Guide

Inclusive Language

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Introduction

Welcome to the Inclusive Language Guide!

This document aims to support everyone in your company in using language that respects and acknowledges the diversity of your workforce.

Traditionally, norms in language and communication have been shaped around the perspectives of privileged groups, thus marginalising and othering those with less privilege.

Stereotypes and assumptions perpetuated through language can reinforce existing power imbalances and harmful generalisations.

These power dynamics and narratives are upheld by us and continue to thrive when we use exclusionary language – whether consciously or unconsciously.
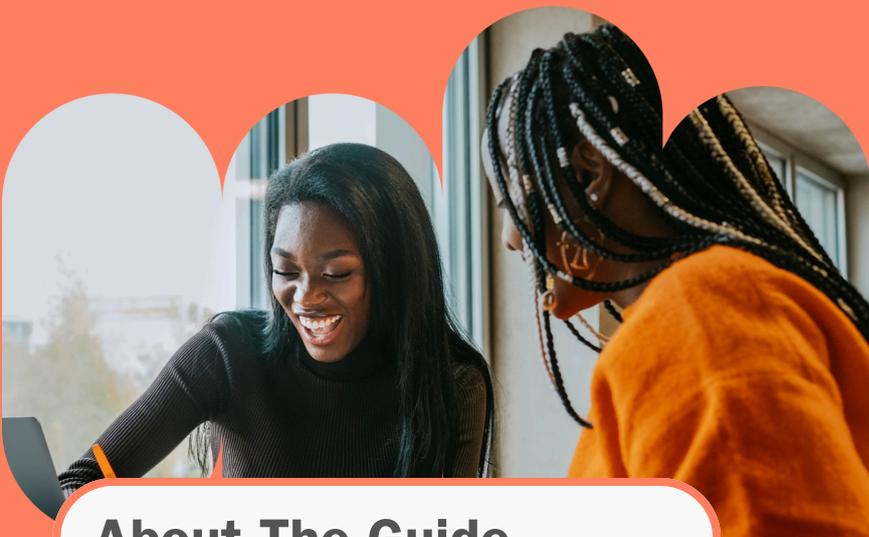
About The Guide...

These guidelines are not strict rules but suggestions to help create an inclusive environment. Language is dynamic and nuanced, varying with individuals, culture, relationships, and time.

This guide covers:

- Common pitfalls in language
- Examples of more inclusive alternatives
- Recognising and addressing microaggressions
- How to challenge non-inclusive language constructively

Key Principles

When considering if language is inclusive or not, it can be useful to refer to foundational principles to guide you. Here are a few to consider:

Respectful

Always consider how others might perceive your words. Respect is fundamental to inclusive language. This means avoiding derogatory terms, stereotypes, and assumptions. Aim to use language that uplifts and empowers others.

Adaptability

Be open to learning and changing your language as societal norms evolve. Inclusive language is not static; it evolves with our understanding and social progress. Stay informed and be willing to adapt your language practices.

Awareness

Recognise the impact of your words and strive to be mindful of inclusivity. Language shapes our perceptions and can either include or exclude. By being aware, you contribute to a positive and inclusive workplace culture.

Listening/Informed

Ensure that the language being used accurately reflects reality. Pay attention to how people refer to themselves and respect their preferences. Everyone has the right to define their identity and be addressed accordingly. Listening actively is crucial to respectful communication.

Getting It Wrong

We all make honest mistakes, especially when navigating the complexities of inclusive language. If it hasn't happened already, we all have the capacity to unintentionally use language that is potentially harmful. This can be uncomfortable for all parties involved, but it can still be resolved!

Don't make it about yourself...

When we experience guilt or shame, it can be easy to make the situation about ourselves and our needs in that awkward moment, it is important to centre the feelings of the individual or group that has experienced the harm.

Understand...

Take the time and effort to understand as best you can why the language you used was harmful and/or inappropriate. If possible, make sure that you take responsibility for educating yourself rather than putting the onus on the party that experienced harm.

Apologise sincerley...

When apologising, it is important to know the impact of our words—this underpins the importance of step 2. An apology should affirm to the recipient that your behaviour will be different in the future, so it can be useful to share how.

Learn from the experience...

...and move on. When we feel guilt or shame about a mistake or harm we have caused, it can be easy to dwell on it or apologise continuously. Approach these situations with humility and a willingness to improve. Acknowledge your mistake, apologise without making excuses, and take steps to ensure it doesn't happen again.

