Employers' Guide to Language and Disability

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

Proper Language

As an employer, you can help build a stronger, more inclusive team by learning how to interact effectively and respectfully with your diverse colleagues. Attitudes and stereotypes often stem from the language we use, and can be some of the most challenging barriers persons with disabilities face. First, consider the following:

- **Terminology is always evolving.** Not everyone will agree on every term or word used (and that is okay). 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 country, region, or individual.

- **Do not let fear stop you.** You may have noticed at times that you are hesitant to say something, and fear using 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 create 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 a taboo.** When we talk about disability, we reduce stigma.

If you are not sure how someone self-identifies, the best thing to do is ask! Saying, "how would you like to be referred to?" is an effective way to ensure you are using the person's preferred language.

Guidelines and Recommendations

Here are some key points and general guidelines that will help your interactions be respectful and inclusive:

- Avoid using terms that suggest persons with disabilities are their conditions. It is preferable to identify the person first, such as "persons with disabilities" or a "person with a disability."

- Avoid using terms that categorize, such as "the disabled" or "the blind" as they imply that persons with disabilities are a uniform group.

- Avoid words that suggest heroism, such as "brave" or "inspirational." The majority of 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.

- Avoid using subjective words that equate disability with illness, avoid terms like "suffers from," "afflicted by," "patient," "disease," or "sick."

- Avoid using words that suggest persons with disabilities are inferior and should be excluded from activities generally available to others, such as "incompetent."

- Many persons with disabilities consider using commonly accepted phrases like "see you later" or "got to run" appropriate.

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Below are some recommendations to guide your language. Remember that persons with disabilities may still have their own preferences. When in doubt, ask the person!

Not Recommended	Recommended
challenged, handicapped	person with a disability
confined to a wheelchair	person who uses a wheelchair
the blind, the visually impaired	person who is blind or living with vision loss
deaf people who sign	the Deaf (upper case d)
deaf people who do not sign	the deaf (lower case d) or people who are deaf
mental patient, psychotic, neurotic	person with a mental health disability
learning disabled, learning disorder	person with a learning disability

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The Mental Health Commission of Canada published a document called "Language Matters," which focuses on using safer language when talking about mental health. Here are some of their recommendations:

Language That Stigmatizes	Safer Language
person suffering from mental illness	person living with/experiencing a mental illness
an addict, junkie, substance abuser	person living with a substance use disorder/problem
someone who committed suicide	someone who died by suicide
he is schizophrenic	he lives with schizophrenia
she is insane	she has lived experience with a mental health condition
person suffering from mental illness	person living with/experiencing a mental illness

Be mindful of the terms you many have learned a long time ago and ensure you are using the most up-to-date language. For example:

Not Recommended	Recommended
handicapped parking/permit	accessible parking/permit
handicapped bathrooms/stall	accessible bathrooms/stall
handicapped door opener	accessible door opener

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