

CIPR

DIVERSITY
& INCLUSION
NETWORK

Inclusive Communication

A guide from the CIPR's
Diversity and Inclusion Network



Foreword

A core pillar of the Chartered Institute of Public Relations' (CIPR) strategy is to champion lifelong learning, and as public relations (PR) professionals we understand that continuous professional development (CPD) is essential to keep our skills sharp and apace as the practice of PR evolves.

That same commitment to continuous learning is required within the area of Equity, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI), because like PR practice, this is also a landscape which isn't static – it shifts as cultures evolve and as a society we better understand perspectives which are different to our own lived experiences.

As we live our lives, whether in a professional context or in our day to day living, our views, choices and decisions are hugely influenced by our own unconscious bias. To respond to this challenge, first we need to recognise that unconscious bias plays a factor in our decision making and, secondly we need to commit to understanding the perspectives of people outside our own sphere of experience. Committing to this approach will ensure the actions we take broaden inclusion and lead to better solutions. Significant data demonstrates that diverse teams perform better, so we all benefit if we work harder to ensure everyone's included and we've removed the barriers that may have prevented participation in the past.

Personally, I'm grateful to the many people, particularly within the CIPR community who have shared their experiences of walking through life in different shoes to my own. I've learnt an awful lot in recent years and I've also appreciated the time given by people to be better informed about my perspective as someone identifying as being within the LGBTQ+ community.

I don't consider myself to be an expert in EDI, but I'm committed to my own continuous personal understanding and being an ally for communities outside my lived experience. I'm privileged to Chair the CIPR's newly created Equity, Diversity & Inclusion Committee, formed with the purpose of ensuring the CIPR is accessible and welcoming to new members, that ours is a culture that is inclusive and that we demonstrate our own good faith and standing when commenting on D&I issues.

The CIPR's own EDI journey has been hugely shaped by the many volunteers who have contributed to our Diversity & Inclusion Network (CIPR DIN). This group seeks to develop an inclusive culture within the public relations industry by raising general awareness of diversity issues, by pursuing an inclusive approach which can improve communications and by increasing the numbers of public relations practitioners from diverse backgrounds.

This guide has been produced by the CIPR DIN and is one of the many resources available to support CIPR members to be better informed around many aspects of EDI. We are extremely grateful to those who have given their time to create this resource and I wish to thank Sara Thornhurst and Vickie Cox in particular for leading this work, together with CIPR DIN Chair, Avril Lee and Vice-Chair Cornelius Alexander.

Rachel Roberts

CIPR 2023 Vice-President and Chair of the CIPR's Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Committee

Introduction

For most PR and communication organisations and teams improving diversity, both internally and in client work, is deemed a priority but often falls down the list as other daily pressures take hold. This can result in mounting pressure and a feeling of being stuck when it comes to Equity, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI), leaving organisations unsure where to start. This series of guides from the CIPR is a toolkit to inspire action and progress wherever you are in your EDI journey. Each guide focuses on a different area of inclusive communications and together they form a versatile and practical resource suitable for people at any level within an organisation.

These guides align with and are written from the perspective of the Social Model of Disability, a model designed and created by and for disabled people. The Social Model takes the view that people are disabled by barriers in society, not by their impairment or disability. Further reading on the Social Model can be found on the [Scope website](#).

Each guide is worth 5 CPD points.

How to use this guide

It should go without saying that all communication should be inclusive. But lack of representation, knowledge, and understanding of disability, impairment and neurodivergence has created barriers to inclusion and participation. This guide explains the importance of inclusive communication and shares best practice on achieving this. However, like many other things in public relations, tools, trends and best practice continue to evolve and so too should our own approaches and efforts around inclusive communication.

Additional resources and links are provided at the end of the guide to further develop your knowledge.

You can use this guide:

- + as an onboarding tool for new employees
- + as a foundation to build inclusive processes and systems
- + as part of an exit interview
- + as a guide to make sure that your organisation's inclusion work aligns with the core values of EDI within the CIPR.

What is inclusive communication?

Making sure everyone can easily understand and access information is the definition of inclusive communication. From the point of view of professional communicators, it means we must consider and plan for the different ways our audiences will interact with messages based on individual need.

Why is inclusive communication important?

Life is built on communication yet disabled people are often excluded due to the inaccessibility of information and how it's presented. Deepening our understanding of inclusive communication and putting our learning into everyday practice will remove barriers for disabled and neurodivergent people. This goes beyond the communications we create and broadcast, it also applies to the conversations we have with peers, clients, suppliers and colleagues. Inclusive communication improves organisation culture, prevents confusion or incorrect assumptions, and helps break down harmful stereotypes.

