DCIF Project – Communication Tool 1: An Introduction to Accessible Communication

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Tags

Who is this tool for?

High Level Priority:
- Direct managers
- Corporate cross-departmental managers

Practical Information:
- HR Professionals

Useful to know:
- Executive and Senior management

What guidance does this tool provide?
- Creating a culture for effective communication
- Facilitating communication to ensure it is accessible and inclusive across various modes of conversations

Take home messages:
- Learning directly from people with disabilities is one way to ensure you are on the right path. However, do not assume all employees with disabilities will have the answers to your questions
- A simple way to create an inclusive environment in the workplace starts with changing the language we use around disability. Remember, terminology is always evolving, do not let fear stop from you, and disability is not a taboo
- Tips to remember:
  - Use first person language
  - Avoid using words that suggest people with disabilities are their conditions
  - Avoid using words that categorize
  - Avoid words that suggest heroism
  - Avoid using subjective words
  - Avoid using words that suggest people with disabilities are inferior
- When facilitating conversation, ensure steps are taken before, during and after for communication to be accessible and inclusive

Where do I begin?

Tips for Employers: Communication and Disability

When businesses have the knowledge and tools to provide effective communication, they can ensure they meet the needs of their workforce and ==diverse== customer base. Taking an accessibility-first approach will help create a culture committed to providing effective communication and will ensure that equitable access and opportunities are provided for all individuals. While providing effective communication is not always straightforward, business leaders can take actionable steps to make their work environment and digital content more widely accessible to everyone.

About:[1]
- 43.1% Canadians with disabilities, difficulties, or long-term conditions reported a barrier in communicating by phone
- 40.5 % Canadians with disabilities, difficulties, or long-term conditions reported a barrier in communicating in person
- 40.2% Canadians with disabilities, difficulties, or long-term conditions reported a barrier in communicating in reading and understanding materials
- 26.4% Canadians with disabilities, difficulties, or long-term conditions reported a barrier in communicating while using video conferencing
- 23.5% Canadians with disabilities, difficulties, or long-term conditions reported a barrier in communicating while using social media or online chat forums

Unions representatives are well positioned to amplify and facilitate communication not just with their members, but also in communicating and publicizing organizational polices for implementation. In addition, unions can provide substantial feedback to management in the selection and implementation of new technologies, from both an occupational health and safety perspective and an accessibility perspective.

Learning directly from people with disabilities is one way to ensure you are on the right path. However, do not assume all employees with disabilities will have the answers to your questions. They have valuable lives experience; however, this does not mean they are experts that provide all information. Instead, commit to learning along with your employees, this will support everyone and ensure all employees are on the same page.

Terminology Guide

As an employer, you can build a stronger, more inclusive workplace by learning how to use respectful language with your colleagues. Ableist attitudes and stereotypes often stem from the language we use and can be some of the most challenging barriers people with disabilities face.

A simple way to create an inclusive environment in the workplace starts with changing the language we use around disability.

First, consider the following:[2]

- **Terminology is always evolving.** Not everyone will agree on every term or word used. It's not a "one-size-fits-all" solution, but we can do our best to use disability positive language and promote inclusion by being aware of what we say and how we say it. Note that preferred language can also differ by region, country, or individual.
- **Do not let fear stop you.** You may have noticed at times that you can feel scared to use the wrong word or term when interacting with a person with a disability. This can be a normal feeling. Be aware that this discomfort may cause barriers when communicating with others and may result in the absence of important conversations with your employees. Building your awareness of this fear is the first step.
- **Disability is not taboo.** When we talk about disability, we reduce stigma. If you are not sure, the best thing to do is ask!

Tips for Inclusive Communication

Disability is diverse. Make sure to ask your employees about their communication preferences. Do not worry if you feel uncertain or awkward the first time you meet or interact with a person with a known/visible disability. Everyone does from time to time; its natural and it can be mutual. So long as you do your best to use respectful language and are willing to learn, people will generally recognize your intentions – even if the way it is was delivered was not correct.

Here are some overarching guidelines for inclusive accessible communication:
- ✓ Use first person language. Asking, "how would you like to be referred to?" is an effective way to ensure you are using preferred language.[3]
- ✓ Avoid using words that suggest people with disabilities are their conditions. It is preferable to identify the person first, such as "people with disabilities" or a "person with a disability."[4]
- ✓ Avoid using words that categorize, as in "the disabled" or "the blind," this implies that people with disabilities are a uniform group[4]
- ✓ Avoid words that suggest heroism, such as, "brave" or "inspirational." Many persons with disabilities have similar goals as the rest of the population, and the words we use should be non-judgmental, non-emotional, and reflect their inclusion in society.[4]
- ✓ Avoid using subjective words that equate disability with illness. For example, avoid terms like "suffers from," "afflicted by," "patient," "disease," or "sick."
- ✓ Avoid using words that suggest people with disabilities are inferior and should be excluded from activities generally available to others, such as, "incompetent."[4]

For more information, please visit Disability Connect for more tips on how to communicate effectively: Disability Connect I Linking Communications to Transportation (webflow.io).

Accessible and inclusive communication means ensuring that messaging and information meets the communication needs of everyone within the community so that the target audience, whether employees or customers can access, understand, and engage with the information you are sharing.[5]

Facilitating Communication

Before a conversation

If you are meeting for the first time, ask the employee if they have any communication needs and respect these needs as much as possible. People communicate in different ways, they are the experts on how they need or prefer to communicate, and it is your responsibility to ask and learn.

Well ahead of the meeting, ask employees if they require any accommodations or adjustments during the conversation. Be flexible and schedule extra time before and after a meeting as a buffer in case things do not go as planned. People especially those with disabilities may require more time to arrive for the meeting, may not understand the information presented or need clarification and may have follow up questions.[6]

Determine someone who can support you if you are having trouble communicating with an employee or applicant. Inform the employee when any changes in communication method are made or are temporarily on hold.[7]

Lastly, provide advances in notices of any meetings where in-depth conversation will take place. Provide necessary documents, and questions well in advance with accessible formatting and information on follow up notices available via different platforms to ensure the employees have an opportunity to understand expectations and information before and after a meeting or event.[5]

During the conversation

Identify and introduce yourself and anyone else is present in the room. In addition, let the individual know if someone else leaves and enters the room. It is important to be cognizant of your surroundings and allow for space.[8]

When providing written information, offer to read and explain documents. Take notes, write down instructions and follow up as necessary. Ensure employees or applicants understand the decisions and content of a document if they are asked to sign something. Informed consent and approval are vital in ensuring comprehension and understanding. Try to ensure there are opportunities to ask questions and appreciate the consequences of any decisions. Ask employees if they need assistance with filling in any forms, be sure to have electronic versions of forms to offer. When appropriate, accept alternate signatures or authorized signers.[5]

After the conversation

Continue the dialogue, before the employee leaves the meeting, spend a few moments summarizing the key discussion points. This will help remind employees of any action-items and reinforce any acknowledgement or coaching tips provided. Ask the employee if anything was missed and remind them of when the next meeting will be. Take 2-5 minutes after each meeting to record key discussion points, action-items, or feedback. This will help kick-start the next meeting and will serve as a useful log when managers need to review past communications or accommodations.

References

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