

# Introduction to Disability Inclusion



## Who We Are

KIM GREENFIELD ALFONSO, CEO



- Corporate and Non-Profit Executive
- 25 years of experience in Corporate Arena
- 10 years of nonprofit experience
- Disability Advocate
- MBA – Kellogg Graduate School of Management - Northwestern University
- BS – Economics – Wharton School of Business - University of Pennsylvania

CHERLYN FREEMAN-WATKINS, ESQ.  
PRESIDENT

- Trial Attorney with 20-plus years of litigation experience 10 plus years of training experience.
- Juris Doctorate - Howard University School of Law
- BA- Political Science –Virginia Commonwealth University.
- Licensed to practice law, D.C. and MD.



## Learning Objectives

1. Become familiar with different types of disabilities as defined by the ADA, including hidden disabilities.
2. Be familiar with language and etiquette that stimulates meaningful interactions and connections with your colleagues and customers.
3. Debunk some common myths about people with disabilities
4. Learn specific, actionable tips for treating people with disabilities respectfully.



## Agenda

- Set the Stage
- Define Disability
- Debunk Myths and Misconceptions
- Review Common Courtesies
- Your Words Matter
- What Should I do When...?
- Key Takeaways

**We all want to do “the right thing”. Fear of doing something wrong may prevent us from fully engaging with people with disabilities.**



We fear that we will say or do the wrong thing and, therefore we may avoid engaging with people with disabilities. We may feel:

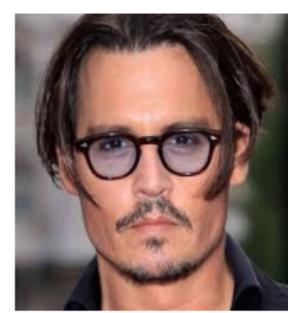
- Apprehension
- Embarrassment
- Discomfort

And therefore may be alienating important people from their life, such as:

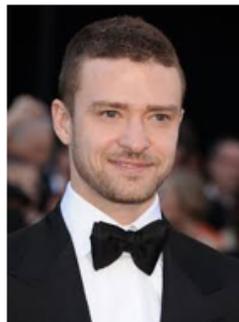
- Colleagues
- Clients
- Customers
- A family member

## Who has a disability?

- Marlee Matlin – Deaf
- Jennifer Aniston – dyslexia
- Whoopi Goldberg - dyslexia
- Simone Biles– Attention Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD)
- Johnny Depp - he's blind in one eye and near-sighted in the other.
- Prince Harry– Mental Health, panic attacks
- Justin Timberlake - OCD, ADHD
- Halle Berry– type 1 diabetes, hearing loss
- Chris Rock – Non-Verbal Learning Disorder, similar to Asperger's



**These are the faces of people with disabilities.**



All of these celebrities have been living with a disability. You may be surprised to find out that it's not as uncommon as you might think. People with disabilities are in all walks of life, all professions, and all ages.

## What is Disability?



A person with a disability is someone who:

- Has a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more major life activities - for example: **Walking, Thinking, Seeing, Speaking, Breathing, Depression, or Hearing**
- Has a history or record of such an impairment (such as cancer that is in remission), or
- Is perceived by others as having such an impairment (such as a person who has scars from a severe burn).

Disabilities are; temporary or permanent, visible or invisible and you are born with it or it's s acquired.



Temporary and Permanent

Visible and Invisible

Born with it or Acquired

## Common Disability Classifications



These are the common disability classifications that we will be discussing:

- Cognitive.
- Visual.
- Auditory.
- Motor.
- Speech.

## Disability Inclusion

Disability inclusion at work is about more than hiring people with disabilities. An inclusive workplace values all employees for their strengths. It offers employees with disabilities — whether visible or invisible — an equal opportunity to succeed, learn, be compensated fairly, and to advance. True inclusion is about embracing difference.



## Why is Disability Inclusion important in the workplace?

Disability Inclusion:

1. Enhances employee engagement and innovation,
2. Creates a sense of belonging,
3. Improves the employee experience,
4. Improves leadership skills and abilities.

