Lost in translation:

a global guide to the language of disability

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## Contributors

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Sharing views and experiences can be difficult, especially on such sensitive topics as language and disability. However, with these shared experiences, we can start conversations around the language of disability and all work together to overcome the shared barriers.

We want to thank the following groups and individuals for their contributions:

* Bianca Prins, Global Head of Accessibility, ING
* Cognizant
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* Saudi Aramco.

# Foreword by Diane Lightfoot, CEO, Business Disability Forum

Talking about disability and normalising the conversation is critical in developing global disability inclusion strategies.

Senior leaders are ever more crucial in shaping a narrative of “what matters round here” and we see time again that a visible and active senior champion is what makes the difference in driving real change. The platform they occupy and their profile has a huge impact… But for many leaders, this means that the stakes simply feel too high and the risk of getting it wrong just too great – which too often means they say nothing.

With the language around disability constantly evolving, we know it can be difficult to know where to start. Language that works in one situation and place may not work in another. At the same time, organisations also need to think about the language they use within their brand.

What message are they giving out to disabled people about their organisation’s values? This links to data too; many businesses want to gain a picture of the number of employees with disabilities in their workforce, but you can only measure in a meaningful way if you have a clear definition or agreed sense of what disability means in your business.

That is not always straight forward in a single country business; layer on the complexities of a global business with not only very different cultural approaches to talking about disability but which work in countries in which the word “disability” is not used or where there is not a direct translation, and it becomes even more complicated.

So, we have developed this new guide, thanks to the support of our long-standing friend and Partner HSBC, to help point businesses in the right direction.

It does not set out to give a definitive answer but, rather, encourages you to start a conversation with your customers and employees to develop a narrative together that works for you.

I hope you enjoy the guide and find it thought provoking – and that it gives you the tools and the confidence to start your own conversation on the language of disability – wherever you are in the world.

Diane Lightfoot, CEO, Business Disability Forum

# Foreword by Carolanne Minashi, Global Head of Inclusion, HSBC

The language we use and the topics we discuss as an organisation matter.

This report highlights the difficulty of getting disability language right for all individuals, markets and cultures. We cannot stop having these important conversations just because it’s hard. We need to ensure we are creating an inclusive culture that fosters diversity.

We know that at times we will get it wrong. However, if we use language with the right intentions, ask for guidance when we’re uncertain, forgiveness when we get it wrong and we all can learn. This helps open up opportunities for everyone – our customers, colleagues and across our communities.

This report is an excellent resource to encourage us to talk about disability more openly, something which can only be positive. I would like to thank BDF and all those who contributed to its development for tackling this difficult, but extremely important topic and for the clear and pragmatic advice it provides.

Carolanne Minashi, Global Head of Inclusion, HSBC

# Executive summary

Organisations must make their own decisions about what language to use in different global contexts. There is no one set of guidelines that will be applicable in every location.

Differences in culture, history, language (and many other factors) combine to give explicit and implicit meanings to words that vary significantly across different cultures. The differences can be pronounced even between cultures that share the same language (for example, between the UK and the US, or Spanish-speaking Latin American countries). Understanding subtle differences in meaning becomes even more complicated when crossing language barriers.

As a result, this guidance starts from the belief that global organisations should use different language when talking to different audiences. Further, we believe global organisations should work with relevant local stakeholders – such as employee resource groups, customer groups, disability groups – to identify the appropriate language to use when talking about disability.

Decisions about what language to use should also be reviewed regularly. Words’ meanings can and do change over time, and words that have once been appropriate can soon become inappropriate.

This guide aims to:

* explain – why using the “right” language (language that is appropriate in the specific context in which you are using it) matters
* outline – the decisions around language that global organisations need to consider when deciding what the “right” language is
* provide guidance – on how global organisations can go about identifying the “right” language.

Getting the language of disability “right” can seem scary – but global organisations should not let this stop them talking about disability. It is more harmful to say nothing about disability than to try in good faith to use the right language. You may make mistakes along the way (and certainly you won’t be able to please everyone), but it is always better to talk about disability than to avoid it.

# Introduction

## Who is this guide for?

This guide is for everyone actively influencing and making decisions about the language of disability in their organisations, including:

* senior leaders
* disability and inclusion professionals
* people with disabilities
* marketing and communication teams
* human resources professionals
* staff network organisers

anyone else who is involved in deciding how your organisation talks about disability.

It is also for anyone who wishes to learn more about the language of disability, why it is vital to use appropriate and respectful language, and how organisations can work towards this.

## A note on the language in this guide

At BDF we recognise there are many different, and often strongly held, views on language. One of the strongest-held is whether we should use ‘people with a disability’ (people-first) or ‘disabled people’ (identity-first) language.

As a result of the global audience this guide has, we recognise there is no single formulation of language that will reflect the preferences of everyone in our audience.

In an attempt to respect these differing views, and following feedback from our Members and Partners who have contributed to this guide, we have chosen to use both terms interchangeably throughout this guide. This decision was taken to make the guide as readable as possible and should not invite any inferences about the beliefs of Business Disability Forum.

## Why do we need a guide about the language of disability?

Too often, global organisations are afraid of saying the wrong thing when it comes to disability – and that means they may say nothing. Failing to talk about disability will almost always have worse consequences than making mistakes in using language. By addressing how you use the language of disability you can:

* reduce the risk of alienating people and losing out as organisations and societies
* potentially avoid reinforcing stereotypes and negative imagery of disability

make a positive difference for everyone by improving inclusion.

