



employers'  
forum on  
disability

# The Disability Communication Guide

I know parking is difficult  
around here but it's no excuse  
for being late





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forum on  
disability

The Employers' Forum on Disability is the world's leading employers' organisation working to the mutual benefit of business and people with disabilities.

We make it easier to employ disabled people, welcome disabled customers and develop partnerships with disabled people as stakeholders in the wider community.

Our 380-plus membership employs more than 20 per cent of the UK workforce.

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# The Disability Communication Guide

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This guide is for human resources managers, line managers and all other staff for use in their everyday working lives.

The guide will help:

- ★ Smooth the process of meeting and working with people who have specific impairments
- ★ Recognise and avoid the attitudes and behaviours that create barriers and misunderstandings
- ★ Develop a greater understanding of the views and preferences of disabled people



### The basics

The overriding rule is not to be daunted by lists of rights and wrongs. If in doubt, rely on your common sense. Ask yourself how you would want to be treated and always be willing to adapt to a person's individual preference.

- ★ **The majority of difficulties faced by disabled people are caused by other people's misunderstanding of their capabilities**
- ★ **Improving access means removing barriers; it is not just about spending money on structural alterations. It also involves adjusting policies, procedures and outdated attitudes towards disabled people**
- ★ **The word 'access' should be applied in its broadest sense to all forms of communication and opportunity**
- ★ **'Disability' is not 'sickness'. The general health of most disabled people is as good as that of anyone else**

### Communication skills

Communication skills are vital in developing relationships with disabled and non-disabled customers and employees alike.

#### **Common sense and common courtesy tells us:**

- ★ **Be patient and listen attentively**
- ★ **Use a normal tone of voice when extending a verbal welcome**
- ★ **Exercise patience when listening**
- ★ **Do not attempt to speak, or finish a sentence, for the person you are speaking to**
- ★ **Never ask, "What happened to you?". Restrain your curiosity**
- ★ **Address a disabled person by their first name only if addressing everyone with the same familiarity**
- ★ **Speak directly to a disabled person, even if accompanied by an interpreter or companion**
- ★ **Never make assumptions about what anyone can do**

## Words and phrases

Certain words and phrases may give offence. Although there are no concrete rules, it is helpful to understand why some terms are preferred to others. And preferences vary, so be prepared to ask the individual.

People are increasingly sensitive to the way in which the ‘language of disability’ can inadvertently reinforce negative stereotypes.



### General guidance

Most people who see disability as an equality issue strongly prefer the term ‘disabled people’ as they regard themselves as people with impairments or medical conditions who are ‘disabled’ by a society that fails to remove unnecessary obstacles.

Some prefer the term ‘people with disabilities’ because it puts the person first, while others, such as many who are pre-lingually deaf

(i.e. deaf from birth or an early age) and use British Sign Language; those that have a long-term medical condition; or who have experienced medical illness, may not see themselves as disabled at all, even though the Disability Discrimination Act may define them as such.

- ★ **A disabled person is not defined by their impairment. Nobody wants to be given a medical label.**

- ★ Labels say nothing about the person, they simply reinforce the stereotype that disabled people are 'sick' and dependent on the medical profession
- ★ References such as 'an epileptic' or 'a diabetic' are dehumanising. Instead, if you need to refer to a person's condition, say a person who has epilepsy or a person who has diabetes. (Exceptions do, however, exist. For instance the Dyslexia Association advocates the use of the phrase 'dyslexic people' as opposed to 'people with dyslexia'.)
- ★ Do not be embarrassed about using common expressions that could relate to someone's impairment, for example, "See you later" or "I'll be running along then"
- ★ Avoid using language that suggests disabled people are always frail or dependent on others, or which could make disabled people objects of pity, such as 'sufferers from' or 'a victim of'
- ★ Do not use collective nouns such as 'the disabled', 'the blind', 'the disfigured'. These terms imply people are part of a uniform group which is somehow separate from the rest of society. However, there is one exception and that is 'the Deaf', with a capital 'D'. This is the preferred term for many pre-lingually deaf people who use British Sign Language and see themselves as a cultural minority rather than part of a disabled community