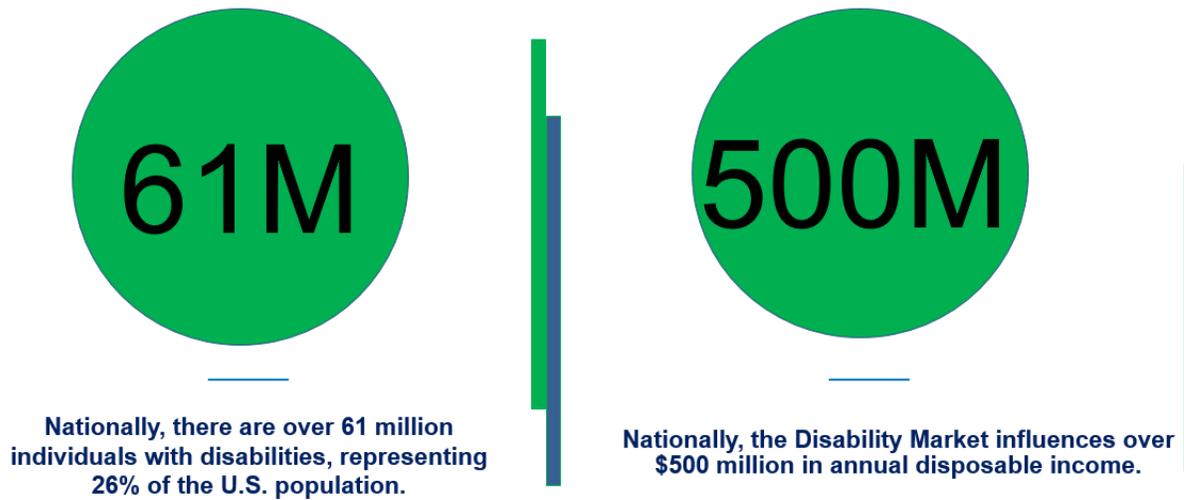


**“People with disabilities bring diversity of thought and lived experience and a wealth of talent, all vital for the business sustainability agenda.”**

**Carolyn Casey, Founder of The Valuable 500**

## Population and Market Size

### Population and Marketplace



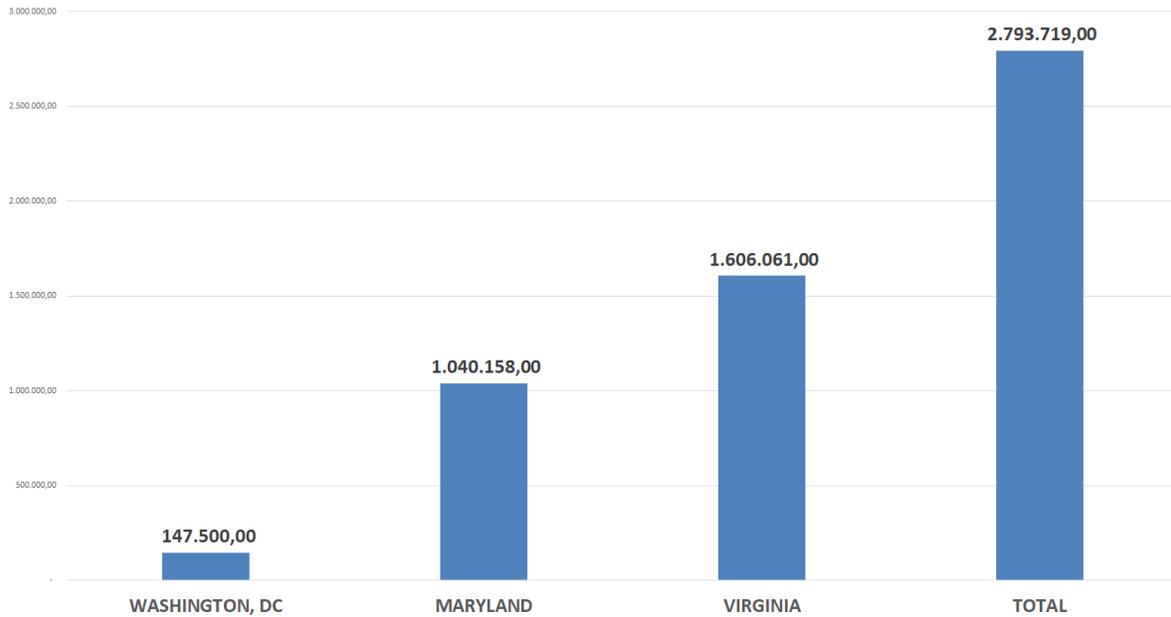
Source: \*U.S. Census, Nielsen | U.N. Enable

Based on the CDC, 26% (1 in 4) OR 61 MILLION adults in the United States have some type of disability. People with disabilities are the largest minority in the U.S.