All large organisations have employees, customers and service users who have, or will develop, disabilities. In addition, many will have family and friends who have disabilities. No organisation can afford to avoid talking about disability. Understanding the importance of and using respectful and appropriate language at individual, local and global levels is part of this process.

How confident we feel about speaking about disability will depend on the situation and environment. For example, many employees still do not feel confident speaking about disability in the workplace. They also fear the potential consequences for them and their organisations. They worry about offending employees and customers, damaging the brand image, legal issues, and actual and potential loss of customers and income. These are all legitimate concerns and can result in some people and organisations avoiding discussing disability while promoting the inclusion of other ‘diversity’ groups.

It may feel daunting and too big to start (or carry on for those who are already making progress). This is where the guide can help.

The guide offers learnings and experiences from those at different stages of the process and puts them into one place, adding background and explanations were possible. It helps global organisations to navigate factors such as cultural and regulatory differences as well as language barriers to avoid causing confusion, offence or upset.

This guide is here to help you explore what language is right for you and your employees, wherever you are in the world.

## Aims

The purpose of this guide is to give global organisations practical advice about how to work out what language to use when talking about disability.

The decision about what language to use is up to you – there are no one-size-fits-all solutions. What is considered appropriate in one country may not be in another.

This guide aims to do this by bringing together relevant information to make it easier for organisations to:

* look at the challenges around language and communication, especially at a global level
* address common fears about the use of disability-related language
* start a conversation within their organisations on global languages of disability
* provide guidance and tips on the use of language, especially at a global level
* equip people with the tools they need to be able to respectfully disagree
* understand how factors such as culture and legislation are often interlinked and their impact on language choice and behaviours

develop their own house styles and practices to fit their own unique needs now and in the future with the ever-evolving nature of language.

## Languages of disability

In today’s world, communication is essential and arguably more complex than ever. We frequently communicate globally in our professional and personal lives. Moreover, we live in a world where everything is more immediate thanks to technology. We also have rapidly evolving vocabularies in our languages.

This is no different in the use of language about disability. In fact, it may be much more complex as disability is a deeply personal and emotive topic. How we use disability-related language and interpret it can also be influenced by factors addressed throughout the guide.

Decisions about the language of disability cannot be a one-off. This is an ongoing and never-ending process of dialogue and reflection.

A number of the organisations we spoke to while creating this guide had tried – with varying levels of success – to create their own handbooks for staff about language to use and avoid. With this guide, we have decided not to take this approach.

* Firstly, there is rarely consensus (even at a national level, let alone a global level) about what language is appropriate. For example, the term ‘people/persons with disability’ is used in some countries. However, some others use ‘people with special needs’.
* Secondly, because languages are evolving all the time, this guide would be out of date shortly after publication.

And finally, by making these decisions for yourselves, in conversation and collaboration with local audiences (disabled and non-disabled) around the world, you can gain a better understanding of the nuances of different languages. This will allow you to reach decisions that have the buy-in of the very people you are trying to reach.

As individuals and organisations, we must not be put off by all the complexities of our languages and the risks associated with getting them wrong. We all make mistakes, so we need effective ways to manage that.

## Overview

### Part one

The first part of this guide focuses on common challenges and fears associated with the language of disability at a global and local level. It does this by examining:

* current terminology
* the debates around some of these terms
* the impact of culture, geography and different disability models
* the fears associated with language and how it can go wrong

the intention and impact of language.

This part encourages global organisations to look at their own specific circumstances and ask – what are we trying to achieve? What challenges are we facing, and how can we address and overcome them? Part one provides a framework for understanding how your organisation’s specific circumstances could influence decisions around language.

### Part two

The second part of the guide considers practical ways that organisations can develop processes to:

* start a conversation in their organisations about disability and language
* create their own ‘house styles’ for their unique circumstances
* be able to support all staff, customers, and visitors in using inclusive language through training, behaviours, values, policies and procedures
* develop systems for when disagreements over language arise

be able to keep up with the continual evolution of language around disability.

Part two provides practical tools for creating and engaging in decision-making processes.

# Part one: Background

## Why is language important?

The language we use can reveal the assumptions – conscious and unconscious – that we hold about disability. Equally, unclear language can lead people to misunderstand our intentions.

Whatever your organisation’s aims – to improve workforce diversity, to welcome disabled customers, to ask disabled employees about their experiences – you need your audiences to trust you. Without the right language, this can be much harder.

Language is one of the key ways we introduce ourselves to other people and organisations. It is a way to portray the image we want others to see. For example, if we want to increase diversity within our organisation, we will use words, examples and images that demonstrate this in a way that is reassuring and welcoming to prospective employees.

Common goals include:

* telling people about our identity, organisation, brand
* expressing our emotions, fears, passions, beliefs and values
* promoting our ideas and products
* having our questions answered
* being understood and trusted
* receiving support
* increasing motivation and a sense of belonging to a team
* encouraging someone to be a loyal employee or customer of a cause or brand
* trading information in work, learning, and social situations
* persuading others to do things such as buy our product

making others feel welcome, important, respected and understood.