## Specific guidance

<b>Instead of</b>	<b>Use</b>
Mental, mental patient, schizophrenic, lunatic, psycho, etc.	A person with a mental health problem or difficulty.
Cripple, or invalid.	Disabled person, or person with a disability or, if appropriate, a person with a mobility impairment.
Deaf and dumb, or deaf mute.	A person who is deaf without speech, or a Deaf person (see opposite page). Please note that British Sign Language is a recognised form of language.
Midget, or dwarf.	A person of short stature, or a person of restricted growth. (Although some individuals do prefer to be called a dwarf.)
Fits, spells, attacks.	Seizures.
Mentally handicapped, subnormal.	A person with a learning disability or difficulty.
Spastic.	A person with cerebral palsy.
Wheelchair-bound.	A wheelchair user.

### Disability etiquette

The one universal rule is never to assume you know what assistance, if any, a disabled person requires. Ask if, and what, assistance may be needed.

However, here are a few more general pointers that may be useful.

- ★ **Treat a disabled person in the same manner and with the same respect and courtesy you would anyone else**
- ★ **Treat adults as adults**
- ★ **Do not make assumptions about the existence or absence of a disability; many people have disabilities that are not visible or immediately apparent**
- ★ **Use appropriate physical contact, such as a handshake, as you would with anyone else**
- ★ **A disabled individual may not introduce a personal assistant or human aid to communications**

(for example an interpreter).  
Take your lead from the person using their services

- ★ **Assistance dogs (with a visually or hearing impaired person, a wheelchair user, or someone with epilepsy) are working dogs. They should not be treated as pets. They will, however, need water and somewhere outside to relieve themselves if it is a long meeting**
- ★ **Know where accessible (and other) toilets, drinking fountains, water coolers, and telephones are located**



- ★ Identify yourself clearly and introduce any other people present. Clearly indicate where people are located
- ★ If speaking in a group it is helpful to identify the name of the person you are speaking to. People should introduce themselves before speaking
- ★ To shake hands, say, “Shall we shake hands?”
- ★ Before offering assistance, ask the individual how you may help. If the person asks for assistance, ask, “May I offer you an arm?” rather than taking their arm. This enables you to guide, rather than ‘propel’ the person
- ★ Remember that most people with impaired vision do have some residual sight
- ★ If you are guiding someone, tell them when steps, stairs, ramps or other obstacles occur. And, in the case of steps, stairs and ramps, whether they are up or down
- ★ When you are offering a seat, guide the person’s hand to the back or the arm of the seat, and say this is what you are going to do
- ★ If leaving someone with a visual impairment in an area unfamiliar to them, inform the person you are leaving and connect them with someone else
- ★ When entering an unfamiliar area, give a brief description of the layout
- ★ Where someone might normally take notes, ask if they would like to tape the meeting or conversation
- ★ Provide written communication in an accessible format and, if possible, in the person’s preferred format, such as floppy disc, in large print, on audio-cassette or in Braille
- ★ Papers for meetings should be available in advance, including minutes and any papers to be tabled

## Meeting people: who are deaf or hard of hearing

There are many different degrees and types of deafness, and different ways for deaf people or those who are hard-of-hearing to communicate. It is estimated that 689,000 people are profoundly deaf and 50,000 people use British Sign Language (BSL) as their first language.

