the impact of words: inclusive language in your workplace.

human forward.

why inclusive language matters.

Language is important. The way we describe ourselves and each other is such a powerful tool in affirming our identities and how we comprehend the world around us. And as diverse as we all are, so is the language we use to describe our gender, sexual orientation, disability, age, and other layers of who we are.

As we celebrate Pride in the workplace, it's a good time to assess your company communication style and workplace culture to ensure that it promotes respectful language that is 2SLGBTQIA + friendly and inclusive. In today's workplace, many of the best practices around inclusivity relate to language and when you make it a priority to use inclusive language, both internally and externally, it makes employees, clients, customers, and stakeholders feel safe, welcome, and like they belong.

what is inclusive language?

Simply put, inclusive language is about respect. It should leave everyone feeling accepted and seen. It's free from words, phrases, or tones that reflect prejudice, stereotypes, or discriminatory views of particular people or groups. It also doesn't deliberately or inadvertently exclude people from feeling seen or heard. Throughout this guide, we'll provide a primer on inclusive language and how to examine the language you use in your workplace.
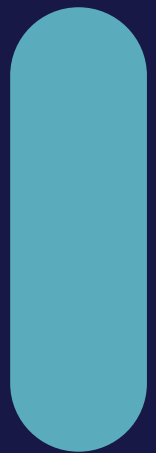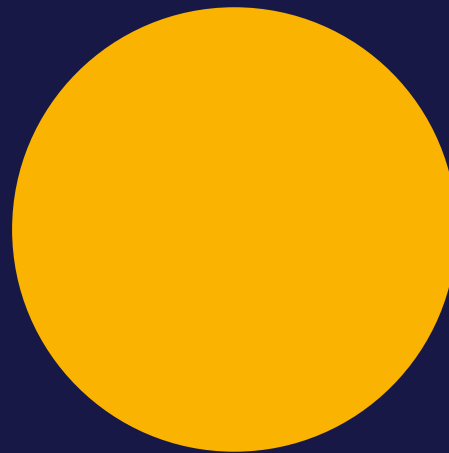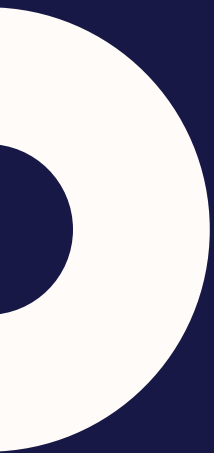
using inclusive language around gender.

gender-inclusive language

Using gender-inclusive language means speaking and writing in a way that doesn't discriminate against a particular gender identity or social gender and doesn't perpetuate gender stereotypes. In workplaces, using gender-inclusive language contributes to making everyone feel welcome and sets an example for employees that gender-inclusive language is the norm and that nothing should be assumed either when it comes to a person's self-identity.

The most common example you've likely encountered is the default use of masculine pronouns (he, him, his) when referring to roles that could be any gender or identity (fireman, weatherman, salesman etc). In the workplace, try replacing commonly used words for more inclusive language such as, businessmen to businesspeople, chairman to chairperson, manpower to personnel, man hours to working hours, guys to team/everybody, manning the office to staffing the office and so on.

using the correct pronouns

Chances are, your first formal education on pronouns was taught in your early school days and had rules based around a binary male/female and singular/plural framework. But language is fluid and ever evolving, and our grammatical framework requires updates to be considerate of the intersections between gender and other layers of identity. Being aware of pronouns and more intentional about the way you use them fosters a more positive and inclusive work environment. To normalize using the right pronouns, encourage employees to add their pronouns to their email signature, business card, office sign, LinkedIn profile and anywhere else that makes sense. This is a great way to normalize pronoun sharing and show support to fellow employees who identify as transgender or non-binary and who might use different pronouns than he/him or she/her. For example using they/them as a singular pronoun. (And yes, it's grammatically correct!) In fact, Shakespeare, Chaucer and Jane Austen all used they/them as singular pronouns!