## How do we do this?

It is not just the words we choose that are important; there are other factors to consider such as:

* the intention of our message – both assumed and actual
* the impact – this may not always be the result we intended
* the nuances that are linked to language use and often missed in global contexts.
* the context in which the words are used – for example: humour, their history, the environment, using a second language, culture, geography, age, individual preferences
* the tone we use
* the how, where and when – for example, is it a sensitive conversation in a private room or splashed on a billboard? In a speech given at a company event or in formal HR procedures?
* body language – is what you say reflected by your posture, time and place

format – for example, email, spoken, formal document, face-to-face, online, video, conference.

### Actions speak louder than words

Sometimes it is not the language we use but the lack of it that can say more about a person or organisation. It is not uncommon for organisations to say they want to promote disability, but this does not appear to be backed up in actions. Their web pages and corporate responsibility reports have little or no reference to disability, making it hard to find. Where some protected characteristics are promoted, disability can struggle to receive the same level of attention.

Employees, customers, service users and other stakeholders with disabilities will be able to tell if your words do not reflect their lived experiences. Using the right language cannot be a substitute for taking the right actions. Only by doing both together can you make real change.

## Current terminology

### Why do some people not like to use the term ‘disability’?

Some people can find the word ‘disability’ insulting – perhaps due to years of negative cultural assumptions and discrimination against disabled people. In English, the etymology of the word ‘disability’ literally means ‘not able’. In Arabic it literally translates into “hindrance”, in Swahili (Eastern African region) – ‘mwenda wazimu’ (the term often used for people with learning difficulties & mental health conditions) means ‘the mad people’, and in Shona (Southern African region), Urombe/Urema (all-encompassing term often used for disability) means ‘useless and irresponsible’. (See Appendix 1 for examples of the word ‘disability’ in different languages.)

Of course, meaning evolves, and can be far removed from its origins. However, without an understanding of the concepts outlined in this guide, it can be easy to misinterpret talk about disability as focusing on negatives.

Medical terminology can also sound negative. For example, ‘dis-order’ or any medical words starting with ‘dys’. The ‘dys’ is translated from ancient Greek as ‘difficulty with’, ‘abnormal’, or ‘bad’. For example, ‘dysphagia’ is the medical jargon for ‘difficulty with swallowing. It describes the ‘problem’ and often where it is in the body.

In an attempt to remove the stigma that can accompany the term disability, many disabled and non-disabled people have tried to find alternatives – such as ‘differently abled’. Whilst this appears to have had some success in some organisations, it is not universal. For others, these alternative terms can be seen as offensive and patronising as they ‘other’ people with disabilities. In response, some disability groups focus on trying to reclaim ‘disability’ as a positive – or at least neutral – term.

This process is ongoing, so some parts of your audiences may have different reactions when you use terms such as ‘disability’ and ‘disabled’. Don’t worry too much about this – talking about disability positively is more important.

### ‘Disability’ in other languages

Many other languages also have words that appear to focus on ‘deficiency’ or ‘inability’. Like medical terminology, it is the origins of the words that can promote the negativity rather than how they are currently perceived and used. For example, ‘invalid’ initially appears to suggest that the person is of no importance though this is unlikely to be the current meaning or intention. See Appendix 1 for examples of ‘disability’ in different languages.

Does this mean that global organisations should avoid using these words? Perhaps in some circumstances – but only if you are sure that you understand the nuance of using (or not using) these words. Some groups may find them offensive – others may have embraced and reclaimed them. In many cases, there might be a mixture of responses.

Understanding your audience and shaping your language to your organisation’s specific context is a vital approach to take. We will explore this further in the guide.

### What is disability?

There is no universal definition. When we talk about disability, our definition can depend on what we are trying to achieve. For example, if we are talking about adjustments at work, we may use definitions that include people who don’t consider themselves to be ‘disabled’ but who are for legal purposes. Alternatively, when welcoming customers who have disabilities, we may not consider if the legal standard is applicable, and focus on what support the person needs instead.

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities does not give a formal definition of disability but it does describe it as the result of the interaction between a person and barriers in their environment. Even though it describes the definition of disability as “an evolving concept”, it is increasingly seen as exclusive and unhelpful by people with disabilities.

### Legal definitions and ‘models’ of disability

Most legal systems around the world have their own definitions of disability in their legislation for preventing and addressing discrimination. We list a few examples in Appendix 2.

Legal definitions are often based on a particular ‘model’ of disability, of which there are several, including:

* the medical model
* the charity model
* the economic model
* the social model

the biopsychosocial model.

You can find further information on each one in Appendix 3.

The purpose of this guide is not to say whether one approach is ‘right’ or ‘wrong’. It’s important to think about how your audience understands disability, so that you can talk about disability using language that will convey your meaning most effectively.

Legal definitions are only one way of looking at disability. For organisations, these can be useful but not definitive – you need to know the laws of the countries you operate in, but it is best to consider legal definitions as the minimum standards only and to practice at a much higher level.

When communicating about disability, focusing on legal definitions can mean inadvertently reflecting views on disability that are different from those of your audience.

For example, China and Saudi Arabia’s legal definitions of disability are firmly based on the medical model. By contrast, Brazil’s definition is closer to the biopsychosocial model which is preferred by the World Health Organisation.

Understanding how a country or society ‘models’ disability can help global organisations make sure they are speaking the same language around disability as their audience.

### Alternative words for ‘disability’

Words or phrases that have been suggested to replace the word ‘disability’ in English include

* differently abled
* diffability
* DiffAbility.

