



Disability

# Words  
At Work

Building inclusion for **people  
with disability** through the  
power of language

aurecon



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## How to use this guide

People tend to use non-inclusive language unwittingly, often not aware that it can alienate and exclude. This Guide therefore provides a starting point for learning about inclusive language and communication.

We have tried to avoid creating lists of 'good' and 'bad' language – instead, we explain why and how some language can include or exclude, and provide guiding principles and some examples.

The information provided is not meant to cover all situations. For more information DCA recommends contacting organisations who make up and represent people with disability (such as the Australian Network on Disability, or People with Disability Australia).

**Inclusive language** enables everyone in your organisation to feel valued and respected and able to contribute their talents to drive organisational performance.

## Why **inclusive language** matters

**Language is a powerful tool for building inclusion (or exclusion) at work. The way we speak to each other creates a culture in which everyone – people with or without a disability – can feel valued, respected, and one of the team (included), rather than under-valued, disrespected, and out of place (excluded).**

Biases, both conscious and unconscious, are often expressed through language. By thinking about our language, we can dismantle some of the unconscious biases we hold and the prejudices behind them.

Research shows that when organisations include *all* employees and customers they have a lot to gain, including improved performance, productivity, profit, creativity and innovation, access to diverse markets and opportunities, as well as enhancing brand reputation, and employee engagement, commitment, and wellbeing.<sup>1</sup>

## Make people visible

Language can make groups of people seem invisible. Respectfully talking about people with disability can go a long way to making everyone feel part of the team. Using examples of people with disability in everyday discussion can be an easy way of doing this.

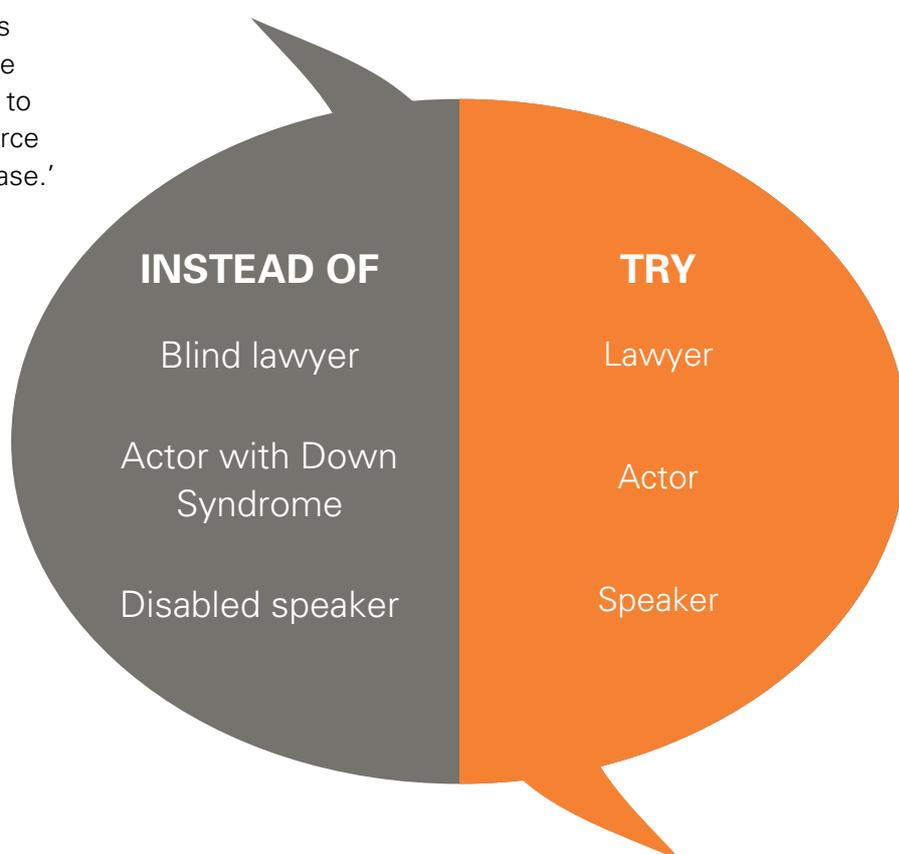
People can also become invisible when we make assumptions around what they may or may not need in terms of accessibility or support to participate.

**Collecting data?** The best option is to be inclusive. Often asking for information about disability is unnecessary, but if required, ask individuals to share information about their disability in their own preferred terms.

## But not too visible...

As a general rule, if someone's disability is not relevant – and it is unlikely to be relevant in many work situations – then don't mention it. If it is relevant, then discuss it respectfully.

Including reference to someone's disability unnecessarily can create the idea that the person referred to is somehow an oddity and reinforce notions that they are a 'special case.'



**AVOID**

Differently abled,  
people of all  
abilities, disAbility,  
diffAbled special  
needs, special

Avoid made up words or euphemisms such as 'special' when referring to people with disability.