Age and Generational Inclusion

Inclusive language should be reflective and welcoming to people of all generations. We live in multigenerational communities and navigate multi-generational workplaces, so it's crucial we work to engage perspectives across age groups.

Silent Generation

Typically includes people born between approximately 1928 and 1945. They experienced the Great Depression, World War II, and the Cold War.

Baby Boomers

People born between approximately 1946 and 1964 during the post-World War II baby boom. This generation experienced significant cultural, social, and economic changes in the latter half of the 20th century.

Gen X

People born between approximately 1965 and 1980. This generation grew up during the rise of technology, the end of the Cold War, and a shift towards more individualistic and entrepreneurial attitudes.

Millennials (Or Gen Y)

People born between approximately 1981 and 1996. Experienced the internet boom, the Great Recession, and characterised by familiarity with technology, social media and a focus on work-life balance.

Gen Z

Include those born between approximately 1997 and the early 2010s. The first generation with smartphones from a young age and known for digital fluency.

Alpha

Refers to people born from the early 2010s onwards. This generation is expected to be the most technologically immersed generation, growing up in a world dominated by artificial intelligence, advanced technology, and significant global challenges.

Age and Generational Inclusion

Age-related language can reinforce stereotypes about both younger and older people, affecting their confidence, opportunities, and inclusion in the workplace and society. Phrases that undermine someone's abilities based on age can contribute to bias and exclusion. Key terms to understand are:

Ageism: Discrimination or prejudice based on age.

Intergenerational equity: Fair treatment of all age groups in access to opportunities and resources.

Pitfall	Why it's a problem	More inclusive alternative
You're too young to understand!	Dismisses valid perspectives based on age and assumes inexperience.	"I'd like to hear your perspective on this…"
Senior moment	Reinforces negative stereotypes about ageing and memory loss.	"I forgot for a second."
Ok, boomer!	Dismisses older people's views and contributes to generational divides.	Engage in discussion without minimising viewpoints.
Millennials/Gen Z don't want to work	Assumes an entire generation lacks a work ethic.	Focus on systemic issues affecting work patterns.

Disability (including neurodiversity and mental health)

Language surrounding disability should centre respect, dignity, and the social model of disability rather than deficit-based thinking. Many people prefer identity-first language (e.g., "disabled person") rather than person-first language (e.g., "person with a disability")

The Medical and Social Models of Disability

The medical model of disability has had a large historical influence on the traditional language used day-to-day, as well as in medicine/healthcare, to discuss disability and mental health conditions.

The medical model of disability says people are excluded because of their impairments or differences. The medical model tends to focus on what is 'wrong' with a person, not how the word has been built to exclude them. This is reflected in language that suggests that disabilities need to be 'fixed', 'healed', or 'overcome'.

The social model of disability says people are excluded by barriers in society rather than their impairment or difference. Barriers can be physical, like buildings not having accessible toilets, and they can be caused by people's attitudes, like assuming disabled people can't do certain things or assuming everyone can perform the same tasks. The social model helps us recognise that barriers in society make life harder and less accessible for disabled people.

Disability (including neurodiversity and mental health)

It is important to remember that disabled people aren't homogenous and will have unique preferences about how they are referred to.

Person-First Language

Emphasises the individual before the disability. This approach highlights the personhood of individuals, that they are not defined solely by their disability. For example, "person with a disability". The aim is to acknowledge that disability is one aspect of a person's identity, reducing stigma and promoting a respectful and humanising perspective.

Identity-First Language

Places the disability before the person – "disabled person" instead of "person with a disability." This approach is preferred by many in the disability community who feel their disability is a core part of their identity and shapes their experiences and worldview. Identity-first language is seen as empowering, creating pride and solidarity in the community.

It is important to respect individuals' preferences regarding how they wish to be identified. Asking someone for their preferred terminology is a good practice that demonstrates respect for their autonomy and identity.

Disability (including neurodiversity and mental health)

Key terms to understand are:

Ableism: Discrimination against disabled people, often through language, policies, or social attitudes.

Neurodiversity: The recognition that neurological differences (e.g., autism, ADHD) are natural variations of the human experience.