The US Disability Market influences over \$500 million in annual disposable income.

The numbers are increasing through population growth, medical advance, and the aging population.

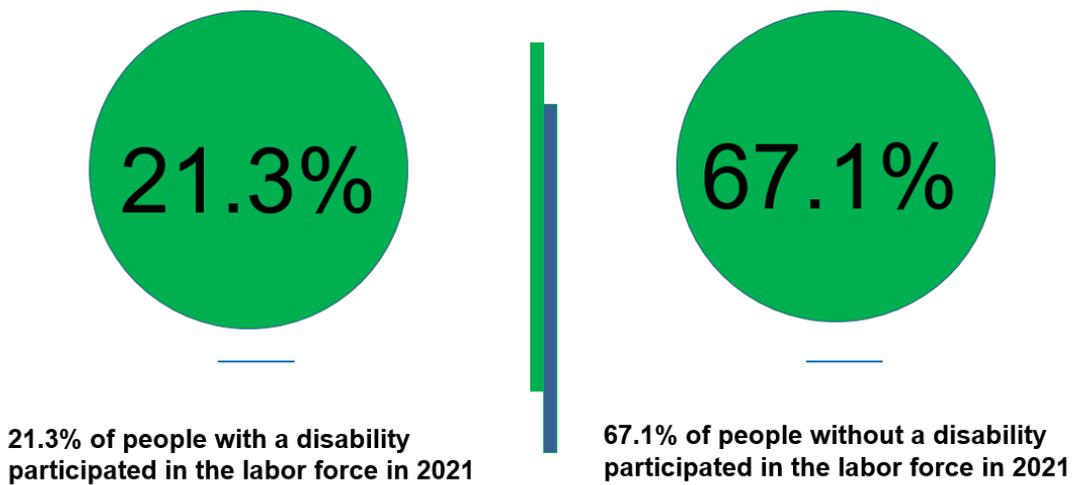
## Number Of People With Disabilities In The DMV



In the DMV area, we have almost 3 million people living with a disability

- 147,500 or 22% in DC
- 1,040,158 or 22% in Maryland
- 1,606,061 or 24% in Virginia
- 2,793,719 People in Total

## Employment



Employed persons with a disability were more likely to be self-employed than those with no disability.

In 2021, 21.3% of persons with a disability were employed, up from 17.9% in 2020. For persons without a disability, 67.1% were employed in 2021, up from 61.8% in the prior year. The workforce over 55 is estimated to grow by 4% per year.

Employed persons with a disability are more likely to be self-employed than those with no disability. Source: <https://www.bls.gov/news.release/disabl.nr0.htm>

## Common Myths and Misconceptions

**MYTHS**  
**BUSTED**

Where do myths about any group come from?

where do myths about any group of people — not necessarily just people with disabilities — come from?

They come from:

- Personal experiences
- Social Sources (beliefs, folklore, inaccurate information) - “They say” and “I have always heard” are common phrases. Never mind who they are or if the statement contains a shred of truth; if “They say” it often enough, it will probably be accepted by some as truth.
- Fear, lack of understanding, or prejudice
- Media, TV, Family, Schools, Books, and History

Everybody's fighting some kind of stereotype, and people with disabilities are no exception. These begin with people's attitudes and beliefs, often rooted in inaccurate or insufficient information, misinformation, and misunderstandings about what it's like to live with a disability.

These myths and misconceptions perpetuate inappropriate actions and interactions.