respect self-identification

Respect the self-identification of individuals and groups. People know best what their pronouns/gender identity/ sexual orientation are and it's important to respect how they want to be addressed. We have to remember that self-identification can change over time as people evolve in life and become more confident in who they are. Another essential point is that all terms emerge from a specific context— and they will continue to change over time. This is particularly true when it comes to 2SLGBTQIA+ terminology. As our language evolves to better reflect our values and our realities, some words might become outdated. For example, we don't use the word hermaphrodite anymore because of its past negative pathologization. We use intersex instead. Furthermore, 2SLGBTQIA+ terminology is often very western-centric, and it's important to remember that people from different cultures and backgrounds may use other words to describe their sexual orientation and gender identity. A good example is the word Two-Spirit, an umbrella term used by Indigenous people to describe their sexual, gender and/or spiritual identity.

inclusive language beyond gender.

To create an inclusive workplace, you'll need to create a supportive environment for all people, regardless of their differences. Inclusive language extends beyond gender and promotes all people as valued members of society. Here are some examples of inclusive language to use to respect the diverse identities in our society and workplaces.

people with disabilities

According to Employment and Social Development Canada, 22% of Canadians identify as having a disability and it's expected that the number is even higher as many disabilities are underreported. Living with a disability often means experiencing restrictions in how you interact with the world. A good rule of thumb for speaking about disabilities in an inclusive way is to put the person first, rather than their condition. For example, instead of using terms like disabled person, handicapped, crippled, or wheelchair-bound, try using phrases like 'person with a disability' or 'person who uses a wheelchair'. These phrases centre the person, rather than their disability and frame the disability as something they have, rather than something they are.

In addition, to lessen stigma around disabilities, do not use the word 'normal' to describe people without disabilities as it implies that people with disabilities are abnormal. In the workplace, inclusivity spans beyond language and can include modifications to make everyone feel welcome, such as providing telecommunication devices for Deaf or hearing-impaired employees, braille displays or braille printers for blind employees, raised or adjustable-height desks for employees who use wheelchairs and modified equipment controls for hand and foot operation for a person with limited hand or foot control.
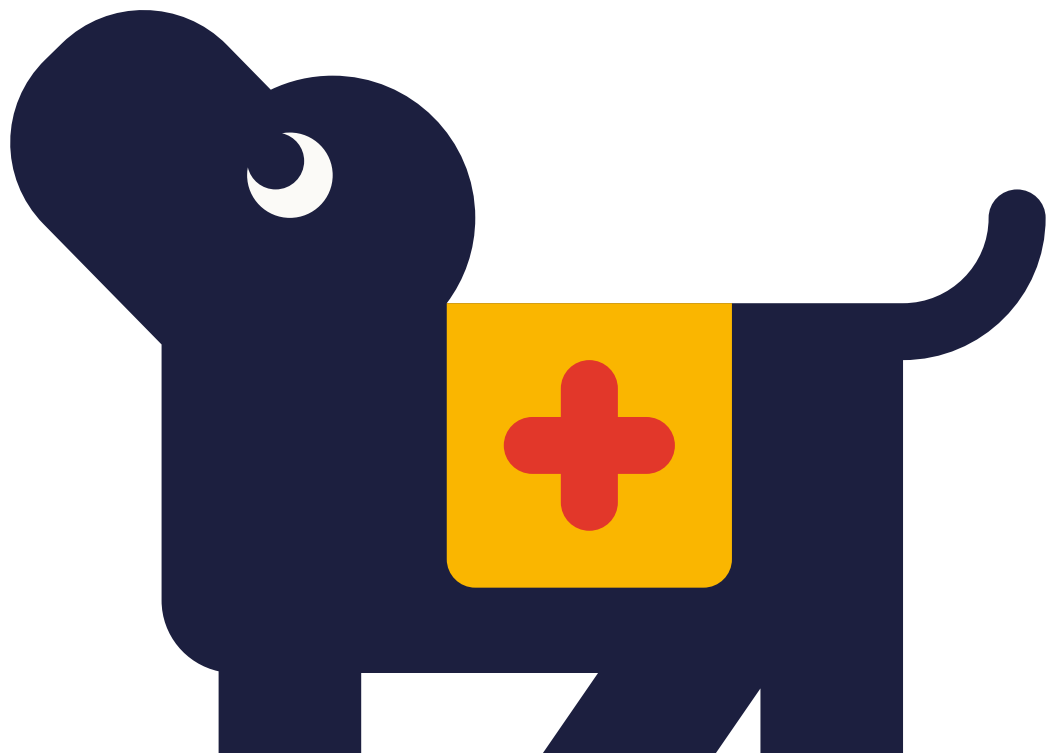
indigenous peoples

