

*Communicating  
Effectively  
With People  
Who Have A  
Disability*



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## Introduction

Nearly one out of every five Americans has some type of disability. That is more than 54 million people or 20% of our population nationwide. More than 128,000 of North Dakota’s 630,000 residents have a disability; about 68,000 are working-age.

Some disabilities are visible and readily apparent. People with mobility impairments often use wheel chairs, walkers, crutches, or other assistive devices. People who are blind or visually impaired sometimes use service animals or white canes. But many other disabling conditions are invisible, such as deafness, hard of hearing, mental illness, autism, heart or respiratory conditions.

A lot of progress has been made toward breaking down barriers in employment, education, and accessibility, but actual communication and interaction with people with disabilities still needs attention. Many people are afraid of accidentally saying something that will offend a person with a disability, so they say nothing and avoid contact.

In this publication you will find suggestions that will help educate people about communicating with people with disabilities.

## People First Language:

describes what a person HAS, not what a person is.

People First Language puts the person before the disability.

People  
First  
Language

SAY:

people with disabilities

he has a cognitive disability

she has autism

he has a physical disability

she uses a wheelchair

he has an emotional disability

accessible parking

INSTEAD OF:

handicapped,  
disabled or crippled

he's mentally  
retarded

she's autistic

he's a quad or  
crippled

she's wheelchair-  
bound

he's emotionally  
disturbed

handicapped  
parking

## Respect and Courtesy:

The following tips for communicating with people with disabilities are based on simple respect and courtesy

### General Tips for Communicating with People who have a Disability

- It is perfectly acceptable to offer to shake hands when you are introduced to a person with a disability, even when the disability involves limited hand use or an artificial limb. Shaking hands with the left hand is also acceptable.
- You may offer to assist a person with a disability, but wait until your offer has been accepted. Then, ask for instructions on how you can best assist.
- Address people with disabilities just as you do everyone else in the same circumstance. If everyone is being addressed by first name, then by all means address the person with a disability the same way.
- Relax. Don't be embarrassed if you happen to use common expressions such as "See you later," or "Did you hear about that?" that seem to relate to a person's disability.
- Ask questions if you are not sure about what to do.

### Tips for Communicating with People Who are Visually Impaired

- Speak to the person when you approach him or her.
- Tell him or her who you are and don't raise your voice.
- When conversing in a group, remember to identify yourself and the person to whom you are speaking.
- Don't play with or pet a service animal or distract it unless you ask the owner's permission first.
- Let the individual know when you are leaving.
- Don't try to lead the person without asking permission first. Then, simply let the individual hold your arm and let him or her control their own movements.

- Be descriptive when giving directions; verbally give the person information that is visually obvious to people who can see. For example, if you are approaching steps, mention how many steps.

## **Tips for Communicating with People Who are Hearing Impaired**

- Make sure you get the person's attention before you begin to speak. Just tap the individual on the shoulder if he or she is not facing you.
- Always look directly at the person and try to keep your face in the light away from shadows. Speak clearly in a normal tone of voice and avoid chewing gum or smoking while you talk. Try to use short, simple sentences.
- When the person is using a sign language interpreter, don't speak directly to the interpreter. Speak directly to the person.
- If you telephone an individual who is hard of hearing, let the phone ring longer than usual. Speak clearly and be prepared to repeat the reason for the call and who you are.
- If you do not have a Text Telephone (TTY), dial 711 to reach the national telecommunications relay service. This service can facilitate the call between you and an individual who uses a TTY.

## **Tips for Communicating with People with Mobility Impairments**

- Try to place yourself at eye level with the person (i.e. sitting in a chair or kneeling down).
- Don't lean on a wheelchair or other assistive device.
- Do not condescend to a person in a wheelchair by treating him or her childishly, such as patting on the head or shoulder.
- Ask if the person would like your assistance pushing the wheelchair.
- If a person is having a problem with opening a door, offer to assist.
- When telephoning a person, let the phone ring long enough to allow time to reach the phone.