**Myth #1: People with disabilities are special and should be treated differently.**

We want to stop saying special needs. As someone said, “My needs are not 'special;' they are the same, human needs that everyone else has, and I should be able to fully participate in society just as much as the next person.”

The label of “special” in reference to a person with a disability does not convey equality. Expectations for success should not be underestimated to accommodate the “special” label that is associated with people with disabilities.

**Myth #2: People with disabilities are brave, courageous, and inspirational for living with their disability.**

Some people think that disabled people inspire non-disabled people. Stella Young, a comedian, and disability-rights activist, presented a [TED talk](#) in which she stated that by viewing disabled people as inspirational, you are in fact objectifying them — they are seen as “inspiration porn” and not actual human beings with lives.

**FACT:** Adjusting to a disability requires adapting to a lifestyle, not bravery and courage. Of course, people with disabilities can be brave and courageous, just like someone without disabilities can; be mindful about how you use those terms as they are often seen as offensive when applied to a person with a disability for simply existing. George Covington, a writer who is blind, has said, “We’re seen as inspirational, and inspiration sells like hotcakes. My disability isn’t a burden: having to be so damned inspirational is.”. They didn’t set out to be inspirational. Most of the time, they just want to live their lives.

**Myth #3: All disabilities can be seen**

**FACT:** One out of every four Americans has a disability, and not all disabilities are visible or immediately apparent. It is estimated that 10% of people in the U.S. have a medical condition that could be considered a type of invisible disability. Conditions such as chronic back pain and arthritis, as well as learning disabilities and psychological disabilities, can create significant limitations or difficulties for those experiencing them.

This means that just because a person may appear to not have a disability, doesn't mean they aren't living with a disability that you cannot see.

Some disabilities will become more obvious once you get to know someone, but many will be hidden unless they choose to tell you about it.

What you have to understand is they may look like the average person you see on the street; so you assume that they are not a person with a disability. It's like reading a book – you turn each page in the book, not knowing what the next part of the story is.

**Myth #4: People with disabilities always need help.**

All of us may have difficulty doing some things and may require assistance. People with disabilities may require help on occasion; however, disability does not mean dependency. It is always a good strategy not to assume a person with a disability needs assistance. **Just ask!**

### Debunking Disability Myths

- Stem from inaccurate or insufficient information
- Are reinforced in media and society over generations
- Perpetuate inappropriate assumptions, actions, and interactions

### **Common Courtesies and Best Practices for Treating People with Disabilities Respectfully**

Sometimes, we may be afraid of interacting with people with disabilities out of fear of saying or doing something wrong. So, Now we're going to look at some best practices for engaging the disability community at large, then in the following section, we will go a little deeper on some specific disabilities.

Ask yourself: What can you do to make interactions with people with disabilities a positive experience for both of you?

## Opt For Equity

In most situations, the way you treat a person with a disability should be identical to the way you treat a person without a disability.

**“Focus on the Person, not the Disability”**

|       |  |
|-------|--|
| Treat | Treat adults in a manner befitting adults.         |
| Be    | Be wary of attaching labels.                       |
| Shift | Shift from sympathy or pity to empathy.            |
| Think | Think twice before calling someone an inspiration. |

## Do Not Judge Ability

People with disabilities are so diverse that it is impossible to predict what any single individual might need or not need.

- Rely on each individual to let you know what they need, want, like, and can do.
- Let people make decisions for themselves. People with disabilities are the best judges of what they can or cannot do. Don't make assumptions or decisions for them.

*my ability  
is stronger  
than my  
disability*



[www.facebook.com/emotionalrespite](http://www.facebook.com/emotionalrespite)

## Communicate with Confidence

- Greet people with disabilities the same as you would greet those without a disability.
- Speak directly to the person with the disability. I cannot tell you how many times my daughter and I have been out at a restaurant and when they are taking her order they ask me “what would she like” as though her limited vision does not allow her to respond.
- Make eye contact. This does not matter whether they can see the eye contact or not. Often they can tell by your voice if you are speaking to them or someone else.
- Relax. Anyone can make mistakes. Keep a sense of humor and a willingness to communicate.



