not in harness, permission from the animal's companion should be requested and received prior to any interaction with the animal. Service animals should not be petted or otherwise distracted when in harness.

The one universal rule is never to assume you know what assistance, if any, a person with disability may require. Ask if, and what, assistance may be needed

DISABILITY AWARENESS

Disability Awareness

A major component to successful communications is being comfortable with the person with whom you are interacting. For many people, there is some awkwardness in communicating with people with disabilities—they're just not sure how to act and what to say. Should you look at people with a mobility or disfiguring disability and risk them thinking you're staring at them, or do you ignore them, avoiding eye contact and risk making them feel ostracized? Should you help someone who seems to be having difficulty getting his/her wheelchair up an incline? What do you do when you can't understand someone with a speech disability?

“For the transgender and non-binary communities in particular, the identity printed on their cards may not reflect who they truly are and can be a source of sensitivity, misrepresenting their true identity. True Name by Mastercard has been designed to change that, enabling people to display their preferred name on their card. At Mastercard, we strive to foster acceptance and we are incredibly proud to have BMO join this effort and bring the feature to Canada for the first time.” - Sasha Krstic, President, Mastercard in Canada

The chart on the following pages [3] outlines key suggestions to guide your interactions with people who have different types of disabilities.

Please note that the guidance provided above is generalizable to all disabilities. To ensure all employees with disabilities are heard and communicated effectively, ask, and learn from your employees. They are the experts in their lives! If more information and context is needed, look to local community resources and training opportunities.



DISABILITY AWARENESS

Disability Type	Suggested Etiquette
Mobility	• Try to place yourself at eye level when speaking with a person in a wheelchair. • Be mindful that some wheelchair users may prefer to transfer into a chair. • Never lean or hold a person's mobility device. This is their personal property and space. • Refrain from physical contact, such as gripping or leaning on someone. This could impair their balance. • Allow space for mobility aids to remain within reach • Ensure there is clear pathways, exits, etc.
Vision	• As you approach, state your name and who you are. If possible, address the person by their name. • In a group, identify yourself and the person you are speaking to. • Always ask before leading someone. If they accept, allow the person to hold your arm so they are in control of their own movements. • Give descriptive directions. • Try to increase the number of verbal cues (vs. non-verbal cues) that you use during your interaction. For example, instead of only nodding your head in agreement, accompany the nod with an "mhm" or other type of verbal affirmation. • Inform the person when you move, when someone leaves or enters the room, or when you need to end a conversation. • Orient them when entering a space, especially if barriers are present or changes have been made to the physical environment.
Speech	• Do not try to finish a person's sentences or find their words. • Use your regular tone of voice without shouting. • If you have trouble understanding someone's speech, ask for them to repeat what they have said or write it down, verify that you have understood them correctly. • To obtain information, ask short questions that require brief answers or a head nod. Avoid insulting the person's intelligence with oversimplification.



DISABILITY AWARENESS

Disability Type	Suggested Etiquette
Hearing	• Do not shout. Avoid mumbling or exaggerating mouth movements to convey speech. These may distort the sounds of speech and make speech reading more difficult. • Speak in complete sentences. Pause between sentences. This will provide the individual you are conversing with time to follow along in the conversation. • Ensure you have the person's attention before speaking. Maintain eye contact while speaking. • Provide clues in conversation when changing subjects. For example, you may say "new topic" when you move on to discuss a different area in the conversation. • Not everyone understands sign language, ask what the best method of communication for the individual is. It may include American Sign Language (ASL), Langue des signes du Québec (LSQ), captioning, messaging devices such as the UBIDuo or using assistive listening devices, either the individual's device or having devices available. If an interpreter is not available, using a smartphone to text or writing on paper to communicate would be appropriate for a short-term solution. • If using captioning, turn yours on so you can see what it being translated and how accurate it is. • Do not cover your face or mouth. Speak clearly at a regular pace. Use expressions as the person may rely on expressions, gestures, and eye contact to understand you. • Do not turn your back. Make sure to face the person when speaking to them. • Avoid positioning yourself with strong light coming from behind. This will case shadows on your face and place the individual looking into direct light. • Make sure to follow up with the individual to ensure conversation or other information was received. • For additional tips on how to communicate effectively with people with hearing loss, please visit Disability Connect Tip Sheet: Disability Connect Tip Sheet (webflow.io).