Accessibility: The design of products, services, and environments so that they are usable by all people, regardless of disability.
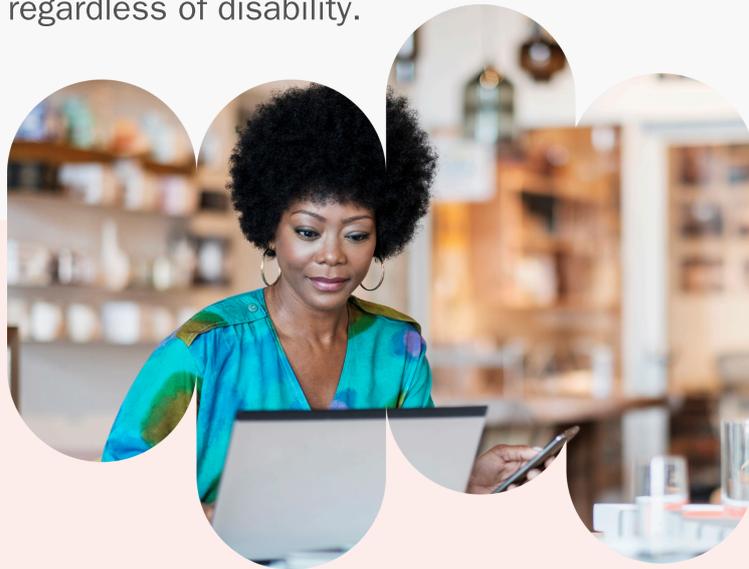
Pitfall	Why it's a problem	More inclusive alternative
Crazy/ insane/ mad	Stigmatises mental health conditions.	"Unbelievable," "wild," "intense," etc.
Tone deaf	Dismisses people with hearing disabilities.	"Insensitive," "out of touch."
Blind spot	Associates blindness with ignorance or lack of awareness.	"Unconscious bias," "knowledge gap."
Wheelchair bound	Implies restriction rather than mobility.	"Wheelchair user."

Gender, Sex, and Trans Inclusion

Gender Identity and Sex are terms often used interchangeably. However, sex and gender refer to different things and vary across cultures. Typically, people understand sex as male or female, determined by someone's genitals. But this is an oversimplified definition.

Sex is scientifically defined and determined by the following characteristics:

- Genes
- Chromosomes
- Hormones
- Internal and external sex organs
- Secondary sex characteristics

Intersex – A term used to describe a person who may have the biological attributes of both sexes or whose biological attributes do not fit with societal assumptions about what constitutes male or female.

Gender refers to a person's innermost sense of self as male, female, or a blend of both or neither. It's how individuals see and call themselves, which can align with or be different from their sex assigned at birth. Gender can be influenced by socially constructed roles, expression, behaviour and more. Gender is often experienced, referred to, and understood differently in many cultures.

Gender-neutral language – Avoiding gendered terms where possible (e.g., "parent" instead of "mother/father").

Gender, Sex, and Trans Inclusion

Transgender (or trans) – An umbrella term to describe people whose gender is not the same as, or does not sit comfortably with, the sex they were assigned at birth. Trans people may describe themselves using one or more of a wide variety of terms, including (but not limited to) transgender, transsexual*, genderqueer, gender-fluid, non-binary, gender-variant, crossdresser, genderless, agender, nongender, third gender, bi-gender, trans man, trans woman, trans masculine, trans feminine and neutrois.

Misgendering – Using incorrect pronouns for someone, which can be distressing.

Non-binary – An umbrella term for people whose gender identity doesn't sit comfortably with 'man' or 'woman'. Non-binary identities are varied and can include people who identify with some aspects of binary identities while others reject them entirely.

Pronouns—Pronouns that people choose to use for themselves, such as 'he' or 'she'. Some people may prefer others to refer to them in gender-neutral language and use pronouns such as they/their and ze/zir. Others may prefer pronouns that align with their culture or nationality but be mindful that not all languages and cultures use pronouns.

Sexism – Fear, hatred, or discrimination against marginalised sexes and upholding dominant stereotypes or making assumptions about people based on their sex.

Transitioning – The steps a trans person may take to live in the gender they are. For some, this involves medical intervention, such as hormone therapy or gender-affirming surgeries. It can also involve social transitioning, including (but not limited to) using different pronouns, changing their name, dressing differently and changing official documents. It's important to note that not all trans people wish to transition.

Transphobia – the fear, hatred, or discrimination against transgender or gender non-conforming people.

Gender, Sex, and Trans Inclusion

Specific Principles

1. Using gender-neutral terms.
2. Respect self-determined pronouns, names, and other…
3. Be holistic when discussing relationships.
4. Sort titles alphabetically rather than following any perceived hierarchy.
5. Avoid gendered job titles that imply social stereotypes.
6. Avoid using patronising terms.