Accessible from the start

As with all aspects of accessibility, being inclusive with our communication is easier and more effective when it's considered at the start of any project or campaign or conversation. Accessibility is still too often an afterthought and when it's added retrospectively can cause more problems than it solves. If you use project planning software or documents, make sure there is an accessibility and inclusion section, add it as an agenda item for campaign planning meetings. Consider appointing someone as the inclusion lead for the project.

Inclusive communication is intersectional

People can have multiple disabilities or impairments which may affect how they access and process information. Similarly, disability and neurodivergence intersect both with each other and protected characteristics including gender, race, LGBTQIA+, and age. It's important to understand this intersectionality when planning your communications. Almost always, more than one accessibility consideration is needed. An example of this is producing a video with captions, but not providing a transcript, or an audio described version. Inclusive communication best practice would require all three.



Think barriers, not impairments



Think barriers, not impairments

This guide and the others in the series use the Social Model of Disability as their foundation.

One of the defining principles of this model is that people have impairments and are disabled by society. In practice this means focusing on removing barriers to participation and engagement. In terms of inclusive communication we need to be able to identify what these barriers are and how they appear in relation to the channels and formats we use to create and distribute information to stakeholders.

Listed below are common barriers experienced by disabled and neurodivergent people broken down into five categories. These lists may look extensive, but they reflect the scale of exclusion experienced by disabled and neurodivergent people in society. This list is not exhaustive and as we understand more about disability, chronic illness, and neurodiversity we should always check that our information and best practice is up to date when planning communications.

General barriers

- + Language
- + Layouts on documents, websites and presentations
- + Colour palettes
- + Environmental barriers (background noise, traffic etc)
- + Cultural barriers
- + Lighting (e.g. strobe lights, low lighting)

Physical barriers

- + Step free access into and around a space
- + Lack of accessible toilets (not all toilets labelled 'disabled' are accessible)
- + Lack of seating for people with mobility issues
- + High stools for panellist discussions
- + Lack of accessible transport (e.g. tube stations), and parking
- + Inaccessible flooring like gravel (for outdoor events)
- + Access to materials placed too high or in inaccessible places
- + Event equipment, bags, coat racks, chairs causing obstacles

Visual barriers

- + Images, graphics and data visualisation without alternative text or image descriptions
- + Text that's too small (less than 16pt) and unable to be resized
- + Lack of audio description on video or animation content
- + PDFs and presentations that can't be read by screen readers
- + Poor contrast levels of text, or text over images
- + Written display information with no audio or braille alternative
- + Lack of alternatives to visual information provided
- + Websites that don't allow full keyboard navigation
- + Poor link navigation, e.g. 'click here'

Audio barriers

- + Lack of mics for speakers at events
- + Lack of live captions or poor quality automated captions
- + Lack of signed interpretation for Deaf people (BSL, ASL etc)
- + Background noise and music and bad acoustics
- + Lack of hearing loop provision for hearing aid users
- + Videos without captions and transcripts
- + Lack of quiet spaces for auditory processing overwhelm

Written communication barriers

- + Complex or ambiguous use of language, e.g. business jargon, academic, medical, or legal language
- + Hard to read charts and graphs
- + Using too many emojis in online content
- + Poor text colour contrast
- + Small font size and inaccessible fonts
- + Lack of easy read formats (see more on this in the [Inclusive Language guide](#))
- + Justified text causing readability issues
- + Complex layouts

Actions to remove barriers to inclusive communication

Again, this list is not exhaustive but outlines how you should be creating, planning and using inclusive options in your everyday comms work. The lists below apply to both internal communication and public facing communication.

Create material in multiple formats

- + Word documents,
- + Audio files
- + HTML
- + Braille or Moon
- + Large print

Plan to deliver information in multiple mediums

- + Text messages
- + Flyers
- + Telephone calls
- + Websites
- + Illustrations
- + Text-to-speech
- + Email
- + HTML
- + Easy Read documents

Use inclusive fonts and design options

- + Choose san serif fonts ([this Scope guide provides more detail on accessible fonts](#))
- + Set your minimum font size to 16pt
- + Limit the use of italicised, bold and underlined words
- + Ensure colour contrasts in line with the [WCAG guidelines](#)
- + Make text resizable ([guide to responsive text](#))
- + Create accessible PDFs ([Microsoft's guide to creating accessible PDFs](#))
- + Use accessible formats for links and calls to action ([this Audioeye guide has more information](#))
- + Don't use overlays on your website ([this Scope article explains why overlays are bad for accessibility](#))