People with determination (UAE)

None of these English terms have gained much popular usage but they do reflect how problematic the language of disability can be. For example, the term “people with determination” did not yet gain popularity, however it is the official term used in the UAE to refer to disabled people.

To add to the complexity, how disability is defined and whether person-first or identity- or barrier-first terminology is used is hotly debated and preferences differ from country to country (see pages 14-15 for more information).

## What are the different ways of describing disability as it relates to a person?

Talking about disability in general is one question – talking about disabled people raises further questions. For example: “disabled person” or “person with a disability”? There are people, groups and cultures that prefer one over the other, so again, there is no one-size-fits-all rule for making this decision.

Research by BDF and others show that many individuals with disabilities and conditions do not use one approach exclusively over another and that the term chosen is often related to context. For example, someone may say that they ‘are dyslexic’ and that they ‘have hearing loss’.

Below we outline what the options are and some of the reasons behind preference for one or the other.

### Is it necessary?

Before you decide how to talk about a person’s or a group’s disability/disabilities, ask: should I mention it at all?

Avoid describing a person’s disability unless it is relevant. Talking about the effects and what is needed to enable a person or group takes a more holistic view of the individual and is likely to be much more helpful to everyone. It also reduces many of the issues around disability-related language.

### Person-first language (PFL)

“Person with a disability” is an example of people-first language.

It puts the person before the disability and separates the identity of the two. When talking about specific disabilities, it means saying “person with [X disability].”

Proponents of PFL argue that a person should not be defined by their disability – they are multi-faceted and complex individuals whose disability is only one remarkable attribute. PFL recognises this by separating the person from their disability.

Research by Bianca Prins has found that most global organisations, including the UN and European, Australian, and US Governments, use people-first language. Her research also found that this includes many UK based global organisations. Therefore, you may find that many audiences are more familiar with PFL, and less likely to question whether this is offensive.

However, some people feel that their disability is an inherent part of their identity. For example, many autistic people feel that you cannot separate the person from their autism, and therefore they are not a ‘person with autism’ but an ‘autistic person.’ See below for more information.

### Identity-first language (IFL)

A “disabled person” is an example of identity-first language.

This style is often preferred by people who feel that their disability is an inherent part of their identity. They speak about and ‘own’ their disability in the same way they do their nationality. It is commonly used by members of the Deaf communities and also within neurodiversity.

Research by Bianca Prins has found that the UK Government and Scottish Governments use IFL.

However, some people do not feel that they are defined by their disability, and object that IFL does just this.

### Barrier-defining language

According to the social model of disability, disabled people are disabled by ‘barriers’ in society. For example, a deaf person might be disabled by an event organiser’s failure to arrange for accessible content such as a sign language interpreter. ‘Barrier-defining’ language focuses on the barriers external to the individual. ‘Disabled’ becomes a passive verb rather than an adjective, and the logical next question is ‘disabled by what/whom?’

## Some other useful terminology

### Ableism

This is the term used to describe discrimination that favours people who are not disabled. For example, policies or recruitment processes that favour non-disabled people, or phrases such as describing a person with very precise, tidy, and methodical habits as “a bit OCD.” This can be intentional or unintentional.

### Disablism

This is a term used when the emphasis of discrimination is more weighted against disabled people – for example, having a recruitment policy that intentionally excludes people with disabilities.

### Equality

Equality is when you treat everyone the same—for example, by giving them access to the same software.

### Equity

Equity is about giving people the tools or adjustments that they, as an individual, need to remove the barriers to carry out their roles and daily activities. It arises from the principle that to treat people fairly, sometimes you have to treat them differently.

## What can determine our use of disability-related language?

### Health conditions and disability

Many disabled people do not see themselves as disabled. This is especially true in the UK for people with a health condition that, with appropriate medical treatment, has little impact on their daily lives. They may therefore describe themselves as having a health condition rather than a disability.

Feedback from some of our Partners includes experiencing challenges about specific conditions being associated with the disability label, especially neurodiversity and mental health. Individuals may also not want to associate with the disability label due to perceived stigma.

If you are seeking to include people such as this in your efforts as an organisation, it’s important to consider that they may not respond to language about disability in general. You may need to talk more specifically about long-term health conditions or some other, culturally appropriate alternative that they will identify themselves with.

### Cultural change

Often, words that have been ‘acceptable’ in mainstream society can become unacceptable – and vice versa. This can create areas of confusion over what you should say. For example, until recently in the UK, the term ‘retarded’ (the ‘r-word’) was commonly used to describe people with learning disabilities and other cognitive disabilities. It is now strictly taboo and can cause severe offence in the UK (outside of some specific medical contexts in which it can be appropriate).

Further consideration needs to be taken when using languages that are used by different societies around the world – such as English and Spanish. Using the example above, the ‘r-word’ became unacceptable in the United States somewhat later than in the UK, meaning that some people in the US may be more likely not to realise that it can be offensive.

### Fear and the language of disability

One of the reasons we wrote this guide was in response to feedback from our Members and Partners that they are afraid of the consequences of using the “wrong” language. But why is language about disability so feared by organisations and senior leaders?

There are several reasons why organisations and senior leaders may be worried about speaking about disability, including:

### Personal

* fear of offending team members
* feeling unsure of what words they should be using
* feeling out of their depth, especially if it is with people they don’t know
* using a different language from their own
* where there are cultural differences
* not wanting to look ‘stupid’ or offend anyone
* fear of complaints and/or disciplinary proceedings
* fear of losing promotion prospects
* Employment Tribunals or other legal challenges
* fear of how to challenge poor language used by other people

how to keep up with the latest trends in language.