These terms can be patronising, suggesting people with disability are special or inspirational, just for living and working with disability.

And remember, just because someone has a visible disability or has chosen to share information about their disability doesn't mean you can ask them inappropriate questions.

**Person first**

Person-first language is widely accepted in Australia.

If it is relevant to refer to a person's disability, it is respectful to focus on the person first and any disability/impairment they may have second.

**INSTEAD OF**

*"He's schizophrenic"*

*"She's disabled"*

The disabled

Disabled person

Able-bodied or non-disabled person

**TRY**

*"He has schizophrenia"*

*"She has a disability"*

People with disabilities

Person living with a disability

Person with lived experience of disability

Person without a disability

**Focus on accessibility**

Shift your focus from the person and their disability to the work environment's accessibility.

For example, refer to 'accessible' rather than 'disabled' parking, bathrooms, lifts etc. Similarly, rather than 'Disability Action Plans', refer to 'Accessibility Action Plans'. This use of language ensures the focus is on providing a workplace environment that is accessible to and inclusive of all people – with and without disabilities/impairments.

# Stop stereotypes

Inclusion happens when people feel their whole self is understood, respected and included at work – not just a one dimensional stereotype.

**A stereotype is a generalised image of a person or a particular group. We can all fall victim to stereotyping that over-simplifies us as people. Stereotyping of people on the basis of their disability is common – for example:**

- People with disability are often inappropriately seen as victims who are helpless and to be pitied rather than as equal contributing members of society. Use language that respects people with disability as active individuals with control over their own lives.
- People with disability are seen as especially brave or inspirational. It is patronising to refer to a person with disability as amazing because they have a job and do it well. People with disability enjoy the same range of activities and relationships as everyone else – as employees, students, friends, community members, spouses, partners, and parents. When you meet someone new who has a disability, engage them in conversation as you would any other new acquaintance – don't focus on their disability.

**INSTEAD OF**

"He's confined to a wheelchair"

**TRY**

**He uses a wheelchair for mobility**

**INSTEAD OF**

"She suffers from Multiple Sclerosis"

**TRY**

**She has Multiple Sclerosis**

## WHAT NOT TO SAY...

*"You're so brave/inspirational"*

*"I feel so sorry for you"*

*"You don't look disabled to me!"*

*"My next-door-neighbour's mother-in-law had that and she cut out sugar and was better in a week. You should try it!"*

*"I had to use a wheelchair once when I broke my leg so I know how you feel"*

*"You're so lucky to have your partner – he/she must be an angel"*

*"Everything happens for a reason"*

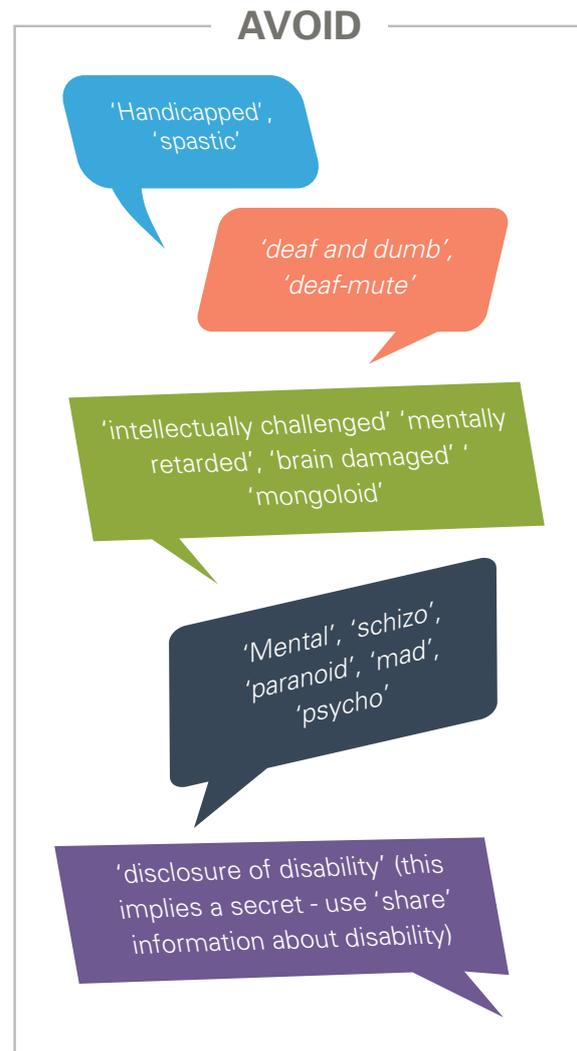
## Lay off offensive labels

Being inclusive means using terms that people feel comfortable with.

Remember that context is everything, and sometimes people can use terms about themselves or their friends, that are not appropriate for others to use.