- ★ **Try not to feel uncomfortable about communicating with a deaf or hard of hearing person, even if the communication feels awkward at first**
  - ★ **If you do not understand what someone has said, ask him or her to repeat the sentence. Do not pretend you have understood when you have not**
  - ★ **Ask the person to tell you how they prefer to communicate**
- ★ **Speak one at a time in meetings or gatherings. This enables lip-reading or interpreter communication**
  - ★ **Written notes may help you present complicated information**
  - ★ **Make sure a deaf person is looking at you before you begin speaking as he or she may need to lip-read. A gentle touch on the shoulder or arm will capture their attention**
  - ★ **Keep background noise as low as possible**



- ★ **Check regularly that you have been understood**
  - ★ **Stick to the agenda**
  - ★ **Book interpreters or other support in advance**
  - ★ **For interviews and meetings use a qualified British Sign Language interpreter. Qualified interpreters are either CACDP (Council for the Advancement of Communication with Deaf People), registered interpreters or registered trainee interpreters**
  - ★ **If a sign language interpreter is present, speak to the individual, not the interpreter**
  - ★ **Use an induction loop, enabling hard of hearing people to tune-in their hearing aids directly to speakers and minimise background noise**
- Many people reinforce what they hear with lip-reading. A few deaf people with no hearing at all use this alone. This is a demanding and tiring skill.
- ★ **Look directly at the person you are speaking to**
  - ★ **Do not speak with your back to a light source as this will put your lips in shadow**
  - ★ **Make sure you are visible and in good lighting when talking**
  - ★ **Speak clearly and at an even pace, but do not distort or exaggerate your lip movements**
  - ★ **Stop talking if you must turn away**
  - ★ **Do not use exaggerated gestures**
  - ★ **Do not block your mouth with your hands, cigarettes or food**

## ❖ Meeting people: who are deafblind

While deafblindness is a combination of hearing and sight impairments, remember that deafblind people are not always completely deaf and blind. In fact, most deafblind people do have some residual hearing or sight or both. The advice provided in the sections on people with impaired vision or hearing may, therefore, also apply.

- ★ **A deafblind person may speak to you but may not hear your voice. Let the person know you are there. Approach from the front and touch the person lightly on the arm or shoulder to attract their attention**
- ★ **Many deafblind people need to be guided. Individuals will have their particular preference as to how they wish to be guided. Some deafblind people experience poor balance**
- ★ **A deafblind person may be supported by a communicator-guide or interpreter. Remember to speak to the individual rather than their assistant**
- ★ **Do not grab or 'propel' a person. Let them know you are offering to escort them by guiding their hand to your elbow**

## ❖ Meeting people: with speech difficulties

- ★ **Be attentive, encouraging and patient, but not patronising**
- ★ **Slowness or impaired speech does not reflect a person's intelligence**
- ★ **Refrain from correcting or speaking for the person. Wait quietly while the person speaks and resist the temptation to finish sentences for them**
- ★ **If you need more information, break down your questions to deal with individual points that require short answers**
- ★ **If you do not understand what someone has said, ask the individual to say it again. Never pretend to understand when you do not**

## ➤ Meeting people: who use a wheelchair, cane, walking frame or crutches

- ★ Leaning on a wheelchair is the equivalent of leaning or hanging onto a person. A wheelchair is a user's personal space
- ★ If you are talking for more than a few moments to someone in a wheelchair, try to position yourself so you are at the same level, or at least ask the person if they would like you to sit down
- ★ Be aware of your manner when you kneel or crouch to speak with the person. Do not alter your treatment of the individual. Treat adults as adults
- ★ If there is a high desk or counter, move to the front
- ★ Never touch or move crutches, canes or walking frames, or push a wheelchair without the user's consent
- ★ Offer a seat to someone who does not bring their own
- ★ Speak directly to a wheelchair user, not their companion
- ★ Unless you know it is easy to move around your building in a wheelchair, offer to help. Heavy doors or deep-pile carpets are just some of the hazards to watch for. Do not assume ramps solve everything; they may be too steep or too slippery
- ★ Do not be offended if your offer of help is refused. Many wheelchair users prefer to travel independently whenever possible



