



Making meetings matter

How to organise and chair accessible meetings

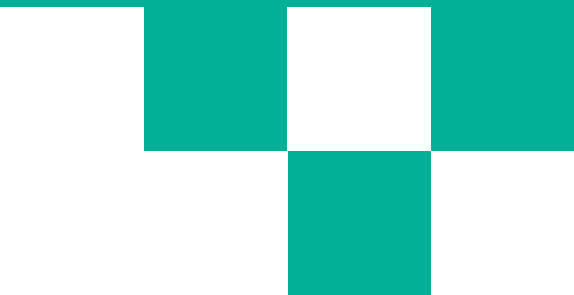
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Language

Talking about disability

In this guide, we use the term 'disabilities' based on the language used by the of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UN CRPD) [1] ratified by over 175 countries.

The UN CRPD Article 1 provides a definition for 'persons with disabilities':

“Persons with disabilities include those who have long-term physical, mental, intellectual or sensory impairments which in interaction with various barriers may hinder their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others.”

[1] United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities

In practice, this could include people with a wide range of impairments or conditions such as dyslexia, cancer or diabetes to name just a few. If in doubt, use the language that the person uses to describe themselves. Focus on the person, not the barrier.

What is 'accessibility'?

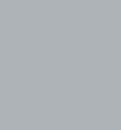
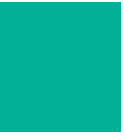
In this guide, we use the word accessibility to describe the extent to which meetings, devices, services, systems or environments are designed to meet the needs of people with a range of physical and mental disabilities and long-term conditions.

Talking about adjustments

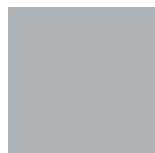
Adjustments (in some countries referred to as 'accommodations') remove or reduce the effect of the barriers experienced by candidates and employees with disabilities.

Examples of adjustments include providing a ramp as an alternative to stairs or an electronic version of paper document so that an employee with a visual impairment can use screen reader software to access the information. Working hours and locations can be made flexible, and managers can agree different ways to communicate with their employees e.g. over the phone, via email, face-to-face or in writing.

These are small changes that can remove barriers that stop someone from doing their job and can support good performance. In this guide, we refer to these types of changes as 'adjustments'.



Introduction



Where and how do people meet? These days, meetings for work as well as meetings with your lawyer, financial adviser or even your doctor can take place from a train, coffee shop, dining room table or while out walking. In a work context, it is now more likely than ever that some of the people meeting will be in a different city, country or time zone.

If you are the meeting organiser or the chairperson of a larger meeting, how can you ensure that everyone attending the meeting can participate fully and get what they and you need from the time spent together?

The checklists and tips that follow are mainly for large meetings organised in advance rather than one-to-ones or ad hoc meetings called at short notice. This said, some of the tips will help make these smaller meetings more accessible and productive as well. Not all the tips will be relevant to every meeting, particularly if you know the people attending and can ask them about their needs in advance. If, however, you are unsure about the needs of the attendees e.g. it is an open meeting for a particular group of people, then thinking about all the accessibility tips in advance is a good idea.

So much of what follows is just good meeting etiquette. As is so often the case, if you get things right for people with disabilities, the meeting will be better for everyone. **Accessible meetings mean more productive meetings.**

You might not think that you have people with disabilities in your meetings or think that you rarely meet someone with a disability. This however, is unlikely to be true.

I don't think I have anybody with disabilities working for me

There are more than one billion people with disabilities in the world. This means that one in seven of the clients and colleagues that you meet each day may have a disability. As the world's population ages in coming years, this number is set to increase.

It is not always easy to know who has a disability. Many people live with a condition or impairment which is not visible or immediately apparent – particularly if you don't meet them in person.

Understanding and recognising how disability can affect a person's needs and preferences is therefore incredibly important. It makes good business sense and is also a legal requirement in many countries.

Good communication reduces the risk of miscommunication and benefits everyone.

**Accessible meetings
mean more
productive meetings.**





Ensuring everyone can fully participate

Accessible meetings checklist for meeting organisers and chairpersons

Following the tips below will help you ensure that everyone is able to participate fully in the meeting and that the meeting is as productive as possible.