**Respect  
And  
Courtesy**

## **Tips for Communicating with People with Speech Impairments**

- If you do not understand something the individual says, do not pretend that you do. Ask the individual to repeat what he or she said and then repeat it back.
- Take as much time as necessary to communicate and be patient.
- Try to ask questions which require only short answers or a nod of the head.
- Concentrate and pay extra attention to help you understand what the individual is saying.
- Don't attempt to help by finishing the person's sentences. Let the person speak for him- or herself.
- After trying to understand the person repeatedly, without success, ask if it is OK to communicate through writing as an alternative.

## **Tips for Communicating with People with Cognitive Disabilities**

- Move from a public area with lots of distractions to a quieter, more private area.
- Be prepared to repeat what you say, orally or in writing.
- In a non-patronizing way and without over-assisting, ask the individual if you can help with filling out forms or explaining writing instructions. Wait for the individual to give you permission to assist. Let him or her have extra time for decision making.
- Be patient, flexible, and supportive. Take your time communicating so that everyone understands each other.

### **Remember:**

- Relax!
- Treat the individual with dignity, respect, and courtesy.
- Listen to the person.
- Offer assistance but do not insist or be offended if your offer is not accepted.

## Ten Commandments Of Communicating

**I. Speak directly to the person, rather than through a companion or sign language interpreter who may be present.**

**II. Offer to shake hands when introduced.** People with limited hand use or an artificial limb can usually shake hands and offering the left hand is an acceptable greeting.

**III. Always identify yourself, and others who may be with you, when meeting someone with a visual disability.** When conversing in a group, remember to identify the person to whom you are speaking. When dining with a friend who has a visual disability, ask if you can describe what is on his or her plate.

**IV. If you offer assistance, wait until the offer is accepted.** Then listen or ask for instructions.

**V. Treat adults as adults.** Address people with disabilities by their first names only when extending that same familiarity to all others. Never patronize people in wheelchairs by patting them on the head or shoulder.

**VI. Do not lean against or hang on someone's wheelchair or pet a service animal.** Bear in mind that people with disabilities treat their chairs as extensions of their bodies. And so do people with guide dogs and help dogs. Never distract a service animal from its job without the owner's permission.

**VII. Listen attentively when talking with people who have difficulty speaking and wait for them to finish.** If necessary, ask short questions that require short answers, or a nod of the head. Never pretend to understand; instead, repeat what you have understood and allow the person to respond.

**VIII. Place yourself at eye level when speaking with someone in a wheelchair or on crutches.**

**IX. Tap a person who has a hearing disability on the shoulder or wave your hand to get his or her attention.** Look directly at the person and speak clearly, slowly, and expressively to establish if the person can read your lips. If so, try to face the light source and keep hands, drinks and food away from your mouth when speaking. If a person is wearing a hearing aid, don't assume that they have the ability to discriminate your speaking voice. Never shout at a person. Just speak in a normal tone of voice.

**X. Relax.** Don't be embarrassed if you happen to use common expressions, such as "See you later" or "Did you hear about this?" that seem to relate to a person's disability.

## Attitudinal Barriers

People with disabilities face barriers as part of their everyday lives. Barriers take on different forms that range from physical to “systematic barriers” in the workplace and society. Yet, the most difficult barriers people with disabilities face are attitudinal. These attitudinal barriers reflect low expectations from society in general. No matter what the source of attitudinal barriers (i.e. fear, misunderstanding, or hate) they keep society from recognizing and appreciating the full potential of people with disabilities.

Attitudinal barriers block opportunities for people with disabilities to seek jobs utilizing higher skill levels. Because of these barriers, people with disabilities are relegated to low-skill jobs, or they face a different set of job standards, sometimes lower but occasionally higher to ensure failure. Finally, negative attitudinal barriers demean a person with a disability through implying that a worker with a disability should be grateful that he or she has a job and not to expect “equal, pay, equal benefits, equal opportunity, and equal access to workplace amenities.” People with disabilities face many attitudinal barriers: inferiority, hero worship, ignorance, the spread effect, stereotypes, backlash, denial, and fear.

- **Inferiority** - Sometimes people with disabilities are thought of as “second class citizens” because they have a disability. However, most people with disabilities have skills that do not “impair” them in the workplace setting.
- **Pity** - When people with disabilities are pitied, it’s patronizing. People with disabilities want an equal opportunity to earn a living, attain independence, and compete in the job market.
- **Hero worship** - The opposite reaction from “pity” is hero worship. People with disabilities do not expect accolades for performing everyday activities. They have learned to adapt by developing unique skills and knowledge. They are making their way independently just like everyone else.