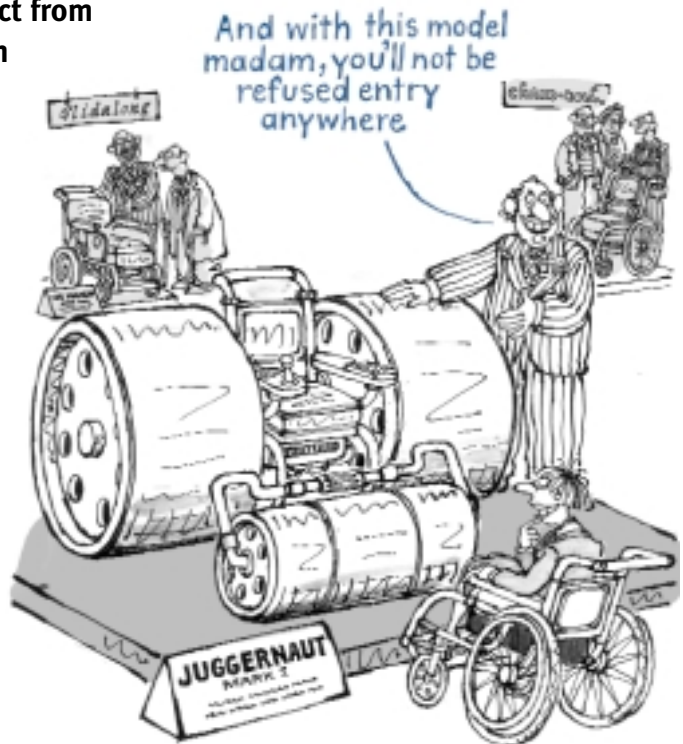
## ❖ Meeting people: with learning difficulties

Many people born with learning disabilities, those in the early stages of dementia or people who acquire a brain injury, live full and independent lives in the community. Most can make their own choices, with varying levels of support.

The following may apply to any of these individuals:

- ★ **Begin by assuming the person will understand you**
- ★ **Speak to the person as you would anyone else. Do not assume you can predict from your initial impression what the person will or will not understand**
- ★ **Keep all communication simple. Avoid jargon**

- ★ **Consider putting information in writing, including your name and phone number**
- ★ **Provide straightforward summaries of written information**
- ★ **Perhaps offer the person an appropriate record of a conversation (for example, tape, an electronic version, or 'easy read' notes) so they can consider it again later and keep a record**



## → Meeting people: with mental health problems

Someone experiencing the emotional distress and confusion associated with mental health problems may find everyday activities very hard. Often the most significant disability people with mental health problems experience is created by the attitudes of others

- ★ **Be patient and non-judgmental**
- ★ **Give the person time to make decisions**
- ★ **Provide clear and timely information with the aim of ensuring people arrive at a meeting as unstressed as possible**
- ★ **Remove any sources of stress and confusion, for example, noise, flashing lights**
- ★ **A person may require an advocate to help access information, or attend meetings or interviews**

## → Meeting people: with facial disfigurement

Some people are born with a disfigurement and others acquire it through accident or illness. Disfigurement is usually only skin deep, but it can be associated with facial paralysis and other impairment such as speech difficulties.

Like any disability, it does not mean the person is any different and certainly does not affect his or her intelligence.

Most of the difficulties, indeed discrimination, people with facial disfigurement experience, stem from other people's behaviour.

- ★ **Make eye contact, as you would with anyone else. Do not stare. Smile if you would for someone else**
- ★ **Listen carefully, and do not let the person's appearance distract you**

## Interviews

When preparing to interview a disabled person, you may need to adjust your usual arrangements. Do not assume you know what will be needed. Ask the individual.

