

Inclusive Communication in the Workplace

Inclusive communication recognizes that people understand and express themselves in different ways and promotes sharing information in a way that everybody understands. Communication includes written, verbal, visual and body language to express information based on individual needs. Communication is integral to a productive workplace.

“A diverse and inclusive workplace is central to a company’s ability to attract, develop and retain the talent it needs to compete.”

McKinsey Researchers

Communicating in an inclusive way helps an employer positively impact the outcome of products, processes, and services. Employees process and perceive communication differently and benefit from inclusive communication in the workplace. Providing clear communication promotes accessibility to all employees as well as safety and productivity at work.

Referring to People with Disabilities when Communicating

People with disabilities may have preferences about the language you use with them when referring to their disability. Being respectful of these preferences is important. Both person-first and identity-first language are used to refer to people with disabilities, or disabled people. In person-first language, disabilities are a characteristic and not the identity of a person. Examples include **person with a disability** or an **individual with quadriplegia** (www.odr.dc.gov/page/people-first-language).

People preferring identity-first language do not see their disabilities as separate from who they are. Examples include terms like **Deaf person, blind person, and Autistic person** (www.aucd.org/template/page.cfm?id=605).

Strategies to Communicate in an Inclusive Manner

- Have the person’s attention before you start speaking to them
- Ask the individual what communication works best for them
- Move into their field of vision
- Look at the person you are speaking to but also understand that not everyone uses eye contact
- Speak at an average pace, leaving time for people who may need extra processing time. Consider a pause between sentences.
- Rephrase things if the first few attempts do not work

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- Ask the individual you are speaking to if they have any questions allow the individual plenty of time to formulate a question before verbalizing it. You may need them to repeat the question or ask them to clarify what they are asking.
- If questioning the individual, ask only one question at a time and allow plenty of time for a response.
- Allow plenty of time for the conversation to take place and for the individual to hear and process what you are saying and then to respond.
- Point to things if necessary
- Pointing and gesturing are communication and should be accepted and responded to as you would any other communication.
- Be aware of background lighting that could make it hard to see your face both in person and virtually
- Reduce background noise
- If needed, use technology to type back and forth for communication
- Use interpreters or other accommodations when requested
- Give the Deaf/hard of hearing individual access to lipreading and facial expressions
- Avoid yelling or exaggerating pronunciation
- Don't cover or speak with things in your mouth, like gum, food, toothpicks
- It is ok to use common terms and phrases, like "see you later" or "let's go for a walk" around people with disabilities.

Telecommunications Relay Service (TRS)

A relay call allows individuals who cannot hear or who may have other disabilities that may prevent them from using a standard telephone to place and receive calls. The call is placed to communication assistants (CAs), who help to facilitate the calls. TRS is available in all 50 states as well as the U.S. territories. Also, there is no cost for an individual to use this service. Additional information about how to use TRS can be found at: www.tinyurl.com/mr3x5dxc

Meeting Preparation

People with sensory differences and/or conditions such as anxiety or PTSD may find it difficult to attend meetings or activities for several reasons, like the potential for triggering stimuli, unexpectedly being asked to participate, or potentially crowded conditions. Consider having written directions, checklists, and checklists with symbols for individuals who have Augmentative and Alternative Communication needs.

Strategies for Inclusive Meeting Preparation Include:

- Ask attendees what their communication needs are prior to a meeting.
- Send information ahead such as agendas, reading material or slide presentations.
- Use a visible, timed agenda to keep the meeting on track.
- The meeting should have a clearly stated purpose.
- Provide visual introductions for presenters, and in smaller meetings, for all attendees.

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- Ask attendees to list their name, title, department/organization in display if virtual
- Set clear communication guidelines:
 - Ask attendees to list their name, title, department/organization in display if virtual
 - Identify a notetaker and a chat monitor.
 - Use Chat, Record, and Transcript Functions
 - One speaker at a time
 - Use “raise hand” feature
 - Wait to be called on before speaking
 - Mute when not speaking
 - Repeat questions from audience members when needed
 - Chat monitor should read typed contributions aloud as soon after written as possible.

When shared prior to the meeting, Google Slides and Microsoft PowerPoint can provide auto captioning for the attendee to see. Most software includes a chat function. This is a good option for side bar conversations and to ask questions. The chat also provides an opportunity for a person who is not comfortable speaking, as well as those who require text-based options, to communicate with the team. Auto captioning in slides can assist those who may not be able to hear the speaker clearly. Polling gives a team an opportunity to reach consensus during a meeting. Tools like integrated polling in Zoom allow you to collect feedback from your team during a meeting. You can also use polls to ask a question and receive anonymous feedback from attendees.

Written Language

When providing in a written format, have information available in large font, different languages, and braille. In addition to large font, use Tahoma, Calibri, Helvetica, Arial, and Verdana as they are the most accessible fonts. All these fonts are “sans serif” fonts. For printed materials, type should be no smaller than 12pt.; however, for maximum readability, put type at 16pt. For web graphics, type should be at least 16pt font. World Wide Web Consortium’s Web Content Accessibility Guidelines are available to confirm electronic resources, including web pages, adhere to accessibility guidelines. Keep white space or open space and present information in logical order.

When information is provided in a written format, “Text to Speech” and “Read Aloud” functions can be used in Microsoft and Google.

Email communication should have a meaningful subject line, be brief and concise and use bullets or numbering when possible. When sharing information specific to job tasks, break tasks into smaller steps and use checklists, videos, flow charts, and color coding when applicable.

Plain Language

Plain language makes information and ideas more accessible to everyone. Wording, structure, and design are clear so that the intended readers can easily find what they need, understand what they find, and use that information. Using visuals combined with plain language will make

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your communications easier for employees with cognitive disabilities to understand. It is easier for employees who speak English as a second language to understand and it is easier for everyone to read and grasp with a quick look. Learn more about using plain language at www.plainlanguage.gov/

Literal Language

Literal language is used to mean exactly what is written. When writing, be descriptive and say, “The computer is about three feet to your left.” Speak all the projected content when presenting and describe the content of charts, graphs, and pictures. Avoid jargon, idioms, acronyms, sarcasm, asking rhetorical questions or hypotheticals when communicating.

Readability of Writing

When you ensure readability of your written text, you increase the probability the employee and customer understand the message. Five steps that employers can incorporate to increase the understanding of the information by employees, customers and partners are:

1. Shorten your sentences
2. Reduce the number of long words
3. Write to your audience
4. Use punctuation effectively
5. Structure writing into simple meaningful chunks of information

To test the readability of your writing go to: www.readable.com