### Organisational

* At a corporate level, they may worry about:
* damaging the brand and reputation of the organisation
* the effect on share price
* customer and client loyalty

recruitment.

insecurity about the appropriate use of terms in English. This can be due to the differences between UK and US English, as well the many nuances for people who do not have English as a first language (no matter how fluent they are).

There is regular press coverage of organisations and public figures causing offence by getting it wrong. Recent examples include poor choice of words in song lyrics by artists Beyonce and Lizzo.

However, while these fears are real, and their impact may sometimes be significant, don’t let fear lead to a lack of action.

Ignoring disability and its language can potentially result in organisations and individuals facing backlash. By not including disability in communications and giving it the same profile as other Diversity and Inclusion priorities, they risk being accused of discrimination, exclusion and unwelcoming to disabled customers, investors, and employees.

Intention is also important. Listen to any criticism you get and learn from it. Make changes to the language you use proactively. While Beyonce and Lizzo were criticised for their lyrics, they were also praised highly for listening, learning, and amending them quickly.

# Part two: Practical language guidance

## Deciding what language to use

All organisations have a moral duty to talk about disability. However concerned you are about using the wrong language when talking about disability, it will always be more harmful to fail to talk about disability at all.

As long as your intentions are always to empower disabled people, you can work with your disabled employees, customers, service users and other stakeholders to work out the right language to use. Start by making sure you employ disabled people and that your organisational culture empowers them to tell you how to talk about disability.

However, it is also important to remember that the language of disability is often changing (even within one language). People who are not familiar with the language of disability may initially struggle to appreciate the subtle differences of meaning that can be implicit in language choices. This can be especially true for people using a language that is not their first language.

As with many groups, the language disabled people use about themselves is not always the language that others without that disability should use. For example, a person with what was previously known as Asperger’s syndrome may call themselves an ‘aspie,’ but find it offensive for someone who doesn’t have Asperger’s to describe them as such. The term ‘Asperger’s’ is no longer recognised as a specific diagnosis in medicine and it has fallen out of favour due to Dr Hans Asperger’s historical association with the Nazis – an example of evolving language.

Therefore, the process of deciding what language to use must involve consultation with all relevant people and groups.

Keep this process simple: Ask, Decide, Explain, Review.

### Ask

What are your aims? Are you looking at a holistic approach to employees with your language? Are you aiming for equity, or are you taking a more niche approach and maybe linking it to other language-related documents?

* People – for example: short staff surveys, employee representative groups (ERGs), customers.
* Other organisations – for example, local disability groups
* Why do people and organisations use the terminology they do?

If you can do better.

### Methods

* Staff surveys.
* groups that represent the organisation, such as:
  + employee networks including disability, different geographic locations groups, different roles and seniority levels within the organisation
  + HR
  + D&I.
* Ensure that you include staff from all geographic areas in your organisation as they can advise on local dos and don’ts.
* Desk-based research what language and definitions other organisations use – for example the UN and governments in countries where you have staff and customers.

Collaboration with other organisations.

### Decide

Once you have all the information, decide what is best for your organisation.

Know why you have chosen the terminology you have.

Decide what terminology to use at corporate levels and what, if any, can be used/is acceptable at local levels.

Where you can be flexible – for example, using PFL in some instances and IFL for others (such as the Deaf community).

What are words that are not to be used anywhere.

### Explain ‘why’

We are all generally more compliant if we know why something was chosen, even if we don’t always agree with the decision.

It can also be easier to remember what to use if we know the context.

Knowing ‘why’ can also help us understand the impact on individuals, customers, and the organisation.

Explaining is also about explaining at high and detailed levels. For example, explain why the language about disability is essential to get right generally, its potential impact on the organisation, and also why some words are acceptable and others not.

### Review

* Set review criteria and dates.

Use feedback surveys.

Remember: You will not please everyone. Because the language of disability is constantly changing and words can have different connotations in different languages, it is often impossible to create a formulation of words that will be unproblematic to everyone who receives it. You can mitigate against this by:

* Consulting with all relevant groups
* Reviewing your language dos and don’ts regularly

Being flexible and open to feedback.

### Case study: ILO’s House of Words

Providing a safe space to reflect on disability inclusive language

Recently, members of the International Labor Organization (ILO)’s Disability Champions’ Network (DCN) participated in an online workshop on disability inclusive language. The DCN is a network of approximately 70 ILO colleagues at all levels of the organisation who work as catalysts for disability mainstreaming.

The workshop drew on the ILO’s Disability Equality Training methodology, which builds on the ideas, experiences and perceptions of the participants. As such, the focus is not on “telling” or “teaching” ILO colleagues a list of words they should (or should not) use. Rather, participants explore language from their childhood, their homelife and work that describes disability; then, through a discussion facilitated by an ILO Disability Specialist, they consider what language is appropriate, or inappropriate, and why.

A key element of this approach is not to put anyone “on the spot” or to criticize them for their answers (for example, the session was not recorded). Instead, in a friendly and collegial space, the facilitator encouraged participants to anonymously post words in three categories: ones they thought were unacceptable, acceptable, and words they were not sure about.