- ★ **Every candidate should be asked if they have any particular requirements in connection with the interview, if they are to do well**
- ★ **Although you should be prepared to make adjustments, do not make assumptions about what a person can or cannot do. Disabled people often develop their own creative solutions to work-based challenges**
- ★ **Focus on the main tasks and requirements of the job and the person's skills**
- ★ **Do not be distracted by issues which are not related to work, such as gender, age, disability or ethnic origin**
- ★ **Restrict questions about the effect of the person's disability to those that potentially affect their ability to do the job**

- ★ **One might be, "How can we help you be successful in this job?"**
- ★ **Only ask about the person's life outside work if you would ask such questions of every other candidate**
- ★ **Do not ask, "What happened to you?"**

Examples of adjustments include:

- ★ **Changing the venue to a more accessible interview room for a wheelchair user**
- ★ **Re-arranging the seating or lighting so that a deaf person can lip-read more easily**
- ★ **Arranging for an appropriate person to help you communicate, such as a sign language interpreter**
- ★ **Allowing the individual to bring an assistant or companion to the interview. They might not want them to come in, so a waiting place nearby may be needed**

When planning a meeting or event remember that ‘access’ refers to facilities as well as buildings. It covers approaches, entrances, floor surfaces, lifts, speaker platforms, lecterns, catering and toilets, as well as providing extra time, interpreters and communications support, notes in Braille or on audio cassette, large print programmes and auxiliary aids such as portable hearing loops.

- ★ **If you think there may be access problems, either give advance warning of the problem or, preferably, find a better venue**
- ★ **Advertise that the venue is fully accessible, providing relevant detail, or disabled people may not risk coming**
- ★ **Make sure reception staff know you are expecting disabled people. Make sure they have read this guide and tell them about any particular requests**



## ... Meetings and events

- ★ Ensure there is room for people with visual or mobility impairments to move about easily, both at the meeting and when taking refreshments
- ★ Make sure help, and some seats and tables, are available. It is difficult to sign with a glass of champagne in your hand!
- ★ Reduce or remove any background noise
- ★ Offer clipboards to wheelchair users
- ★ Make sure parking arrangements are adequate. Provide directions and if necessary valet parking
- ★ Clearly sign accessible toilet facilities, and ensure staff are aware of their location
- ★ Staff should be aware of the evacuation plan, including refuge point and evacuation procedure
- ★ Ideally, the building should be equipped with a 'deaf-alert' (i.e. visual) fire alarm

## ... Invitations

- ★ On papers that go out before the meeting, ask people to let you know what adjustments they need
- ★ Rather than referring to, 'special needs', ask if people have 'particular requirements'
- ★ Use a phrase such as, "Please let us know what we can do to make our reception fully accessible to you?" or, "Do you need us to change anything to make sure you play a full part in this meeting?"

## The Employers' Forum on Disability: Publications

As the Employers' Forum on Disability's best seller, more than one million copies of the **Disability Communication Guide** have been circulated among UK businesses since its launch in 1999.

Like all EFD publications the **Disability Communication Guide** provides a unique source of up-to-date information, giving practical guidance for employers and service providers alike.

For further information on the Forum's activities, including publications, events, research, information helpline and membership benefits log on to our website: [www.employers-forum.co.uk](http://www.employers-forum.co.uk)

**For a publications' list, a quote for customising our publications to your individual needs and incorporating your company logo and equal opportunities statement, or simply to place an order, please phone 020 7089 2410.**

## Disability Discrimination Act

The Disability Discrimination Act protects people with a wide range of mental and physical impairments. People with, for example, dyslexia, epilepsy, severe disfigurements, angina, or mental health problems, may be covered by the Act.

From October 2004, the part of the DDA that relates to employment will apply to virtually every organisation. Further provisions apply to service providers and education establishments, and make it unlawful to discriminate.

NB: The DDA is described in more detail in other publications available from the Employers' Forum on Disability.



Employers' Forum on Disability,  
Nutmeg House, 60 Gainsford Street, London, SE1 2NY  
Tel: 020 7403 3020 Minicom: 020 7403 0040 Fax: 020 7403 0404  
E-mail: [efd@employers-forum.co.uk](mailto:efd@employers-forum.co.uk)  
Website: [www.employers-forum.co.uk](http://www.employers-forum.co.uk)

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