Tips for meeting organisers

What to do in advance of the meeting

- Check if attendees have any requirements, or need any support to take part in the meeting. You can do this at the same time as asking about dietary requirements if you are going to provide lunch or refreshments. A phrase such as 'please tell us if you require any changes or support to take part in this meeting' will be sufficient. You should provide a telephone number and email address to the attendee so that they can notify you of their needs in the way that they prefer to communicate.
- Send out information about the meeting in advance, so people can prepare. This could include details of the venue, the agenda or the meeting format.
- Check if anyone would like to receive information in an accessible format, such as large print, Easy Read [2] or electronic, before sending.
- Consider sending a meeting reminder a few days before the meeting to allow delegates to prepare and provide them with another opportunity to tell you about any access needs.
- Brief the meeting Chair about adjustments or access requirements anyone attending needs and how many people are joining remotely and if they have access requirements.
- When designing the agenda remember to schedule breaks (if the meeting is longer than one hour) and remind the chairperson to keep the breaks in the agenda. Tell the chairperson when refreshments will be available and if more are going to be brought in at a particular time.
- If you know that attendees have particular access or communication needs, consider providing the chairperson with additional information on how to meet those needs.

[2] Accessible communication formats - GOV.UK

Communication and notetaking support

- If someone needs assistance with note taking, consider providing a written or audio transcript of the meeting or using the services of a speech-to-text reporter to provide live onscreen transcription of the meeting. If you do this you will also have a record of the meeting that you can share as a transcript or edit for notes, benefiting everyone. Alternatively, the person might want to bring someone with them to take notes or assist in other ways. Make sure you can accommodate this extra person and that they are on appropriate lists for security and catering purposes.
- Book any external communications support, such as sign language interpreters, or speech-to-text reporters in good time. Remember that sign language interpreters are in high demand so do this as far in advance as possible if you know someone needs an interpreter or speech-to-text reporters. If you are not sure if anyone will need communications support, it is good practice to have it in place anyway. For example, many people who do not have a hearing impairment also like speech-to-text, as it can help them concentrate on what the speaker is saying.
- For large meetings or townhalls, try to provide microphones so everyone can be heard. See also 'For people joining the meeting remotely' below.
- Review the accessibility of your venue before the day.
- Check that hearing loops are available and are working (when were they last tested?).
- Is there a visual fire alarm system and appropriate lighting (this could be bright or low level lighting, depending on individual needs).



- Brief anyone who is going to give a presentation explaining how to design accessible, uncluttered slides. Consider providing them with an accessible template of your own.
- If videos are going to be shown, check that they are captioned and so can be read by people with hearing impairments (this will help anyone for whom the language used in the video isn't their first). It is also good practice to audio describe videos so that visually impaired people know what is happening on screen when presenters aren't speaking.

For remote attendees

- If people are joining the meeting remotely, check the remote access facilities will work for everyone. Will there be Webex, Skype, Zoom or video conferencing facilities or just conference calling? Remember that people might need to download an app or software in advance of the meeting so let them know.
- If people are joining from different countries and/or time zones check that the time of the meeting suits as many people as possible. Very early or very late meetings can be problematic for many people.
- It can be hard to hear what people joining remotely are saying and for them to hear the people in the room. Consider asking remote joiners to use headsets and microphones and providing microphones in the room as well for everyone present so that everyone can hear and be heard.
- Consider providing a separate chat function so people can let the chairperson know if they cannot hear them or another speaker without having to chip in and interrupt.
- If the venue has microphones and cameras that automatically detect who is speaking and swivel to that person in the room, check that they will work with the voices of everyone present. You might need to do this just before the meeting starts so allow enough time and have a manual contingency plan if the technology fails.