These categories were visualized as different areas of a house, where the “good” words go inside the house, the “so-so” words go onto the porch, and the “bad” words go outside in the garden. Thus, the exercise is called, the “House of Words”, and it emphasizes that we all build our house (our inclusive vocabulary) together.

Through guided discussion, the Champions discovered for themselves why expressions like “the blind” or “the deaf” pigeonhole a diverse array of persons into rigid categories, and why saying “a person with schizophrenia” values the person, unlike “schizophrenic”, which essentializes the person with a medical diagnosis. In this way, the participants discovered the person-first language used by the ILO, and the importance of using language preferred by persons with disabilities themselves.

Through providing a safe, friendly space, Champions left the session with an increased capacity and confidence to use disability inclusive language in their daily work.

Provided by International Labour Organization

## Different contexts

There are very few hard and fast rules about what language to use and not to use. In fact, the ‘right’ language to use in one context may be inappropriate in another context.

For example, if your organisation primarily uses American English, it may be preferable to use person first language (for example, ‘people with disabilities’) in a communication to be shared with all employees. This tends to be more acceptable to users of American English, so you may decide that it is likely to be seen as the ‘wrong’ language by fewer people.

However, the exact same language could be inappropriate for another context. For example, if communicating specifically with a regional group within your organisation based in UAE, you may decide to talk about ‘people of determination’ instead, as this term has its own context-specific connotations that you may feel make it preferable.

## House style and other language guides

House style and language guides can be useful documents. They are not just for written work within some departments. They should also advise on what language should be used when speaking to colleagues and customers. Style guides are for use by all employees.

They can give suggestions and guidance on terminology and phrases and have preprepared sections for use in certain documents, such as emails and reports at different levels of the organisation and on various topics.

These guides should also advise on inclusive language, including disability. In addition, they should give context as to why specific terms are, or are not, used, as required.

### Who should the guide cover?

A language guide should apply to all employees. However, you may decide to have different guides for different geographical areas or business areas.

As described in Part one, language use varies significantly between different areas and groups, and so it may not be appropriate to mandate one set of language rules for all global employees.

### Top tips for style guides

* Consult – with the groups that will use the language guides you create, including disabled people and non-disabled people. This can help avoid accidentally mandating language that will cause upset or offence. Allow for differences of opinions and accept that there may be no one solution that will satisfy everyone.
* Explain – Some people may not understand why some language is acceptable and some is not. Users of language guides are more likely to follow them if they can understand why it matters.
* Publicise – Users may not be aware or may have forgotten they should use a language guide. Remind employees regularly about the guidance.
* Invite feedback – Users who find issues with language guides should be able easily to contact the guide’s owner with any feedback they have.

Review – A language or style guide will always have a shelf life, as language use changes over time and language users’ preferences also change.

## Individuals’ use of language

All organisations are made of individuals, and work with individuals on a daily basis – whether as employees, customers, service uses, clients, or members of the public.

This may amount to hundreds, thousands or even millions of interactions every day, where members of your team could use – or be on the receiving end of the use of – potentially upsetting language around disability.

### Tips on how to address language use

Most people find starting a conversation with someone about their possibly inappropriate word choice, views or behaviours difficult. This can be for several reasons, such as:

* fear about the person’s reaction
* fear of repercussions, especially if it is someone more senior to them
* a more senior employee’s fear of receiving negative attention for making a mistake
* lack of confidence in their own knowledge of terminology
* may naturally shy away from confrontation
* may not know how best to raise the topic and fear ‘getting it wrong’
* fear about the impact on a business if they raise the issue, especially with a customer or client

may find general communication difficult for many reasons and potentially challenging conversations more so

### Things to consider as to why this situation has arisen

* Why has this person used the language they have?
* Is it a one-off tongue slip from someone who is usually conscientious about language use?
* Is it that the person doesn’t know that their words are now seen as outdated and offensive?
* Maybe they are describing themselves with words you feel uncomfortable with
* Who is making the comment? Is it a senior leader, a manager, a potential or actual client/contractor, a visitor, a customer, or an employee?
* Where is the comment being made? For example, in a public area such as a conference, meeting, broadcast interview, job interview, shop, open plan workspace, in a one-to-one meeting, spoken or written?

How well do you know the person?

### Planning how to address the situation

Doing nothing is the worst thing you can do – it won’t help the person, the recipient, the organisation or you.

As with any potentially tricky conversation, planning and having strategies are key:

* Where is the best place to have the conversation?
* How might they react, and how will you manage that?
* Is this a one to one conversation, or will you use it as an opportunity to remind everyone to consider how they use language?
* Is it an informal or formal conversation
* Is there any training you can offer or guidance documents you can give them/refer them to?
* Remember that everyone can forget what words to use, especially if they are tired, or feeling under pressure, or overwhelmed. It can also take time to remember new vocabulary and to use it every time.

### How do you want to give feedback about word choice?

If it is a team member, then starting with an informal conversation is probably best.

You may want to discuss this with your manager and HR if it is a more senior person in the organisation. However, it may be that a polite email to the person will suffice – it will depend on your organisation’s culture.

### Having the conversation

Always start from the position that the individual is unaware of the impact of their word choice. They may not have meant to offend. Often approaching it how you would like to be treated in a similar situation works best.

Explain why you find the language unacceptable and suggest what they can/should use instead and why.

