

# Language Matters: Better word choices = better outcomes

Lisa Kelly, Director of Training  
Canadian Business SenseAbility

[Lisa.Kelly@SenseAbility.ca](mailto:Lisa.Kelly@SenseAbility.ca)

# Agenda

- Disability and employment
- Language matters
- Language can affect employment outcomes
- Better options?



# Pop quiz

- 1) % of Canadians with a disability?
- 2) # of Canadians with a disability?
- 3) % of Canadians with a disability + family + friends?
- 4) Unemployment rate for people with disabilities?



# Disability and employment

- **20%** of Canadians
- **6.2M** Canadians - **fast growing** and **largest** diversity group
- **53%** disability community
- **49%** compared to 79%



The real disability  
is not attracting  
employees  
with abilities.

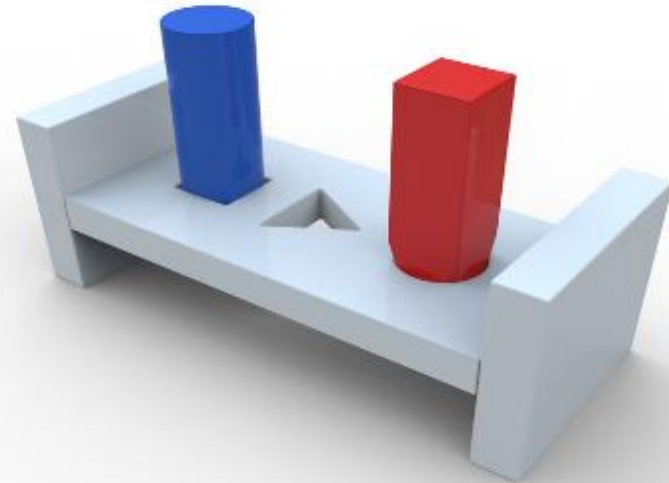
PROFIT FROM INCLUSION

  
SenseAbility.ca

# Definitions

A physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more major life activities.

A mismatch between an environment, societal attitudes and a person.



# Mismatches can be...

- physical spaces or structures
- objects
- environmental
- digital
- attitudinal

*If we solve the mismatch, we can eliminate the barrier.*



# Simplify

- Clear (simple and direct)
- Concise (short and to the point)
- Avoid acronyms, slang...



# Change the focus from...

disability → ability  
negative → positive  
stigmatized → neutral  
generic → authentic





# Practice

## These words?

Handicapped

Person with a disability

Disabled person

Impaired person

Person with an impairment

Suffers from...

## Change the focus from:

the disability → the ability

negative → positive

stigmatized → neutral

generic → authentic

# Practice

These words?	
Handicapped	✗
Person with a disability	✓
Disabled person	✓
Impaired person	✗
Person with an impairment	✗
Suffers from ...	✓

## Change the focus from:

the disability → the ability

negative → positive

stigmatized → neutral

generic → authentic

# What words will you use?

- Best word choice
- Okay word choice
- Not a good word



# Avoid

## Negative or disparaging

...suffers from  
...impaired  
...victim of  
...limited

---

## Out-dated

...delayed  
...R... word  
...stutterer  
...crippled

---

## Inspiration-drive

...special  
...courageous  
...inspiring  
...brave



# ATP

## “Ask the person”

- You don't have to be an expert
- Ask the person their preferred terminology
- Disclosure is an individual choice



# Focus on the positive

## It's what you can do that counts

“I’m unemployed. I’ve never worked. I can’t read well. No one will hire me because of my disability.”

“I’m a job seeker, and I like to be around people. I will come to work on time and I will do a good job. I learn by watching. It may take me longer to learn something the first time, but I always do it the right way. I use picture cards to help me remember.”

# Re-frame experiences

“I have irritable bowel syndrome. I was diagnosed when I was twenty-one. It made it hard to finish school I was in so much pain. Nobody understood. Even now, I can’t tell people because its embarrassing.”

“I have three years experience, and my past employers will tell you that I’m very productive. Because of a medical condition that is under control, I require an office that is close to a washroom and may take frequent washroom breaks. I have always been one of my company’s top performers.”

# Use words free of stigma

- Avoid medical and legal language
- Use words that are free of stigma

“I have been diagnosed with anxiety and PTSD. Loud noises make me nervous and if it’s too busy I’d need my own office.”

“I work best in a calm setting. I require frequent breaks to do the best job possible. Noise cancelling headsets allow me to focus and be most effective.”



# Appropriate sharing

- Why don't you discuss your disability?
- When do discuss it, why do you do so?
- When do you discuss it?
- How do you discuss it?



# How to disclose?

“I have been working at a law firm for three years. Everyone is expected to work late, be at their desks 100% of the time, and always be on top of their game. I just developed diabetes. I am going to need to tell my boss. How do I do this?”

“It is your choice on whether to simply request an accommodation, or whether to share your diagnosis. You can explain this is a recent change. Be specific on what adjustments you need – a regular break to check blood levels, the ability to snack at a desk, and a place to store food nearby. Let them know that a modified work schedule for the short term may be needed.”

# How to disclose

- Must disclose if there are health /safety risks to individuals or co-workers
- Authentic (it's the individual's decision)
- Disclose what is needed to do the job, not the disability or diagnosis
- Focus on the positive (abilities)
- Avoid legal and medical jargon



# The intent behind interview questions

These words?	Or these words?
What is your greatest strength?	What is your best quality as a worker?
What is your greatest weakness?	What do you find most difficult to do at work? How have you fixed it?
Why did you apply for this job?	What interests you about this job?
Tell me about yourself.	Please tell me a bit about your work experience.
What is your work experience?	What have you learned from your previous work / school... that might help you in this job?
Why do you have a gap?	... learning to adapt to the barriers I face, at school, dealing with a personal situation, caretaking, travelling...

# Sources

Cross Cultural Interviewing, Work Ready: Information and Resources for Human Resources Practitioners (Section 3.7)

Disability Etiquette, United Spinal Association, 2015. [www.unitedspinal.org](http://www.unitedspinal.org)

Words Matter: Suggested Guidelines for People-First Language to Create Inclusive Communities, Together We Rock, [www.togetherwerock.com](http://www.togetherwerock.com)

Aulthouse, Michelle (Albert Gallatin Area School District). Jered B. Kolbert, Matthew J. Bundick, and Laura M. Crothers (Duquesne University). Positive Psychology and Career Development.

Confidential – not for sharing without the prior consent of Canadian Business SenseAbility.