Pitfall	Why it's a problem	More inclusive alternative
"Hey guys!	Assumes a male default.	"Hey everyone!" or "Hey folks!"
"He/She	Excludes non-binary people.	"They/them" or use the person's name.
"Manpower	Reinforces male dominance in the workplace.	"Workforce", "staffing."
"Ladies & Gentlemen	Excludes non-binary people.	"Everyone", "colleagues", "team."

Race, Ethnicity, Nationality, and Culture

Race and ethnicity are terms often used interchangeably, but they refer to distinct things and are both social constructs used to categorise people. While there can be overlap between the two terms, it's helpful to understand the difference and how this impacts inclusive language.

'Race' is often used to group people based on shared phenotypical (physical) traits, e.g., skin colour, hair texture, facial structure, and shared ancestry or historical experience.

'Ethnicity' is more often chosen by the individual and describes shared cultural expression or national identity, e.g., language, religious expression, cultural practices, and other customs.

Nationality is the legal membership of a person to a particular country, often signified by citizenship, and usually determines a person's legal rights and obligations within that country.

Culture most often refers to a set of shared beliefs, values, customs, behaviours, and artefacts that characterise a group or society. Culture is typically transmitted from one generation to the next through cultural properties such as language, art, rituals, and social institutions.

Language about race and ethnicity should respect individuals' identities and avoid assumptions, exoticisation, or stereotypes.

Race, Ethnicity, Nationality, and Culture

Key terms to understand are:

Cultural appropriation: Adoption of elements from a culture without respect or understanding.

Microaggressions: Subtle, often unintentional discriminatory remarks or behaviours that reinforce bias.

Racial equity: Ensuring equal opportunities and outcomes for all racial and ethnic groups.

Pitfall	Why it's a problem	More inclusive alternative
Where are you really from?	Implies someone is not 'truly' from the UK.	"Tell me about yourself…" (respecting boundaries, build relationships)
You speak such good English	Assumes non-white people are not native English speakers.	"You made a great point."
I don't see colour.	Dismisses racial identity and lived experiences.	"I value diversity and acknowledge different experiences and identities."

Sexual Orientation

Sexual orientation refers a person´s physical, romantic and/or emotional attraction to another individual. This could be towards people of the same sex, a different sex or both, as well as the same gender, a different gender, or both.

Language around sexual orientation should respect individuals' identities and avoid assumptions about relationships or preferences. Inclusive language ensures LGBTQ+ individuals feel acknowledged and valued without reinforcing stereotypes or heteronormative thinking. Key terms to understand are:

Aromantic: Someone who does not experience romantic attraction to others, though they may experience sexual attraction to others.

Asexual (or Ace): Describes a person who does not experience sexual attraction to others, though they experience romantic feelings for others.

Bisexual: Refers to someone who is emotionally, romantically, or sexually attracted to more than one gender.

Coming out: When an LGBTQ+ person shares their identity with others.

Gay: Describes a person, typically a man, who is emotionally, romantically, or sexually attracted to people of the same sex. The term is also used by some women and non-binary people who are emotionally, romantically, or sexually attracted to women or feminine people.

Heteronormativity: The assumption that heterosexuality is the default.

Sexual Orientation

Homosexual: Used to describe someone who is emotionally, romantically, or sexually attracted to people of the same sex.

Lesbian: Describes a woman and some non-binary people who are emotionally, romantically, or sexually attracted to women or feminine people.

LGBTQ+: An acronym for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, and other diverse identities.

Queer: A reclaimed term used by some LGBTQ+ people, but not universally accepted. In the 1980s it was weaponised as a derogatory slur against the LGBTQ+ community.

Pitfall	Why it's a problem	More inclusive alternative
You don't look gay	Implies there is a specific way LGBTQ+ people should present.	Avoid making assumptions about appearance.
That's so gay.	Used negatively, reinforcing stereotypes.	Express discontent without using identity-based terms.
Love is love.	While well-intentioned, it can oversimplify LGBTQ+ struggles.	"LGBTQ+ rights are human rights."
Are you the man or woman?	Assumes relationships must fit a heteronormative dynamic.	"Tell me about your partner." (respecting boundaries)

Religion, Belief and Spirituality

'Religion or belief' is the preferred term in use in equality and human rights legislation. Respecting diverse religious and spiritual beliefs is essential to inclusive communication. Avoiding language that assumes a dominant belief system helps create a more welcoming environment for all faiths and beliefs, including atheism and agnosticism. Key terms are:

Agnosticism: The view that the existence or non-existence of a deity, or deities, is unknown or unknowable, and therefore, neither believing nor disbelieving in a god.