Be aware that people will react in different ways. Some people will initially respond defensively or even angrily. This is often because they feel embarrassed, humiliated, ignorant, and ashamed. This does not mean they will not regret what they said or learn from the experience. People can react negatively as a coping strategy due to life experiences, low confidence, and self-esteem.

The terminology the person uses may be acceptable where they come from. For example, ‘handicapped’ in the USA but not in the UK or vice versa. ‘Mad’ in the UK still has some connection to mental health, whereas, in the USA, it is another word for ‘angry’. They are unaware that they have even said it or that it has a different interpretation and impact from their intention.

However, if they continue to use inappropriate language after being made aware of it, you may need to remind them politely. If it continues after that, their manager may need to get involved, and potentially escalate to disciplinary processes if they still do not.

Remember the aim is not to punish people but to use this as an opportunity to encourage people. Be kind and clear with your feedback.

### Supporting staff and clients

Most organisations already have guidance for staff available about what steps they can and should follow if they witness or experience unacceptable behaviour from other employees. The guidance may also include what to do if someone outside the organisation makes them uncomfortable. It is not uncommon for employees to forget this or be unsure where to find it as it is not something they ever expect to need. Having this guidance visible with regular reminders may help.

Many organisations now provide ‘difficult conversation’ training or resources to all staff. Training and guidance on handling situations, who and where to get help, what is acceptable intervention and what is not, and why, can help staff feel more supported. Again, publicising this regularly is helpful.

Some organisations have job roles more likely to encounter angry and abusive customers. Learning how they protect their staff in these situations and how their staff deal with these cases can be useful.

If a client reports this, then have a plan for how to deal with simple and more complex situations. It may be as straightforward as thanking them for raising it, apologising, saying what you will do next, and whether you will be feeding back to them or not.

## Inclusive language: The dos and the don’ts

### Why words are important

The words that we use to talk about disability are important. Our choice of words can make the difference between someone feeling engaged and included or ignored and excluded.

Unfortunately, there are many unhelpful and negative stereotypes around disability, which are still in existence. Using words or phrases without thinking about their meaning can reinforce these stereotypes.

Regularly reviewing the language you use with your disability networks or customer panels is important and makes sense. Similarly, if you need to describe a person’s individual disability, the best way to do this is to ask the person how they would like you to describe them. It is much better to ask than assume.

Don’t let the fear of using the wrong words put you off from engaging with a disabled customer or colleague. Most disabled people won’t mind if you get it wrong if your intention was right. Context is often as important as the words themselves.

### Using inclusive language: Top tips

* Ask someone the language they would like you to use. If you are unsure, then ask. Don’t make assumptions.
* Focus on removing barriers. Having a disability is just one aspect of a who a person is. Try not to define someone by their disability. Often, it is not necessary or appropriate to mention a person’s disability. Ask what you can do to make things easier for that person rather than about their disability.
* Use language that everyone can identify with. A person may be defined as disabled under the law but may not regard themselves as having a disability or ever use the term ‘disabled’ to describe themselves. As an example, people who use British Sign Language, and who identify as part of the deaf community, may prefer to be referred to as ‘Deaf’ with a capital ‘D’. Someone who has autism or dyslexia may prefer ‘neurodiverse’ or ‘autistic’ or ‘dyslexic’.
* Avoid phrases with a negative connotation. Most everyday phrases such as ‘see you later’ or ‘look forward to hearing from you’ are acceptable to someone who is blind or D/deaf. The exception is if the phrase has a negative connotation, such as ‘to turn a blind eye’ or ‘it fell on deaf ears’.
* Do not ask people to ‘declare or disclose’ their disability. Some people are ok with this, but many others aren’t. It is safer to use plainer language, such as “tell us if you have a disability or condition” or simply ask if people need an adjustment. It is good practice to ask everyone if you can do anything differently to make things easier for them. Remember everyone has preferences regardless of whether or not they have a disability. Business Disability Forum discusses this topic further in an article on inclusive language published by Includr.
* Consider your audience. Generally, if writing for a UK audience, then ‘disabled people’ is often preferred over ‘people with disabilities’. ‘Disabled people’ recognises that people are ‘disabled’ by society’s response to them or by their long-term condition. This is called identify first language. If communicating with a global audience, then ‘people with disabilities’ is more widely used. This is called people first language and emphasises the person over their disability.

Take into account cultural meaning. The words and phrases mentioned in this resource relate to the use of English in the UK. Different words will be viewed as acceptable and unacceptable in other languages and cultures. It is important to take this into consideration when translating any information into another language.

Our resource ‘Inclusive language: The dos and don’ts’ in our Inclusive Communication Toolkit has more advice.

## Remember to tell everyone

* Remember to tell contractors and anyone working for you in any capacity. Then, they can roll out your training (or theirs) as part of the contract.
* Don’t just add it to a webpage or policy and procedure. Many people don’t look at them unless they are immediately relevant to their needs.
* Have annual reminders and publicise updates. Have campaigns similar to events such as no-smoking day.
* Have a ‘lessons learned’ for the whole organisation. Notices on doors in toilets, kitchen areas, and emails are ideal.

Combine with other training and events, not just disability language training but also as part of corporate values and behaviours training.

* Blogs and vlogs focusing on how changing views on language has helped an individual, a conversational piece in newsletters looking at personal experiences. Case studies can also be very effective.

Adding it to corporate responsibility reports and possibly annual reports as one of the organisation’s measurables can raise its profile. It can show employees and investors that disability and inclusion are taken seriously.