## **Ask Before You Help**



- Don't assume everyone with a disability needs assistance. A person with a disability often communicates when they need help.
- Feel free to offer help to someone if you feel they need it. (wheelchair, blind person, etc.)
- If you do assist someone, always ask how you should assist before acting.
- If you offer help and a person says no, respect their answer.

## **Respect an Individual's Privacy**

- Do not refer to a person's disability, unless it is relevant.
- Avoid asking personal questions about a person's disability.

## Be Mindful of Language – Your Words Matter



It is important to address people with disabilities in a way that makes them feel the most comfortable.

## Person First vs Identity First



Person-first language puts the person first; For people who prefer person-first language, the choice recognizes that a human is first and foremost a person: They have a disability, but that disability doesn't define them. For example:

- "I am a person with a disability"
- "Person with cerebral palsy"

Identity-first language puts the disability first as a mark of identity; For people who prefer identity-first language, the choice is about empowerment. It says that disability isn't something to be ashamed of.

Among autistic and hard of hearing/deaf people, identity-first language is popular, because they often feel it's such a strong part of who they are, not something that's happened to them.

For example:

- "I am disabled"
- "Autistic person"
- "I am deaf".

So, which one should you use? If you do have a chance to ask someone their preference, ask and use the language they prefer.

If you don't know the preference of the person go with the majority opinion of the community (if you know it). Person-first language is consistent with the ADA and United National Convention of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.

The disability community is rapidly evolving to use identity-first language in place of person-first language. This is because it views disability as being a core component of identity, much like race and gender.

## Language Do's and Don'ts

| WHAT NOT TO SAY  | WHAT TO SAY   |
|--|---|
| Outdated terms: Handicapped, crippled, etc.                    | Person with a disability; persons with disabilities, children with disabilities |
| Euphemistic language: Physically challenged; differently-abled |   |
| Negative, disempowering words: victim, sufferer                |   |
| Suffers from a disability                                      | Lives with a disability, has a disability                                       |
| Confined to a wheelchair; wheelchair-bound                     | Uses a wheelchair, wheelchair user  |
| Mentally challenged, retarded                                  | Person with an intellectual, developmental, or cognitive disability             |

The use of language and words describing people with disabilities has changed over time. What we may have said years ago we cannot say now. It's important that people are aware of the meaning behind the words they use when talking to, referring to, or working with the Disability Community.

What To Say and What Not To Say:

- Outdated language, like Handicapped or Crippled instead say Disabled Person
- Euphemistic language, like Differently-abled or Special Needs, instead say Person with a Disability
- Or Negative, disempowering words: victim, sufferer.
- Language that suggests disabilities are bad, like Suffers from a disability instead say Lives with a disability, has a disability
- Confined to a wheelchair instead say Wheelchair user or uses a wheelchair
- Mentally challenged, retarded instead say Person with an intellectual, developmental, or cognitive disability

## Exploring Different Disabilities - What Should I Do When Interacting with...?

### People with Mobility Disabilities

The most common disability type, mobility, affects 1 in 7 adults.

There are many types and degrees of physical disabilities, and not all require a wheelchair, Some people use mobility aids such as canes and walkers.



When interacting with a person with Mobility Disabilities:

- Treat a person's mobility aid (wheelchair, walker, etc.) as part of their personal space. Don't touch or lean on the mobility aid.
- If your conversation lasts more than a few minutes consider sitting down with them.
- Don't push or move any mobility aid or device unless the person asks for assistance.
- Feel free to use words like "run" or "walk". Wheelchair users use these words too.

## People Who Are Visually Impaired, Blind or Have Low Vision

2018 National Health Interview Survey (NHIS) data release established that an estimated 32.2 million adult Americans (or about 13% of all adult Americans) reported they either "have trouble" seeing, even when wearing glasses or contact lenses, or that they are blind or unable to see at all.

According to studies funded by the National Eye Institute, the number of people with vision disabilities in the U.S. will double to more than 8 million by 2050.

- Low vision is used to describe a loss of visual acuity while retaining some vision.
- Visual impairment is “a decrease in the ability to see to a certain degree that causes problems not fixable by usual means, such as glasses.”
- Blindness is “the state of being unable to see. It is the inability to see or to tell light from dark.

What should you do?



