

- Discuss how various physical and mental disabilities might affect communication

—Paul Hockey



It's important to note that not all disabilities are visible or accompanied by obvious cognitive or processing challenges. It's possible to work with someone for a long time before you learn that they have a disability. Some disabilities can be invisible or usually unobtrusive (MS, for example, which can lay dormant and then flare up). Additionally, some mental illnesses (like ADHD or OCD) can impact a person's work, but are completely invisible.

Empathy goes a long way in bridging knowledge and communications gaps. For a start, watch one or more of the videos in [Soul Pancake's *How You See Me* series](#).

✓ Summiting Mount Everest



Perhaps our perception of ability—and disability—says more about us than it does about others. So before we discuss communication specifics, let's broaden our perspective of what's possible. Erik Weiheymayer is one of seven disabled athletes to have successfully climbed Mount Everest, the highest mountain in the world at 29,029 feet above sea level. The only blind person to summit Everest to date, Erik went on to complete the "Seven Summit" challenge, scaling the highest peaks of each of the seven continents. Erik subsequently co-founded No Barriers, a non-profit organization that helps youth, veterans, and people with disabilities achieve transformative challenges. The organization's motto: Unleash the Human Spirit.

Indian amputee Arunima Sinha is another of the seven disabled Everest summiters. In the aftermath of a train accident that severed her leg, Arunima "pondered on the most impossible dream I could set for myself. I decided to climb Everest." Erik and Arunima are remarkable athletes and people, but there are thousands of similar stories—people who, by birth or circumstance, found themselves at a relative disadvantage and yet prevailed and indeed, thrived. Clearly, they did not see their disability as a limitation. Tapping this human spirit is critical to business success in a competitive global economy.

Overcoming Communication Challenges

People with disabilities can experience unique communication challenges whether they have sensory impairments (blindness or deafness), cognitive disorders (autism spectrum disorder, post-stroke challenges), or physical disabilities (head trauma or neurological injury). In particular, some communication difficulties in the workplace can include the following:

- Difficulty speaking: speech may be unclear, interrupted by stuttering, or abnormally slow, fast or irregularly paced
- Difficulty with listening for extended periods or listening to multiple people participating in a conversation
- Difficulty reading manuals with dense amounts of text
- Difficulty keeping track of procedural material without the help of notes or hands-on experience
- Difficulty interpreting language that has implied meaning such as indirect requests or offers for help, or certain types of humor
- Difficulty interpreting body language, the emotions of others, or other non-verbal language
- Difficulty communicating with unfamiliar people; this can include eye contact

Whether individuals have disclosed a disability or not, the way you approach a communication breakdown or misunderstanding matters. If you do not understand something a person says, do not pretend that you do. Ask the individual to repeat what he or she said and then repeat it back. Try to ask questions that require only short answers or a nod of the head. Concentrate on what the person is saying and do not rush to a conclusion about what you think they mean. Do not speak for the individual or attempt to finish her or his sentences. If you are having difficulty understanding the individual, consider writing as an alternative means of communicating, but first ask whether this is acceptable.

Other things to consider are:

- If you are in a public area with many distractions, consider moving to a quiet or private location.
- Be prepared to repeat what you say, orally or in writing.
- Offer assistance completing forms or understanding written instructions and provide extra time for decision-making. Wait for the individual to accept the offer of assistance; do not "over-assist" or be patronizing.
- Be patient, flexible and supportive. Take time to understand the individual and make sure the individual understands you.

If you notice a communication breakdown or misunderstanding, it is of utmost importance to treat everyone with dignity, respect, and courtesy. Be patient, be supportive, and take as much time as necessary to listen to the individual because it can make all of the difference.

Developing an Accessible Workplace

The Society for Human Resource Management's (SHRM) [Developing an Accessible Workplace toolkit](#) is an excellent resource, addressing the business case, physical accessibility and information accessibility. Technology accommodations might include use of large display screens, screen readers, and/or voice recognition software. In order to communicate effectively across a range of abilities, businesses also need to design materials—from onboarding and ongoing communications to training and development—with accessibility in mind. Rather than “retrofitting” materials and programs to accommodate a person’s particular disability, a best practice is to use a [Universal Design for Learning \(UDL\)](#) approach. Briefly, UDL is a research-based educational framework that guides the development of flexible learning environments that can accommodate individual learning differences.”^[2] The concept and language of UDL was inspired by the universal design movement, proposing that “products and environments be designed to be usable by all people, to the greatest extent possible, without the need for adaptation or specialized design.”

As with many conceptual frameworks, there are different approaches to achieving UDL. The following 7 core principles provide the framework for an online educational certification program at Saddleback College:

1. Principle 1: Inclusive & Fair
2. Principle 2: Straight-Forward & Clear
3. Principle 3: Flexible & Fair
4. Principle 4: Explicitly Presented
5. Principle 5: Supportive
6. Principle 6: Minimize Effort
7. Principle 7: Appropriate Learning Space

Delving into UDL is beyond the scope of this section and course. However, even at the summary level, these principles clearly contribute to a fair, inclusive and effective workplace. The upside is that applying the design principles also makes information more accessible to people for whom English is a second language. The clarity that the design principles require also contributes to clear communication across other diversity dimensions—for example, cultures and ethnicities.

There are also simple, practical adjustments we can make in our one-on-one interactions that will facilitate effective communication. The following eight recommendations, adapted from a toolkit for medical practitioners, are equally relevant to communicating with people with disabilities in the workplace (Heath Care for Adults with Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities):

- Allocate additional time to achieve the communication objective.
- Be aware of your tone of voice and nonverbal signals.
- Moderate your speaking pace and give the person with a disability adequate time to process and respond to what you’ve communicated.
- Actively confirm the person’s understanding and your own understanding of what he or she communicated.
- Focus on abilities rather than disabilities.
- Use specific rather than abstract language; for example, “bring a pen and paper” rather than “get ready for the meeting.”
- Stage conversations in areas that are relatively quiet without distracting activity or background noise.

Just as our history is not our destiny, our frame of reference doesn’t need to limit our future possibilities—individually or collectively, as a business or society. Disability rights are not only civil rights, they’re human rights—the right to strive to achieve our full potential, whatever that is. As one of the testimonials on [Nike’s Equality Campaign page](#) phrased it: “we all deserve a starting line.”

? Additional Resources

- The Language of Disability: [Do’s & Don’ts – Alliance for Inclusion in the Arts](#)
- [A Guide to Disability Rights Laws](#)
- [Nike’s Equality Campaign page](#)
- Communicating With and About People with Disabilities

1. Isaacs, Kim. "Should You Disclose a Disability on Your Resume?" Monster. Accessed August 5, 2019. Disclosing a disability: www.monster.com/career-advice/article/disclose-disability-on-resume

2. Rose, David H., Anne Meyer, Nicole Strangman, and Gabrielle Rappolt. *Teaching Every Student in the Digital Age: Universal Design for Learning*. Association for Supervision & Curriculum Development, 2002. www.ascd.org/Publications/Books/Overview/Teaching-Every-Student-in-the-Digital-Age.aspx

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