Antisemitism: Prejudice, hostility, or discrimination against Jewish people, which can manifest in negative beliefs, attitudes, or actions against Judaism. Both are harmful forms of discrimination that target individuals based on their religious beliefs and cultural backgrounds.

Atheism: The belief that there is no deity or divine being, or the absence of belief in any gods.

Belief: Includes any religious or philosophical belief or reference to belief, including a reference to a lack of belief.

Humanism: A philosophy that emphasises the value and agency of humanity, individually and collectively, favouring critical thinking and evidence over acceptance of dogma or superstition.

Interfaith dialogue: Conversations that foster understanding between different religious groups.

Islamophobia: Prejudice, hostility, or discrimination against Muslims or people perceived to be Muslim, often based on stereotypes and misinformation about Islam.

Religion, Belief, and Spirituality

Religion: Any religion or reference to religion, including a reference to a lack of religion.

Religious literacy: Understanding and respecting diverse religious and spiritual traditions.

Religion or belief: Should be taken to mean the full diversity of religion and belief affiliations, including non-religious and philosophical beliefs such as atheism, agnosticism and humanism.

Secularism: The principle of separating religion from civic affairs and government.

Spirituality: A sense of connection to something greater than oneself, often a feeling of connection to the universe, and can relate to religious beliefs or exist independently of them.

Pitfall	Why it's a problem	More inclusive alternative
Merry Christmas!	Assumes everyone celebrates Christmas.	"Happy Holidays!" or "Season's Greetings!"
I don't see religion.	Dismisses the significance of religious identity.	"I respect all beliefs and perspectives."
This is a Christian country.	Marginalises people of other faiths.	"This country has a diverse range of beliefs."

Socio-economic Status and Class

Language around class and socio-economic background should acknowledge systemic barriers and avoid reinforcing negative stereotypes about people's financial status or education level. Key terms to understand:

Socio-economic status (SES): A person's economic and social position in relation to others.

Social mobility: The ability of individuals or families to move between social and economic classes.

Classism: Prejudice or discrimination based on social class.

Pitfall	Why it's a problem	More inclusive alternative
They just need to work harder.	Ignores systemic inequalities that affect opportunities.	"What barriers might be affecting their success?"
That's a rough neighbourhood.	Stigmatises certain areas and communities.	"That's an under-resourced community."
You're so well spoken!	Can imply surprise that someone from a lower-income background speaks well.	"You expressed that point clearly."
Why don't they just buy a house?	Dismisses financial barriers and housing crises.	"Home ownership isn't accessible for everyone."

General Considerations for Inclusive Language

Inclusive language is not about rigid rules but about fostering respect and belonging. Language evolves over time, and people from marginalised groups are not homogenous. Preferences for terminology can vary widely.

Be mindful of appropriate and respectful in-group versus out-group naming.

- Certain terms may be used within a community but can be offensive if used by those outside it. For example, words like "Queer," "Dyke," and "Transsexual" have been reclaimed by some but remain harmful if used improperly.
- Historical examples, such as "Nasty Woman" (H. Clinton), highlight how language can be reclaimed for empowerment but should still be used with care.

Language evolves over time.

- Words that were once widely used may no longer be appropriate today. Language should be regularly reviewed to ensure it aligns with contemporary respectful communication.

Respect individual preferences

- People should have the autonomy to define their identities, and the language used to refer to them. Rather than assuming, ask how someone prefers to be addressed.
- This is especially important in professional and workplace settings, where using incorrect terminology can contribute to exclusion or harm.

Avoid assumptions about identity, background, or experiences.

- People's experiences are diverse. Instead of assuming pronouns, background, or preferences, create opportunities for people to share what they are comfortable with.

Use this document as a guide, not a rule book.

- The goal of inclusive language is to promote understanding and reduce harm. When in doubt, take a learning approach rather than focusing on 'getting it right' perfectly every time.

External Resources & Helplines

EHRC
Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC)
www.equalityhumanrights.com
Guidance on anti-discrimination laws and best practices for inclusive workplaces.

Stonewall
Stonewall UK
www.stonewall.org.uk
Resources on LGBTQ+ inclusion, allyship, and terminology updates.

Race Equality
Race Equality Foundation
www.raceequalityfoundation.org.uk
Reports on racial equality, unconscious bias, and anti-racist practices in the UK.

Disability
Disability Rights UK
www.disabilityrightsuk.org
Guidance on disability-inclusive language and accessibility best practices.

Language
The Inclusive Employers Guide to Language
www.inclusiveemployers.co.uk
Practical tools for embedding inclusive language in professional settings.

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