- Identify yourself by name when approaching a person, before extending your hand or entering a conversation, and introduce others as well.
- Use the same courtesy when entering or leaving a room, or saying goodbye when ending a conversation. Do not just walk away when talking with a person who is blind or visually impaired without excusing yourself first.
- Offer your arm or shoulder instead of “taking or grabbing” their arm when guiding someone.
- Be descriptive when giving directions as you walk e.g., “This is a step up or step down” and Describe barriers and be specific.
- When escorting into a room, describe the layout and contents of the room. Ask where they would like to sit and assist in locating a seat.
- Offer to read information. When dining, you may offer to read the menu. When the food arrives, describe where the different items are placed on the plate, if requested.
- Provide work-related materials (employee handbooks or benefit information) in alternative formats as necessary e.g., Braille, raised graphics, large print, audio

files, or PDF for Kurzweil 3000, web page design compatible with screen readers.

- Don't hesitate to use words like "see" and "look." Use normal everyday language and relax.
- IF they have a guide dog, never pet, feed or distract a guide dog without asking permission first. They are working.

## People who are Deaf or Hard of Hearing

For those who are deaf or hard of hearing: "hard of hearing" is generally used for people who have mild to severe hearing loss—while the term "deaf" mostly designates those who have profound hearing loss. Approximately 15% of American adults (37.5 million) aged 18 and over report some trouble hearing.

- Always make eye contact, face the person directly, and gain the person's attention before starting a conversation. Use hand signals to gain attention a wave, a light touch on the shoulder, or other visual or tactile signals are appropriate ways to get their attention.
- Ask for their communication preferences. Determine how THEY prefer to communicate. There are different forms of sign language. Some people who are deaf read lips (speech reading), others use sign language (interpreters) and writing can also be a good way to communicate. Do not assume that the person can read your lips.
- If a sign language interpreter is present, keep your eyes focused on and speak directly to the person, not the interpreter.
- Do not turn your head or walk away while talking.
- Speak using a normal speed and tone of voice unless asked to raise your voice. Do not exaggerate and shouting will not help.
- If in a meeting, one person should speak at a time.
- Keep excess noise to a minimum, especially if you are at a restaurant, as hearing aids amplify all sound. So when possible, speak in a well-lit room that is free from background noises.
- If you don't understand something, ask the person to repeat it or write it down.

## People with Speech Disabilities

18 million adults report having a problem with their voice. People who have speech impairments have a hard time pronouncing different speech sounds. They might distort the sounds of some words and leave other sounds out completely.

- Be patient and listen closely.
- Allow time for the person to speak, as they may need more time to respond to you.
- Never finish sentences for them. Avoid the urge to interrupt or complete a sentence for the person and allow the person to finish speaking before you begin talking.
- Focus on content rather than the delivery of the communication.
- Ask for repetition if you cannot understand him, ask him to repeat himself or repeat it to him for verification.



## Hidden/Invisible Disabilities



NOT EVERY  
**DISABILITY**  
IS VISIBLE

## Hidden/Invisible Disabilities

**“Physical, mental or neurological condition that limits a person’s movements, senses or activities that is invisible to the onlooker. ”**

Some disabilities look like this



Some look like this



Some examples include:

- Autism
- Brain injuries
- Chronic pain
- Developmental Disabilities
- Diabetes
- Learning Disorders
- Mood Disorders (depression, bipolar disorder)

\*The terms non-apparent, non-visible, invisible, and hidden disabilities are used interchangeably.

## People with Cognitive Disabilities

"Cognition" refers to the mental process involved in understanding, knowing and learning. A cognitive disability/cognitive functioning that is not “typical” can affect a person's ability to:

- Learn and process information;
- Communicate through spoken or written language; and
- Infer information correctly from social cues and body language.



Neurodivergent refers to cognitive functioning that is not considered "typical".

Some Examples include:

- ADHD
- Alzheimers
- Aphasia
- Attention deficit/hyperactive disorder
- Autism
- Dyslexia
- Memory loss

## Key Terms

The term neurodiversity refers to variation in the human brain regarding sociability, learning, attention, mood, and other mental functions. Neurodiversity is a viewpoint that brain differences are normal, rather than deficits. advocates the idea that our brains are different and that everyone (whether neurotypical or neurodivergent) should be treated equally by individuals, the workplace, and external environments.