There are three distinct groups of Indigenous Peoples in Canada: First Nations, Métis, and Inuit, though there are many subgroups within each. Indigenous Peoples is commonly used as a collective term for all the native peoples of Canada and should be used instead of the terms Aboriginal or Native. If a person identifies as part of a specific group, it is encouraged to use the more specific name of their group, rather than the broader term, Indigenous. Terms such as Native Americans or Native Indians that were once commonplace are now no longer acceptable to use.

avoid language that stigmatizes mental health issues

Although progress has been made removing some of the stigma attached to mental health, there are still some expressions to avoid to help everyone at work and out in society feel valued. Avoid language that denigrates those suffering mental health issues, such as referring to a person as crazy, insane, manic, OCD and so on. These terms, when used in casual conversation, perpetuate the idea that suffering from mental health issues is a negative personality trait.

correcting yourself if you make a mistake.

People make mistakes and that's okay. Language is constantly changing and evolving and how we use it needs to adapt, too. If you make a mistake and use outdated or incorrect identifiers, it's okay. We're all only human. The best thing you can do is take accountability for your error, apologize and make an effort to do better going forward. Avoid making excuses or asking for an exception (i.e. 'your name is so difficult to pronounce, can I call you X, instead?' or 'how am I supposed to remember your pronouns, I will just use he/him instead') unless the person you're speaking with offers an alternative.

Ideally, using inclusive language will become the norm in society, but until then there will be a learning curve. It may even feel overwhelming to be mindful of all of the possible linguistic pitfalls that you may encounter in the workplace, but mistakes should be viewed as opportunities to learn. And remember, if someone is asking you to identify them in a particular way, it's not about making your life harder, it's about how they want to present themselves in the world.

if you make a mistake

- Try to avoid being defensive. Chances are the person will be understanding as long as you're respectful and make an effort to correct yourself.

- If you make a mistake, apologize and take the time to understand why what you said was not correct, and what you should say going forward.

- If you need a refresher on the correct language to use, ask the person respectfully (Remind me, how should I pronounce your name/what are your pronouns?) It's better to tackle the situation head-on rather than misgender a person or ignore your mistake altogether.

using inclusive language in a workplace setting.

To create a workplace environment that empowers all employees to thrive regardless of varying characteristics of gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity, culture, age, religion, or physical ability, consider starting at the first human touchpoint of your company: HR. Get in the habit of regularly reviewing your company recruitment policies to ensure they don't negatively impact any group and are equally accessible to all applicants. Words matter, so take a look at existing language in all corporate policies in addition to application forms to ensure inclusive language options for employees who don't identify as men or women.

onboarding

To showcase your commitment to inclusivity, keep inclusion at the forefront of your onboarding process. Providing an onboarding experience that makes new employees feel welcome and comfortable will set the tone for how connected they feel to the company and fellow teammates. Believing they are acknowledged and included from day one lays the foundation for a new hire's experience at your company. All of this leaves the impression that they will receive the support they need while they get settled. It is also essential to articulate that every employee should feel safe, and that discrimination will not be tolerated.

clarify your policies

Be sure to cover the policies that pertain to expected behaviours and measures to be taken if they were to experience or witness any ill-treatment of an employee. Within the onboarding package and email set-up instructions, include a reminder about adding pronouns and any proper titles they'd like in their email signature (Dr., Ms., Mrs., or Mx., for those who don't want to indicate a gender in their identification or those who identify as non-binary). And to support employees who are looking to learn more about inclusive language, you can also include a tip sheet on how to avoid gendering groups in written and verbal communication by providing a glossary of terms or word alternatives.

inclusive washrooms

Another area of comfort that should be prioritized is having gender-inclusive restrooms with stalls. If this falls outside of your budget parameters, try developing a revised company policy that encourages 2SLGBTQIA+ individuals to use whichever restroom they choose without judgement. You can also try creating an all-gender restroom using signage that doesn't reinforce gender binaries.

remember, language will continue to evolve.

