

Effective Interaction: Communicating With and About People with Disabilities in the Workplace

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As children, we are curious — pointing to anything unfamiliar and asking questions. We have few, if any, inhibitions. As adults, we learn to censor our queries, feeling uncomfortable with anything unfamiliar. This is true when we are faced with new technologies. It is true when we are faced with tackling new projects for which we may not feel prepared. It is often true when we meet people who speak a different language or come from a different culture.

It is human nature and not unusual, therefore, to be concerned about interactions with people who use wheelchairs, who are blind, who are deaf, or whom we find difficult to understand. We may be concerned that we will say the wrong thing, ask an inappropriate question, or unintentionally offend. We do not want to appear uninformed or insensitive.

Tips for Speaking or Writing about People with Disabilities A key to any effective communication is to focus on the communication itself — what information needs to be transmitted and how best to transmit it. Positive language empowers. When writing or speaking about people with disabilities, it is important to put the person first — to focus on the person, not the disability. Group designations, such as "the blind," "the deaf" or "the disabled" are not empowering. It is important to use words that reflect individuality, equality or dignity — the person who is blind, the child who is deaf, the individual with a disability, for example.

Following are examples of appropriate and inappropriate phrases to describe persons with disabilities.

Positive Phrases

Person with an intellectual, cognitive, developmental disability

Person who is blind or visually impaired

Person with a disability

Person who is deaf or hard of hearing

Person with multiple sclerosis

Person with cerebral palsy

Person with epilepsy or a seizure disorder

Person who has muscular dystrophy

Person who uses a wheelchair; wheelchair user

Person who is unable to speak, person who uses synthetic speech

Person with a psychiatric disability

Person with a physical disability, person who is physically disabled

Person who is successful, productive

Negative Phrases

The retarded; mentally retarded

The blind

The disabled; handicapped

The deaf; deaf and dumb

Someone afflicted by MS

A CP victim

An epileptic; person with fits

Someone stricken by MD

Person confined, bound or restricted to a wheelchair

A mute

A crazy person

Person who is crippled, lame or deformed

Person who has overcome his/her disability; person who is courageous

Tips for Interacting with People with Disabilities

Appropriate etiquette when interacting with people with disabilities is based primarily on respect and courtesy. Below are a few tips to help you communicate effectively.

1. When speaking with a person with a disability, talk directly to the person, not his or her companion. This applies whether the person has a mobility impairment, a speech impairment, a cognitive impairment, is blind or deaf and uses an interpreter.
2. Extend common courtesies to people with disabilities. Extend your hand to shake hands or hand over business cards. If the individual cannot shake your hand or grasp the card, he or she will tell you, and direct where you may place the card.
3. If the person has a speech impairment and you are having difficulty understanding what he or she is saying, ask the individual to repeat, rather than pretending to understand. Listen carefully, and repeat back what you think you heard to ensure effective communication.
4. If you believe that an individual with a disability needs assistance, go ahead and offer the assistance — but wait for your offer to be accepted before you try to help.
5. If you are interviewing a job candidate with a disability, listen to what the individual has to offer. Do not make assumptions about what that person can or cannot do.
6. If you are speaking to a person who is blind, be sure to identify yourself at the beginning of the conversation and announce when you are leaving. Don't be afraid to use common expressions that refer to sight, such as, "See you later."
7. If you wish to get the attention of a person who is deaf, tap the person gently on the shoulder or arm. Look directly at the person, and speak clearly in a normal tone of voice. Keep your hands away from your face, and use short, simple sentences. If the person uses a sign language interpreter, speak directly to the person, not to the interpreter.
8. If you encounter an individual with a service animal, such as a dog, please do not touch or distract the animal. Service animals are working, and it breaks their training to interact with others when they are on duty. When the animal is not working, some owners may allow interaction.
9. If you are having a conversation with a person who uses a wheelchair, if at all possible put yourself at the person's eye level. Never lean on or touch a person's wheelchair or any other assistive device. A person's assistive device is part of the person's personal space, and it is jarring or disturbing for anyone to have his or personal space invaded.
10. If you are speaking with an individual with a cognitive disability, you may need to repeat or rephrase what you say. If you are giving instructions on how to perform a task, you may also need to give the instructions in writing.
11. Relax. Whether conducting an interview or day-to-day workplace communications, focus on the subject matter and not on disability related issues. Treat the individual with the same respect and courtesy that you extend to all job candidates and employees. Any initial concerns will quickly disappear as you focus on effective communications.

References

"Guidelines for Reporting and Writing About People with Disabilities," produced by the Research and Training Center on Independent Living, University of Kansas.

"Ten Commandments of Etiquette for Communicating with People with Disabilities," October 1995, National Center for Access Unlimited, Chicago, IL.