

# **Disability Language & Terminology Guide 2019**



**Workplace Diversity Solutions**  
Delivering powerful results in a diverse world

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# WELCOME

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A welcome message from Richard Shakespeare -Managing Director of Workplace Diversity Solutions.



Many people are concerned about how to communicate effectively with an individual who has a disability, and often we concern ourselves with what language and terminology to use and fear that saying “the wrong thing” will offend.

As a person who has a disability, I can understand and appreciate why we might feel anxious about communicating with a person who has a disability.

The following guide has been designed to give you some hints and tips on how to talk to a person who has a disability without fear of saying the wrong thing.

Everyone can feel anxious in a new situation, or when meeting someone for the first time, it is perfectly natural and not unusual. When talking to or meeting a person with a disability for the first time, we understand that it can be daunting. Remember, having a disability is only a small part of who they are!

Much of what you are about to read is based on my personal experience.

Having been born with a disability, dealing with people’s perceptions and stereotypes have become part of my daily life. I firmly believe that no individual or business sets out to be offensive, sometimes, no matter how well-intentioned we get it wrong.

The most useful thing you can do is not be afraid to talk to a person who has a disability, actively avoiding conversation for fear of saying or doing the wrong thing is far more offensive than merely not acknowledging a person who has a disability.

Having worked for many of the UK’s leading brands, I often come across businesses that are petrified they are going to offend a person who has a disability. If you are someone who is not confident about the best way to communicate with someone who has a disability- You are not alone.

I hope that you will find this guide useful.

**Richard Shakespeare**  
**Managing Director**

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# SOME GOLDEN RULES

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## Don't Panic

When interacting with, or meeting someone who has a disability relax and act naturally, if you overthink things for fear of saying something offensive your communication will be less effective, and you may get flustered.

## Remember

- **Focus on the person rather than a disability** –A disability does not define the person.
- **Unless asked to do differently always speak to the person with a disability** rather than anyone who might be with them –If the person needs support with communication, or for you to talk to anyone they are with, let them decide.
- **Avoid making assumptions about an individual's abilities** –Trust the person with the disability as the expert on what they can manage.
- **Act naturally** –Don't alter your tone of voice or speak slowly. Doing this may mean that you may risk coming across as patronising.
- **Avoid telling a person with a disability that they are "inspirational"** In general, people with a disability do not appreciate other people suggesting that they are inspirational in typical day to day circumstances. I recently visited a supermarket, as I got out of my car a lady told me that she thought I was inspirational -All I had done was get out of the car, how is that inspirational?
- **Avoid Shouting at a person with a disability.** Quite often people make an automatic assumption that people with a disability also have a degree of hearing loss or need things to be simplified. While some people with a disability may have a degree of hearing loss, do not make that assumption automatically and therefore raise your voice.
- **Place the person before the disability** -Refer to a person with a disability, a customer with a disability or an employee with a disability rather than disabled people, a disabled customer or a disabled employee.

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# HAVE A CONVERSATION

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Many people are often confused about what language and terminology to use when speaking to someone who has a disability. Here we are going to look at some simple things we can do when we interact with a person who has a disability.

First, have a conversation and be yourself. Remember the saying – treat others as you would like to be treated.

## Things to avoid:

- **Resist the urge to jump straight in** -Before you start trying to help a person with a disability -ASK. If you feel that you could be of assistance to a person who has a disability, approach them and ask – “Can I offer you any assistance?”

Taking this approach allows the individual to politely decline your offer if they feel that they can manage, or it will enable them to accept your offer, and then give you details about how you can assist them.

- **Avoid using words such as wheelchair bound**- An individual who uses a wheelchair may not use it all the time; also, they may only use it in certain circumstances or situations.
- **Avoid suggesting that a person suffers**-People with a disability do not necessarily suffer pain or discomfort as a result of their disability. You should avoid suggesting that a person is suffering unless they advise you of their circumstances.
- **Asking what is wrong with them**- Unless you specifically need to know, try and avoid saying something like “What happened to you? Hey, what is wrong with you? While this might sound obvious, you might be surprised to learn how often people do this.
- **Bending down to talk to someone in a wheelchair** -Unless invited or requested to do so do not automatically bend down to speak to a person who uses a wheelchair.

It is okay to feel a little awkward or unsure; everyone can be uncertain in some situations. If you try and have a conversation without looking panicked, you will make a great first impression.

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# TERMINOLOGY

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<b>Terminology to Avoid</b>	<b>Alternative Suggestions</b>
Spastic	A person who is spastic is a person born with a disability which makes it difficult for them to control their muscles, especially in their arms and legs. People now refer to someone with this disability as having cerebral palsy. Alternatively, simply use the phrase- an individual with a disability.
Disabled Person	Put the individual first- A person with a disability, an individual who has a disability, a customer with a disability. Do not use labels such as “the disabled”
Wheelchair Bound	A person who uses a wheelchair or an individual with a wheelchair. Think of the wheelchair as a mobility aid rather than part of the person.
Deaf & Dumb, Mute	A person with a hearing impairment, a person with a degree of hearing loss, a person who uses sign language.
The Blind	A person with a visual impairment or degree of sight loss, people who are blind, a person with vision loss.
Mental/ Insane/ Mad	A person with a mental health condition, an individual who has a degree of mental health concerns.
Dwarf/Midget	A person of short stature or a person with restricted growth
Handicapped/Cripple	A person with a disability, a person with a mobility impairment, people with a disability.