Make images and social posts inclusive too

- + Use both alt text and image descriptions/video descriptions on posts
- + Use positive disability inclusive imagery, the resources section at the end has links to sites which provide this
- + Avoid imagery which reinforces stereotypes and negative associations
- + Avoid using text over images
- + Limit your use of emojis and put them at the end, rather than the start of your content
- + Both Pascal Case (also known as Title Case) and Camel Case are acceptable for hashtags ([Accessible Social's guide to hashtags explains why](#))

Additional ways to remove barriers

- + Provision of signed language interpretation (e.g. British Sign Language, Irish Sign Language, American Sign Language)
- + Closed captioning and subtitling ([What is the difference between closed captions and subtitling?](#))
- + Hearing / induction loops, these can be portable or installed in venues
- + Audio description on video content

Removing the biggest barrier of all

Whilst the lists above provide positive actions to make your communication inclusive, one of the biggest barriers disabled and neurodivergent people continue to face is the attitude of non-disabled people towards inclusive behaviours and actions. This is seen in the language we use around access needs and removing barriers. For example 'accommodations' or 'additional needs'. It implies that acting inclusively is something extra, something which sits outside the scope of our everyday actions. It wrongly implies that it's optional. As professional communicators, one of the biggest steps we can take around inclusive communication is understanding and accepting that disability is present across all our publics and as such the lists above should be part of our standard processes.

Additionally, as we mentioned earlier in this guide, disability is intersectional. Disabled people make up the largest minority in the world; the United Nations estimates that 1 in 6 people globally has a disability. Instead of viewing disability as another, separate demographic, we should be including it in our existing lists. For example, if your target audience is women aged 20-24 in England, 15 percent of those women will have a disability (data from the Office of National Statistics: Disability by age, sex and deprivation, England and Wales: Census 2021). Disability is part of their identity, which means it should also be an integral part of how we communicate with that audience.



Creating an equitable future in PR

Creating an equitable future in PR

Thanks for reading this guide looking at accessibility brought to you by the CIPR D&I Network.

In this era of increasing EDI awareness, accessibility should be at the front of every communicator's agenda but can often be forgotten. It is vital that we work to ensure equitable access and understanding for all our audiences, allowing for the continuum of human ability and experience. These needs vary but often relate to living with a disability. Disability is still often overlooked and has not received the focus that some other areas of D&I have. Many fixed and outdated views of disability remain, and we must remember many disabilities are hidden including mental health challenges (globally the main cause of disability), and that with age, disability becomes more prevalent. Although we tend to think 'it won't happen to us', one in four 20-year-olds will have a disability before they retire. The reality is that many of us will find ourselves living with a disability at some point in our lives and may face accessibility challenges in the future.

Alongside our role as PR Professionals, we must also look to our own industry and how we best create fairer workplaces that are welcoming and flexible, enabling people living with disabilities, impairments, or other accessibility barriers to work, progress and succeed.

This series of guides will address accessibility from a range of perspectives including a review of language – a powerful tool that can empower, include and acknowledge – as well as events and advocacy. The guides are practical as well as being thought provoking and aim to support skills development: critical more than ever as initiatives addressing a lack of diversity increase and society recognises the need for change. We hope they support better communications, engagement and action for better accessibility.

I would like to say a big thank you to Sara Thornhurst and Vickie Cox for all their hard work on the guides which has made this initiative possible, and to the rest of the CIPR D&I Network for their continuing focus on making our profession a more inclusive community.

Avril Lee
Chair of the CIPR Diversity and Inclusion Network

Resources

Inclusive Communication Hub - Inclusive Communication Scotland

<https://inclusivecommunication.scot/>

Scottish Government - Principles of Inclusive Communication: An information and self-assessment tool for public authorities

<https://www.gov.scot/publications/principles-inclusive-communication-information-self-assessment-tool-public-authorities/pages/5/>

Business Disability Forum - Inclusive Communication Toolkit

<https://businessdisabilityforum.org.uk/knowledge-hub/toolkits/inclusive-communication-toolkit/>

United Nations - Disability Inclusive Communication Guidelines

https://www.un.org/sites/un2.un.org/files/un_disability-inclusive_communication_guidelines.pdf

Accessible Social - Social Media Accessibility Checklist

<https://www.accessible-social.com/checklist>

Web Content Accessibility Guidelines - Making the Web Accessible

<https://www.w3.org/WAI/>

The Association of Speech-to-Text Reporters - Find a reporter

<https://avstr.org.uk/#reporters>

National Union of British Sign Language Interpreters - How to find an interpreter

<https://www.nubsli.com/guidance/how-to-book-an-interpreter/>

European Forum of Sign Language Interpreters - Interpreter organisations

<https://efsli.org/links/interpreting-organisations/>

Gov.uk - Inclusive Communication

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/inclusive-communication>

Chartered Institute of Public Relations

+44 (0)20 7631 6900

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