It's important to remember that this guide is a reflection of the moment in time it was created. Though the content within is true and accurate at this time, language is constantly shifting what's respectful and the preferred language may change over time.

Further, every company is unique and will require a tailored approach when it comes to cultivating an inclusive workplace culture. Building an inclusive mindset among colleagues takes a conscious and robust effort and as language continues to evolve, so will the learning process. Keep in mind that best practices within this space may need to be periodically adapted to meet the changing needs of the current and potential workforce.

By prioritizing human dignity within the workplace, you'll be creating a positive corporate legacy that will be synonymous with encouraging people to be authentically who they are in a safe and welcoming environment, which is fundamental to success. Language plays a key role in shaping cultural and societal attitudes and by using inclusive language within the workplace it is a powerful way to promote equality and eradicate biases.
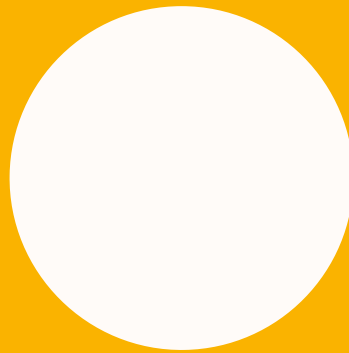
glossary of key terms.

2SLGBTQIA+:
This acronym, which is constantly being updated, refers to all identities commonly associated with gender and sexuality that are outside of the heterosexual, cisgender norm. The letters in this iteration stand for Two-spirit, Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Intersex and Asexual. The + is typically used to indicate that this list is not comprehensive and includes others that are not named.

agender:
No attachment to any gender.

cisgender/cis:
Identifiying with the gender that was assigned at birth.

gender dysphoria:
Is the discomfort that many trans people feel about their bodies because of their gender not 'matching' their body. People can be dysphoric about their genitals, their chest, or any part of their body.

gender expression:
The external display of one's gender, through a combination of dress, demeanour, social behaviour, and other factors, generally perceived on a scale of masculine to feminine. Also referred to as 'gender presentation.'

gender identity:
The internal perception of one's gender, and how they label themselves, based on their understanding of gender. Common identity labels include man, woman, genderqueer, or non-binary among others. Gender identity can differ from biological sex, or gender assigned at birth.

gender non-conforming:
Is used to indicate non-traditional gender presentation (i.e. a masculine woman or feminine man); it can also be used by people who identify as non-binary. Often abbreviated as 'GNC.'

intersex:
Refers to people who are born with a combination of chromosomes, gonads, hormones, organs, and genitals that differs from the two expected patterns of male or female.

non-binary:
The term non-binary can mean different things to different people; at its core, it describes someone whose gender identity isn't exclusively male or female.

pronouns:
Pronouns are typically an identifier, signaling one's gender identity. Some common pronouns include: she/her, he/him, they/them, ze/hir, xe/xem, or a combination of the above.

transgender/trans:
Identifying with a gender that is different than the one assigned at birth.

transition / transitioning:
Is primarily used to refer to the process a trans person undergoes when changing their bodily appearance to be congruent with the gender/sex they identify with.

two-spirit:
Refers to a person who has both a masculine and a feminine spirit. It's used by some Indigenous people to describe their sexual, gender and/or spiritual identity. It can also encompass same-sex attraction and a wide variety of gender variance, including people who might be described in Western culture as gay, lesbian, bisexual, trans, gender queer, or who have multiple gender identities. Two-Spirit people held significant roles and were an integral part of tribal social structures.

for inquiries

If you have any questions about using inclusive language in your workplace or would like to consult with a diversity & inclusion expert from Randstad, we'd love to hear from you.

reach out to our team

about randstad

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