About 15-20% of the global population are “neurodiverse”.

Neurodivergent refers to cognitive functioning that is not considered "typical.", its someone whose brain processes, learns, and/or behaves differently from what is considered "typical"

Examples of neurodivergent conditions include ADHD, Autism, Dyslexia, Obsessive Compulsive Disorder, and Tourette's syndrome.

Neurotypical is the term used for someone whose brain behaves in the same way as the majority of society.

## Neurodivergent People



abilities or needs.

- Make sure they are paying attention before you address them. For instance, use their name at the beginning so that they know you are talking to them.
- Treat the individual as an adult. Speak directly to the individual, rather than his/her companion, and use words and phrases according to his or her level of complexity. Do not infantilize your conversation partner.
- Use clear and simple language. Avoid providing too much information. For example, an autistic person can find it difficult to filter out the less important information. If there is too much information, it can lead to 'overload', where no further information can be processed.
- Do not make assumptions about their

Every neurodivergent person is different, so do not assume that because someone says that they're autistic or have ADHD, they're any less capable of doing their jobs.

- Understand that social situations can sometimes be challenging for neurodivergent team members. Keep this in mind if an employee unknowingly says something rude or inappropriate. Keep in mind that an unconventional response may be influenced by a cognitive difficulty which affects social interaction. Do not take offense.
- Some neurodivergent individuals are uncomfortable with eye contact. If your teammate is avoiding eye contact, follow their lead and avoid it as well.
- Ask the person if he prefers verbal, written, or hands-on instruction, or a combination of methods in training and work-related situations. For example, if providing verbal instructions, it may be helpful to follow up with an e-mail that clarifies your request.
- Be Patient. Allow the individual time to think and answer questions independently. Allow adequate time for actions (reading, writing, speaking)

## How do I grow?

|            |   |
|------------|---|
| Awareness  | Become aware of <b>your own bias</b> and work to overcome it.   |
| Seek out   | Actively seek out inclusive discussions on how to meet the needs of those needing accommodations and those who are accommodators. |
| Recognize  | Recognize diversity does not come unless <b>all diverse voices</b> are part of the discussion.                                    |
| Facilitate | Facilitate diversity and inclusion of present and future leaders with disabilities in your agency or corporate team.              |
| Research   | Do your research <b>first</b> , then ask for help.  |

## Key Takeaways



1. Not all disabilities are visible. Be aware that there are many people with hidden disabilities that are not apparent
2. Each person has their own experience.
3. Don't make assumptions. Remove the myths and misperceptions, making assumptions helps no one.
4. Always ask before helping. If you don't know what is appropriate, put in the effort to learn. Always ask before you help. Ask them how you can help them.
5. Speak directly to the person. Not to the interpreter. Remember they can tell if you are speaking directly to them.
6. People are the best judge of what they can or cannot do. So let them tell you. People with disabilities are NOT alike and have a wide variety of skills and personalities.
7. Your words matter so please choose them carefully.
8. Be patient: Give people time. Be patient and give your undivided attention, especially with someone who speaks slowly or with great effort. Be considerate of the extra time it may take a person with a disability to get some things done
9. **Relax!** - People with disabilities are just like everyone else.

## Resources



Job Accommodation Network: [AskJAN.org](http://AskJAN.org)

JAN is the leading source of free, expert, and confidential guidance on workplace accommodations and disability employment issues.

Recent JAN activities and areas of focus include:

- JAN Workplace Accommodation Toolkit
- JAN Just-In-Time Training Modules
- Workplace Accommodations: Low Cost, High Impact

Employer Assistance and Resource Network on Disability Inclusion (EARN): [AskEARN.org](http://AskEARN.org)



EARN helps employers recruit, hire, retain and advance people with disabilities. EARN also maintains a website, [AskEARN.org](http://AskEARN.org), which provides information on:

- recruiting and hiring
- retention and advancement
- laws and regulations
- creating an accessible and welcoming workplace
- and federal contractor requirements.