For example, some people with disability prefer to describe themselves as 'disabled' (as a preferred identity because of the way our broader society disables them) and some people have re-claimed the word 'crip.' However in most circumstances, these words are not appropriate for others to use, especially in a workplace context.

If in doubt, ask what terms someone would prefer, and make sure you respect their preferences. It is important to recognise that preferences vary – for example, one person with a hearing disability may prefer 'Deaf'<sup>2</sup> while another may prefer 'person with a hearing impairment.'



## Everyday phrases

Most people with disability are comfortable with the words used to describe daily living.<sup>3</sup> People who use wheelchairs 'go for walks' and people with visual impairments may be comfortable – or not – 'to see you'. Someone's impairment may just mean that they do some things in a different way.

Common phrases that may associate impairments with negative things should be avoided, for example 'deaf to our pleas' or 'blind drunk'.

## Try not to trivialise

Language that trivialises others and their experiences suggests that the other person is inferior (e.g. **"How did you ever manage to finish university?"**; **"It's not that bad – lots of people are worse off than you"**, **"Don't be so sensitive – I was only joking"**, **"Don't carry on – I was only parked there for a minute"** or simplifying your words as if you were talking to a young child). Trivialisation is often patronising and reinforces differences in power between the 'in-group' and the 'out-group'.

Remember, the difficulties that many people with disability face in getting into and staying in work are not trivial. Australians with disability face some of the most significant barriers to work of all groups in the workforce, with employment participation rates around 30 percentage points lower than other Australians, one of the worst rates in the OECD.

## The courage to call it

It can be challenging to confront non-inclusive language, especially when it's coming from powerful or influential people in your organisation. But doing so can increase our confidence and promote inclusion at work for all.

- ✓ **Focus on the behaviour and avoid labelling, name-calling, or the use of loaded terms**
- ✓ **Keep it simple (e.g. "Do you really think that?", "No, I don't think about it that way", "I don't find that funny".)**
- ✓ **Try appealing to their better instincts (e.g. "It doesn't seem like you to say something like that").**
- ✓ **Try saying something when you are with the person one-on-one (e.g. "Can we please have a quick chat about the comment you made earlier? It might not have been a big deal to you but...")**
- ✓ **Make your views clear and set limits (e.g. "Perhaps you haven't thought about it before but telling jokes like that can offend people – please don't tell these sorts of jokes around me anymore.")**
- ✓ **Consider the indirect approach (e.g. "Wow!" "Hey, let's keep it professional, ok?", "Now that the biased part of the conversation is over, can we move on?")**

## Keep calm and respond

Sometimes our unconscious biases mean we can say things that exclude others – even when we do not intend to. If you are called out for not being inclusive, here are some useful ways to respond, especially if you *'didn't mean it like that!'*

- ✓ Getting called out doesn't mean you need to defend yourself – trivialising someone else's feelings (e.g. "You're over-reacting!") doesn't help build inclusion
- ✓ Instead of trying to defend or excuse your actions (e.g. "I was only joking") try focusing on understanding the other person's perspective
- ✓ Say something like, "I'm sorry. It wasn't my intention to offend you." If you are confused about their reaction ask, "Could you explain why what I said was wrong?"



## Sources

### The following sources of information were drawn on to develop this Guide:

Australian Network on Disability, *Inclusive Language*. Available [here](#).

Evenbreak, *Disability Etiquette: Ten Things NOT to Say to Disabled People*. Available [here](#).

HR Council Canada, *Diversity at Work; Inclusive Language Guidelines*. Available [here](#).

Macquarie University, *Inclusive Language Tips*. Available [here](#).

People with Disability Australia, *Terminology used by PWDA*. Available [here](#).

Queensland University of Technology, *Working with Diversity: A Guide to Inclusive Language and Presentation for Staff and Students*. Available [here](#).

Tasmanian Department of Education, *Guidelines for Inclusive Language*. Available [here](#).

Southern Poverty Law Center, 'Responding to Everyday Bigotry,' January 25, 2015. Available [here](#).

Stop Sexist Remarks: Creating Change One Conversation at a Time, 'Studies of the Impact of Sexist Remarks.' Available [here](#).

University of Melbourne, *Watch Your Language: Guidelines for Non-Discriminatory Language*, 2005. Available [here](#).

VicHealth, *Bystander Action Toolkit Section 4*, 2014. Available [here](#).

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> See DCA's *Building Inclusion: An Evidence-Based Model of Inclusive Leadership* full report for a review of this research.

<sup>2</sup> Deaf people whose first language is AUSLAN may consider themselves part of 'the deaf community' and therefore may wish to describe themselves as 'Deaf', with a capital D, to emphasise their deaf identity.

<sup>3</sup> Just Better Care, *Wheelchair Etiquette: Ten Tips for Inclusive Language*. Available [here](#).

United Kingdom Office for Disability Issue, *Inclusive Language: Words to Use and Avoid when Writing about Disability*. Available [here](#).



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