



Inclusive Language in the Workplace

Why language awareness is essential for today's companies

- ▶ As human beings, we shape our reality through communication, with language serving as a double-edged sword. It can reinforce stereotypes and biases, yet also offer opportunities to foster a more equitable and just society.
- ▶ Recognizing its significance, the 2022 Communications Trend Radar identified language awareness as one of the top five trends poised to transform corporate communications. A study by the University of Vienna specifically examined the role of language awareness in diversity and inclusion (D&I) initiatives.
- ▶ In today's globalized and diverse business landscape, the use of inclusive language is essential for companies seeking to establish themselves as credible, legitimate players.

How communication contributes to a refined society

According to the Language Awareness Association, the concept of language awareness refers to



the explicit knowledge about language, and conscious perception and sensitivity in language learning, language teaching, and language use,

and was first introduced in the realm of education. A company's (public) discourse may not directly alter economic, political, or social structures. Mindful language use, however, can help reduce systemic sexism, racism, ageism, and other forms of discrimination within its immediate surroundings.

By being aware of the agency of language, companies can foster a more equitable work environment, communicate more effectively with external stakeholders, cultivate or maintain a reputation as a responsible corporate citizen, and ultimately achieve their communication objectives (Koller, 2018).

Towards a more inclusive language

Inclusive language is mainly based on the concept of language awareness. It refers to



communication that refrains from words, phrases and tones that reflect or reinforce prejudices against members of underrepresented and historically disadvantaged groups.

Therefore, it extends beyond the use of gender-sensitive language. On a personal level, the use of inclusive language helps foster and sustain respectful interpersonal relationships, while also promoting the self-esteem and well-being of all participants (Barcena et al., 2020).

Language isn't viewed as a neutral medium for exchanging unbiased information, as it is closely tied to power dynamics, especially in the workplace (Schulzke, 2014). Inclusive language can help address those power imbalances that arise solely from an individual's affiliation

with either a privileged or underprivileged group. The goal is to create an environment where everyone is acknowledged and able to identify themselves by communicating in a respectful and appropriate manner (Pershai, 2006).

i

Inclusive language refrains from

- ▶ (exclusively) referring to or emphasizing a person's sociodemographic features (e.g., gender (identity), ethnicity, or sexual orientation) in situations and contexts in which **their mention is irrelevant.**
- ▶ using words or idioms that **reinforce stereotypes and prejudices** or **victimize** people (e.g., "to be confined to a wheelchair", "to take it like a man").

When it comes to both internal and external corporate communication,

- ✓ companies should be **mindful not only of their spoken and written words** but also the **images, symbols, and icons they employ**, as these can unintentionally discriminate against certain groups or perpetuate stereotypes.
- ✓ Companies and communication departments are well-advised to **use technical terms and abbreviations judiciously**, as overuse can lead to confusion or even backlash.
- ✓ In some instances, **adopting plain language** can be a helpful solution, particularly when addressing audiences with varying levels of expertise or those whose native language differs or who have limited language proficiency.
- ✓ Furthermore, a company's communication efforts should be **inclusive of individuals with visual or hearing impairments.**

» Quite a while ago, our CEO said that inclusive language was important and that we would implement it. That's great and really supportive. The commitment from the top is there, and that makes everything a bit easier – at least the implementation of measures. «

Claudia Rafati, D&I Manager, Infineon Austria

Key essentials for a guideline as the backbone of inclusive (corporate) language

Introduce the concept of inclusive language:

- ▶ **Explain** the importance of inclusive language and its relevance for both the company and society at large.
- ▶ Connect the goals of using inclusive language to the **company's core values**.
- ▶ Briefly summarize the most important contents and refer to **additional (online) materials** such as policies, glossaries, codes of conduct, relevant external sources, and the internal contact point.

Discuss inclusive language principles and provide resources:

- ▶ Identify **areas** where inclusive language is typically – or should be – employed. Common topics include gender (identity) and LGBTQIA+, ethnicity (nationality), and disability. In this regard, it's essential to provide **examples** that demonstrate both inappropriate and inclusive expressions, as shown in the table.
- ▶ Address the use of **images and symbols** (e.g., the need to avoid stock photos that primarily depict white males in leadership roles).
- ▶ In some cases (depending on the language), a brief discussion of **inclusive spoken language** – sometimes in combination with **non-verbal communication** – can promote respectful relationships among employees.

Inapt and inclusive examples*

Topic	Inapt examples	Inclusive examples
gender (identity)	Ladies and Gentlemen	(esteemed) guests, one and all
	manpower	workforce, staffing
ethnicity	race	ethnicity, ethnic origin/ affiliation
	dark-skinned person	person of color (POC)
disability	(the) blind	person with visual impairment
	confined to a wheelchair	wheelchair user
other	the elderly, senior citizens	older people/adults
	class	socioeconomic status

*More examples and guidance on bit.ly/APA-Guidelines



It is recommended to introduce inclusive language guidelines in conjunction with diversity-related training and workshops, such as unconscious bias or intercultural communication sessions.

About the study

This snapshot is based on an extensive literature review and findings of the research project "D&I communication as a provocation? Dealing with internal and external criticism of D&I initiatives" carried out by Prof. Sabine Einwiller and Daniel Wolfgruber (University of Vienna) in the year 2022.

Download the study: bit.ly/DiversityCommunication-Criticism

Sources:

- Barcena, E., Read, T., & Sedano, B. (2020). An approximation to inclusive language in LM00Cs based on appraisal theory. *Open Linguistics*, 6, 38-67.
- Koller, V. (2018). Language awareness and language workers. *Language Awareness*, 27(1-2), 4-20.
- Pershai, A. (2006). The language puzzle: Is inclusive language a solution? In K. Scott-Dixon (Ed.), *Trans/forming feminism: Transfeminist voices speak out* (pp. 46-52). Toronto, Canada: Sumach Press.
- Schulzke, M. (2014). The prospects of global English as an inclusive language. *Globalizations*, 11(2), 225-238.



The Academic Society for Corporate Management & Communication is an initiative of leading companies and universities in Germany and beyond. It aims to shape the future of corporate communications through joint research projects and knowledge sharing.

More information: www.academic-society.net | info@akademische-gesellschaft.com