For people joining the meeting in person

- Book an accessible room or venue. Then check yourself that it is indeed accessible – don't just take the venue's word for this. If the room is in the building where you work, try to check the room yourself. If you are booking an external venue, try to view it but at the very least talk to the venue (some venues provide digital tours and access information on their websites). Make sure that toilets and other facilities are accessible from the room or venue you are considering; just because the meeting room is served by a lift doesn't necessarily mean that the toilets are!
- If you haven't booked the venue and later find out the chosen meeting location isn't accessible, let people know ahead of time about any access issues, or better still, try to find an alternative location.
- Include maps, public transport and parking information including how far the venue is from the nearest station, bus stop or car park as well as information about what will happen during the meeting. E.g. share details of the agenda and any activities that may be involved during the day, such as a tour of a building or group work.
- Provide details about internet access – particularly if there will be no access as some people may rely on it for their adjustments. E.g. an attendee may use a web based sign-language interpretation service.
- Make sure you know where accessible and other toilets, lifts and ramps are located and share this information.
- Find out what the emergency evacuation procedures are and how they might affect someone with different disabilities. Be ready to explain procedures to people attending and to other people helping with the meeting on the day.
- Check signage is clear and direct and if it isn't put up extra signage or have someone in place to direct people.

What to do on the day of the meeting

For people joining the meeting in person

- On the day, be ready to meet any colleagues and clients with disabilities who need assistance at the entrance to buildings, so you can guide them and point out accessible facilities, such as toilets and lifts.
- Before the meeting begins, double check that everyone has everything they need.
- If an attendee has brought an assistant to take notes or provide support, the assistant will also need a seat and refreshments.
- Where an attendee is using an internet service for note taking ensure that you have provided Wi-Fi log in details to all attendees.
- Provide a transcript of the meeting if possible.
- Ensure you have made space at the table for any wheelchair users expected.
- Make sure that everyone can get tea, coffee, water and lunch if it's provided. You may need to arrange for someone to bring food and drink to the people who cannot access it themselves.
- Check if anyone needs assistance exiting the building and/or locating public transport.
- Ask if anyone needs help during the break, e.g. taken to tea/coffee area, breakout rooms etc.

If you are chairing the meeting

- Find out if anyone has any particular requirements or adjustments and how many people are joining remotely.
- Check the remote access facilities and microphones are working before the meeting starts.
- Remember to include emergency evacuation procedures for people who cannot use stairs during the housekeeping introduction.
- Let everyone know that it is okay for them to stand, walk or take additional toilet breaks if they need them during the meeting. Say at the start, if and roughly when, there will be scheduled breaks and if there are refreshments.
- Do keep breaks in the agenda and remember that sign language interpreters and speech-to-text providers need breaks as well. Remember to tell anyone joining remotely when to re-join the meeting.
- Allow everyone taking part in the meeting to introduce themselves, including anyone taking part remotely. Remind everyone to re-introduce themselves every time they speak (especially if it is a large meeting).
- Going round the table asking everyone to contribute in turn will help people who struggle to chip in with their view e.g. someone with a visual impairment or who is using speech-to-text and so might be slightly behind the conversation or who is just shy. Remember to also ask the people joining remotely.

- Remind anyone giving a presentation to read out any content which appears on slides. If someone says “as you can see from this slide” remind them to read what is on the slide or read it out yourself.
- Try not to rush anyone who is speaking.
- Before moving onto the next item on the agenda, recap key points of the conversation to check that everyone is following the discussion and that their points of view are being taken into consideration.
- At the end of the meeting, agree next steps, along with formats and timings for sending through follow-up information.

Remember to tell anyone joining remotely when to re-join the meeting.





Language and etiquette



Some people feel under-prepared when meeting and greeting people with disabilities.

Some people may fear doing or saying the wrong thing and inadvertently causing offence and so do and say nothing. This can lead to people with disabilities not being invited to meetings or social gatherings. This is a real shame as there is only one thing we really need to do and that is ask the person what they want. It's that simple.

Here are a few words about language and etiquette.

Words and phrases

There are words and phrases which although unintentional may cause offence to people with disabilities. Although there are few definitive rules, it's always best to use person-centred language and to check with people what language they prefer. From country to country, differences exist in the cultural context and human rights of people with disability. This leads to inconsistency in the way people talk about disability around the world. If you are talking to people in different countries check with them the language they prefer.