▸ **Ignorance** - People with disabilities are often not given the chance to show their skills for a prospective job. The employer immediately focuses on the disability and the worker isn't even given a chance to succeed. The assumption is that the person with the disability simply can't perform the job. As the material in this booklet shows, people with disabilities really have many abilities, too!

▸ **The Spread Effect** – Some people think that just because a person has a disability he or she must be totally impaired. The notion of the disability “spreading” to include other domains is false. For example, some people raise their voices when they talk to a person who is blind or don't expect a person in a wheelchair to speak intelligently for themselves.

▸ **Stereotypes** – Stereotypes are the positive and negative generalizations that dismiss the true abilities and strengths of people with disabilities. Examples include the notion that people who are visually impaired have a stronger sense of hearing, or all people in wheelchairs are docile, or people with developmental disabilities are innocent and sweet-natured, or all people with disabilities are sad and bitter.

▸ **Backlash** - Many people think that employees with disabilities are given advantages in the workplace. The ADA does not promote unfair advantages for people with disabilities. They must do the same job as anyone else hired for that position; however, they may simply do the job in a different way. That's where job accommodations come into play.

▸ **Denial** - If a disability is not readily apparent, like psychiatric conditions, epilepsy, cancer, or heart disease, people reject the need for accommodation by saying that these disabilities are not true disabilities. However, the ADA defines “disability” as an impairment that “substantially limits one or more of the major life activities.” The examples above certainly meet this definition.

▸ **Fear** - Many people avoid contact with people who have a disability because they are afraid they will do something to offend them. They let fear rob them of opportunities to focus on the “person” instead of the “disability.”

**Attitudinal barriers** can be broken by interaction between people. Some tips for interacting with people with disabilities include:

▸ Try listening with an open mind to what the person with the disability is saying without prejudicing your thoughts about what he or she can or cannot do.

- Make sure you talk directly to a person with a disability, just like you would with anyone else. This applies to people with mobility impairments, mental illness, cognitive impairment, blindness, or deafness.
- Shake hands or exchange business cards with people with disabilities just as you would with anyone else. Don't be embarrassed of your attempt if the person can't respond.
- If you don't understand a person with a speech impairment, ask him or her to repeat. Don't simply pretend to understand. You may be embarrassed if you pretend to understand and it later becomes evident that you did not!
- Offer assistance to a person with a disability, but wait until your offer is accepted before you help.
- It is natural to feel uncomfortable when you first begin to interact with people with disabilities. It's OK to admit that. Try to keep your focus on the "person" and not the "disability." Soon you will be completely comfortable in the situation.

## Friendly Strategies

Employers who include disability-friendly strategies in the workplace enrich and enhance organizational benefits. Such benefits include diverse leadership, innovation, increase in overall morale, and the ability to cast a wider recruiting net. There are several disability-friendly strategies for the workplace:

- Make a corporate commitment to include persons with disabilities in your organization. This commitment begins with top management and permeates the organization.
- Dispel myths about people with disabilities through organizational training at all levels. This educational booklet can be used by personnel to make informed decisions about disability employment.
- Provide continuous education about disabilities, so personnel can use up-to-date information to resolve everyday family and workplace situations.
- Make sure all facilities and services are accessible to all employees.
- Provide reasonable accommodations for applicants and workers with disabilities so they can demonstrate their abilities.

- For additional information on accessibility and reasonable accommodations, go to the website: [www.ada.gov](http://www.ada.gov)
- Let community organizations know that your organization is disability-friendly. Keep disability organizations and agencies informed about potential job openings so they can refer qualified applicants.
- Take advantage of the strengths of having a diverse workforce. Hire people with disabilities.
- Provide training and advancement opportunities to workers with disabilities. Promote qualified workers with disabilities to upper management positions.

## Conclusion

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Business is about productivity and maintaining a competitive advantage. To do this, businesses need qualified workers. Hiring people with disabilities adds value to your business and will attract new customers. Making a difference in the disability employment area will encourage staff to volunteer in the community so they can have a positive influence on future workers with disabilities.

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