## What to do when it goes wrong?

Fact: We will never please everyone 100 per cent of the time. Nor will we always get things right.

### Prevention

* If you feel unsure about what language to use, admit that and ask the person to advise you. You will learn, and they will feel respected.
* Reference your style guide when necessary.

Ask when you are not sure.

### Have a plan for when it does go wrong

* Apologise – Most PR professionals will advise their clients that they should take responsibility and apologise as soon as possible if they make a mistake. This is advice which is relevant here and for everyone within an organisation.
* Take responsibility for any error you make. Most people accept that nobody or organisation is perfect and will respect you for admitting this, providing you do it straight away.
* Learn from the mistake and try to find a way to prevent it from happening again. If appropriate, share the experience as a ‘lessons learned’.

Reporting. If necessary, report what has happened as soon as possible.

# Business Disability Forum

Business Disability Forum is the leading business membership organisation in disability inclusion.

## Inclusive Communication Toolkit

We have created a Toolkit containing guidance about how to communicate in an inclusive way. It includes guidance on language as well as accessible formats, understanding diverse communication needs, and much more.

Visit the Inclusive Communication Toolkit.

## Advice Service

Our Advice Service for Members and Partners, provides in-depth, tailored advice and guidance by email and phone.

Contact the Advice Service.

## Global Taskforce

Our Global Taskforce brings together Members and Partners that want to have a positive impact on the lives of disabled candidates, employees and customers, wherever they are in the world.

Find out more about joining: businessdisabilityforum.org.uk/networks-and-taskforces/global-taskforce.

## Join us

If you want to play your part in creating a disability smart world,   
find out more: businessdisabilityforum.org.uk/membership.

# Further information

## UN

As of May 2022, the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities has been signed by 164 governments around the world, and ratified by 185. It has influenced many countries’ legislation on the rights of disabled people.

Visit the UN’s website for more information about the Convention.

The UN also provides ‘Disability Inclusive Communications Guidelines’.

## Bianca Prins

Bianca Prins is Global Head of Accessibility at ING and has conducted research on the language of disability around the world.

View Bianca Prins’ research on Inclusive Language in Business Communication.

# Appendices

## Appendix 1

‘Disability’ in different languages

* Arabic – إعاقة
* Bosnian, Croatian – invalidnost
* Danish – handicap
* Dutch – handicap
* French – handicap
* German – Behinderung
* Italian – disabilità
* Polish – niepełnosprawność
* Portuguese (European) – deficiência
* Romanian – dizabilitate
* Russian - Недееспособность
* Shona (Southern African region) – urema
* Slovak – Zdravotné postihnutie
* Slovene – invalidnost
* Spanish – discapacidad
* Swahili (Eastern African region) – ulemavu
* Swedish – funktionsnedsättning

US English – disability

## Appendix 2

### Legal definitions of disability around the world

* The UK – The Equality Act 2010 defines disability as “a physical or mental impairment” which has a substantial and long-term adverse effect on [their] ability to carry out normal day-to-day activities.”
* The USA – The Americans with Disabilities Act (1990) defines disability as “a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more major life activities of such individual.”
* China – The Law on the Protection of Disabled Persons (1990) defines a disabled person as “one who suffers from abnormalities or loss of a certain organ or function, psychologically or physiologically, or in anatomical structure and has lost wholly or in part the ability to perform an activity in the way considered normal.”
* Saudi Arabia – The Implementing Regulations of Labor Law and its Annexes of 2019 defines a disabled person as:
  + “A person with disability means every person proven under a medical report issued by the Ministry of Health or Hospitals of other governmental sectors or under one of The Implementing Regulations of Labor Law and its Annexes 14 identification cards issued by the Ministry of Labor and Social Development (MLSD) that he has one or more permanent disability as in the following forms: Visual, hearing, mental, physical, and motor impairment, learning disability, speech disorder, behavioral and emotional disorders, autism, or any other disability requires one form of the facilitating measures and services..”
* European Union – The European Accessibility Act (2019) defines a person with a disability as “‘persons with disabilities’ means persons who have long-term physical, mental, intellectual or sensory impairments which in interaction with various barriers may hinder their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others.”
* Dubai – The Law Concerning Protection of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2022) in the Emirate of Dubai defines a disabled person as “A person suffering from a long-term physical, mental, or sensory deficiency or impairment that may hinder his full and effective participation in the society on an equal footing with others.”

Brazil – The Law of Inclusion of Persons with Disabilities (2016) defines a disabled person as “one who has a long-term impairment of a physical, mental, intellectual or sensory nature, which, in interaction with one or more barriers, may obstruct his or her full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with other people.”

## Appendix 3

### Models of disability

### The medical model

This model focuses on a person’s physical or mental impairments as the source of their disability.

### The charity model

This model is related to the medical model, but with the added belief that disabled people deserve pity because they are a victim of their disability.

### The economic model

This model defines a person’s disability through their reduced or removed ability to participate in work and be a productive worker.

### The social model

This model focuses on the ways in which society is organised that can make it harder (or impossible) for disabled people to do things non-disabled people can do.

### The biopsychosocial model

This model considers disability to be a combination of a person’s physical and/or mental health and their surrounding environment – such as society and physical environments.

Business Disability Forum is committed to ensuring that all its products and services are as accessible as possible to everyone. If you wish to discuss anything with regard to the accessibility of this document please contact us.

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