DISABILITY AWARENESS

Disability Type	Suggested Etiquette
Mental Health	• Treat persons who are adults as adults. Do not patronize, condescend, or threaten when communicating with the person • Refrain from pointing out physical signs or symptoms of someone with a suspected or known mental health concern. • Always be flexible, patient, and open-minded. • Limit the amount of information you provide. Keep messages simple and inform frequently. • Provide support and assistance, as appropriate • Avoid using phrases such as “calm down” or “relax”. These may come across as simplified, dismissive responses to anxiety-inducing situations and maybe harmful for someone to hear if they are experiencing anxiety. • Avoid approaching situations solely with a solution-focused lens. Instead, focus on being sensitive and empathizing with their experiences so that you can best support them moving forward. • If a person is at risk of harm to themselves or others, you need to take the necessary steps to ensure they receive appropriate support (eg. call 9-1-1, provide a list of resources, ask the person if there is anything you can do to help/contact for them).
Language & Cultural Barriers	• Speak slowly and pronounce your speech with clarity. Repeat what you are saying. Repeat yourself multiple times to allow the other person the opportunity to understand as much as of what you are saying. • Ask for clarification if you do not understand what the other person is saying. Do not pretend to understand. • Be specific when you communicate. • Invite conversation with stakeholders about difference in workplace and communication cultural norms. Provide education on typical cultural norms and approach situation an open and non-judgement manner. • Be mindful of gestures you make while communicating. • Utilize a variety of communication methods. Use photos, diagrams, and infographics to help the other person understand the meaning of what you are saying. • Avoid asking closed-ended questions. • Avoid making assumptions about an individual’s character based on their communication style.



DISABILITY AWARENESS

Disability Type	Suggested Etiquette
Learning	• Ask the person how they prefer to receive information (i.e., verbal or written). • Treat the person as an adult but use language that matches their level of complexity or understanding. • Avoid using jargon, acronyms or complicated language. • Allow the individual time to think about their response.
Neurodiverse	• Use clear and simple language. • Avoid using metaphors, euphemisms, and sarcasm as they may cause confusion. If you use these forms of speech, be prepared to explain what you mean. • Ask one question at a time. • Give clear instructions. • Do not assume that a person's body language (e.g., aloofness) equates to a lack of interest.

“The prevalence of communication disabilities varies considerable with age. A study in Canada suggests a rate o 0.8% for the population age 45 – 54 years, and 4.2% for people 85 years and older” – CDAC

INTERSECTIONALITY VIGNETTE

Intersectionality Vignette

Salima:

During online meetings, please do not write in the chat, the applications I use cannot catch those and its super disruptive. Also, please do not pet my dog without asking me. It confuses her, thinking it is play-time when, in fact, she needs to be alert to guide me through the day.

Dante:

Since I have speech impediment and have difficulty pronouncing words, people assume I do not understand what is being said or that I cannot think. I have a wealth of experience that I would love to share, just be patient and wait for me to finish speaking.

Taylor

My non-binary looks are not accessories for you to stare at and ask weird questions about. Sometimes those unwelcome glares and comments can spiral me into a well of depression and anxiety due to the trauma that comes with it.

REFERENCES

- [1] Australian Human Rights Commission (2021). Creating Accessible and Inclusive Communications Guide. IncludeAbility.
[https://includeability.gov.au/sites/default/files/2021-07/03 - includeability - guide - creating accessible and inclusive communications.pdf](https://includeability.gov.au/sites/default/files/2021-07/03_-_includeability_-_guide_-_creating_accessible_and_inclusive_communications.pdf)
- [2] Fujitsu Technology Taskforce (n.d.). Your Disability Communication Guide. Business Disability Forum.
- [3] Brown, S., and Scott-Parker, S. (2020). The disability-confident employers' toolkit. Haywards Heath: Inclusive Futures.