WHY IT IS IMPORTANT TO USE DISABILITY INCLUSIVE LANGUAGE

Language, like reality, is constantly evolving. New ways of living in society have led to the introduction of terms and expressions, which enrich our ability to express an ever wider range of human experiences. The words we choose to use shape our understanding of the world around us, including and excluding in equal measures.

- **What we do not name does not exist**. And w**hat we name incorrectly often reflects prejudices or stereotypes**, which negatively affects our societies.
- On the other hand, using inclusive language is not only **a truer representation of our diverse society**, it is also free from phrases or nuances that reflect **prejudiced, stereotypical or discriminatory views** towards certain groups of people.

Often, even unintentionally, we find ourselves using inappropriate or incorrect terms to refer to particular phenomena, and this can have a significant impact on the lives of people involved. This is the case with language surrounding disability. The use of inclusive language can have a significant impact on the inclusion of people with disabilities and can contribute to full participation in our societies and our economies.

LANGUAGE AS A VEHICLE OF RESPECT

A first step to take in this direction is by getting to grips with some terms and expressions in the area of disability. Understanding the meaning of these terms and then using them appropriately is an important sign of respect and inclusion of people with disabilities.

The use of a disability inclusive language also contributes to combating ableism, a form of systemic discrimination that considers people with disabilities as less capable or having fewer rights than people without disabilities.

PERSON-FIRST OR IDENTITY-FIRST? JUST ASK!

In order to avoid perpetuating these forms of social exclusion, a commonly upheld school of thought advises against identifying people with their disability. This school of thought is often favoured in medical circles as well as public institutions such as schools. The person-first approach is intended to remind us that every person has the right to be considered in their entirety and with respect for their dignity, whatever their abilities or personal characteristics. In the EU, it is generally considered preferable to adopt a person-first language approach i.e. by using the expression "person with a disability" instead of "a disabled person".

But person-first is not the approach favoured by all. There are some movements to reclaim the term "disabled person", noting that the individual has been disabled by the

standardised systems and infrastructure of society, as opposed to their own protected characteristics. Equally, in the world of neurodiversity, the autistic community generally prefer to select an identity-first approach, demonstrating that being autistic is regarded as a core element of identity and not a source of shame. The same is true for the deaf community. Ultimately, the goal of an identity-first approach is to steer away from politically over-correct euphemisms, and demonstrate that disabilities should never be a source of shame. There is nothing wrong with calling disabilities by their name.

As a rule of thumb, just ask what term your colleague or acquaintance prefers. Don't be afraid to ask in a non-judgemental and open-minded manner.

DOS AND DON'TS OF DISABILITY INCLUSIVE LANGUAGE

One tip that is standard no matter where you find yourself in the world is that it is advisable to avoid expressions that denote disability as an obstacle or that place the person in a position of passivity. Phrases such as "stricken with", or "suffering from" remove an individual's power of self-determination and agency over their own life and relationships and are to be avoided.

Unsurprisingly, the opposite should also be avoided, i.e. the use of stereotypical images in a positive sense, which convey a representation of people with disabilities as a homogeneous and undifferentiated group. Examples of this are claiming that people with a certain condition are geniuses, brave people or fighters.

This focus on language is extremely important because disability is precisely the result of the interaction between the person and his or her environment. And each of us, as an ally, has the power to make that environment as inclusive and stimulating as possible.

Having a good knowledge of the vocabulary is a first step towards being an ally and helping to reduce misunderstandings, micro-aggressions and prejudices. Because change comes through small actions, even a word can make a difference.

NOT ALL LANGUAGE IS SPOKEN

It is important to remember that our gestures and actions are also important. We have all seen the images of young children staring and pointing at persons with visible disabilities. It is important to teach our children about the power of our body language. We should not be afraid to ask a question to a person with a disability but equally don't be offended if the person chooses not to answer.

And of course, this is a good juncture to remind us all that there are an estimated 750 000 Deaf Sign Language users in the EU and having some knowledge of even a few of the most common everyday signs can be another open door to inclusive relations in our society.

EASY TO READ COMMUNICATIONS

Finally, if we are to be truly inclusive in our language use, we must also consider written text. Using a format that is as accessible as possible is equally important:

- Avoid writing excessively long sentences and break sentences into several lines. In this way you will help those with a shorter attention span to better process information

- Make sure there is a good amount of white space between the different contents to avoid people feeling bombarded with too much information, which will become difficult to process
- Choose a font that is sufficiently large and readable, certainly 16+
- The contrast between the written text and the background colour is very important to make the text readable and understandable to everyone

If you would like to see a great example of how this is done, take a look at the easy-to-read pages on the EIB website: Easy-to-read content now on eib.org | Intranet