Disabled by society

For many people with disabilities, the biggest barrier they face is not their impairment but society's attitudes towards disability. This in effect, leads to people with disabilities being 'disabled' by a society that fails to remove unnecessary obstacles. For this reason, many people prefer the use of the term 'disabled people' as they regard themselves as people with impairments or conditions who are 'disabled' by society's response to them. Others prefer the term 'people with disabilities' because it puts the person first.

Some people who are Deaf or who have hearing loss, or those with a long-term condition, may not see themselves as disabled at all, even though in some countries, the law and society may think they are.

What to say and what not to say

- Do ask a disabled person how they would like to be described.
- Avoid negative terms such as 'victim' or "suffering from" and language which disempowers disabled people and implies vulnerability, frailty or dependency.
- Avoid defining someone by their disability. When speaking about someone else's condition or impairment say "She has epilepsy" rather than "She is an epileptic'.
- Do not use collective nouns such as 'the disabled' or 'the blind'. They emphasise the impairment and suggest that people are part of a uniform group, rather than individuals with their own needs and preferences.
- Consider whether a reference to a person's disability is needed at all – some disabled people may not see that it is.
- Do not ask people to 'declare' or 'disclose' their disability when asking someone to share their disability status. This suggests that a disability is a secret or something that needs to be announced. Simply ask everyone if they have any particular needs. Remember everyone has needs regardless of whether or not they have a disability.



Remember: Tone is incredibly important. The right words said in the wrong way can be patronising. For example, using a tone which expresses pity, when offering help to a disabled colleague or client.

Words to avoid	Words to use
Mental, schizophrenic, psycho	A person with a mental health condition.
Cripple, invalid, victim	Disabled person, person with a disability, person with an impairment or long-term condition.
Dyslexic	A person with dyslexia.
Dyspraxic	A person with dyspraxia.
Midget	A person with dwarfism or a person of short stature or of restricted growth. Some individuals do prefer to be called a dwarf.
Fits, spells,	Seizures.
Mentally handicapped, retarded, slow	A person with a learning disability or difficulty.
Brain damaged	Brain injury.
Wheelchair-bound, confined to a wheelchair	A wheelchair user.
Deformed	A person with a disfigurement or visible difference.

Disability etiquette

Disability etiquette means showing the same courtesy and respect to people with disabilities as you would to anyone else. We all make assumptions without realising it. Try not to assume that someone automatically needs assistance, just because they have a disability. Equally, try not to forget that some disabilities are not visible or immediately apparent. Always ask what assistance, if any, a person needs, before you give it.

Etiquette dos and don'ts

Do

- Respect personal space. Do not lean or hang on to a person's wheelchair or walking aid, for example.
- Use appropriate physical contact, such as a handshake. Offer to shake hands if this is what you would do normally when you meet someone.

Don't

- Make assumptions about the existence or absence of a disability. Some disabilities are not visible or immediately obvious.
- Distract or stroke an assistance animal without permission. They are working animals and provide vital support to a wide range of people with disabilities and long-term conditions.
- Assume that a person considers themselves to have a disability, even if the law in your country, or you, would define them as such.

Internal and external sources of help

There may be sources of help and advice that you can access for detailed information about disability in your country.

Internally, you should speak to your own manager or to your local Human Resources team. Your organisation may also have Diversity and Inclusion Officers or a Disability Liaison Officer you can ask for help and advice.

Externally, there may be local organisations that can provide you with expert advice and information about disability in your country. The International Labour Organisation's Global Business and Disability Network's website [3] contains some useful information about local legal requirements and the availability of disability-related support in countries all over the world.

[3] ILO GBDN website - www.businessanddisability.org/country-profiles/

There may be sources of help and advice that you can access for detailed information about disability in your country.





About us

Business Disability Forum is a not-for-profit membership organisation working with businesses to transform the life chances of people with disabilities as employees and customers. We provide pragmatic support, expertise, advice, training and networking opportunities between businesses.

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