

Myths & Stereotypes

Rationalise Discrimination

Daily, persons with a disability must overcome challenges put firmly in place through perceptions based on superficial myths and stereotypes. Unfortunately, such judgements alienate persons with a disability from both society and the workplace alike. In an attempt to rationalise these Myths and Stereotypes, we must unpack the definition of each.

“A myth is defined as fiction or a half-truth, particularly when it forms part of an ideology”.

“A stereotype is defined as a widely held, but fixed, oversimplified image or idea of a particular type of person”.

The table below includes some myths and stereotypes as well as facts to dispel them.

Perceptions of persons with a disability ...	Fact
“Persons with a disability are different from ‘normal’ people.”	‘Normal’ is defined as usual, standard, common, ordinary etc. Persons with a disability do think, feel and act in a normal, usual, standard and ordinary way.
“Persons with a disability need constant care. They cannot work independently.”	Most persons with a disability have adjusted to their disability and have support mechanisms in place to ensure their mobility and independence. They are not all welfare cases by default.
“Persons living with mental disabilities are crazy, insane or mental.”	‘Mental’ simply means it stems from the brain. Mental disabilities cover a wide array of conditions. Chances are someone in your family or group of friends has a mental disability, unknown to you. Generally, people with a mental disability can control their condition through medication.
“Persons with learning difficulties are slow, stupid and unable to function in a workplace environment.”	As with every human being, persons with learning disabilities have their strengths and weaknesses. Some need more visual stimulation to grasp concepts, while others respond to repetitive learning. They may learn at a different pace or in a different way than what others may perceive as the ‘norm’, but they do have the ability to learn.
“Persons with a disability have a higher absentee rate in the workplace and are unreliable.”	In stark contrast, various studies reveal that employees with disabilities generally have a better attendance record and a lower job turnaround rate. Statistically, they tend to be more loyal and long-serving if working in an environment which recognises their value, which is no different from everyone else.
“It is important to protect persons with a disability. They should only occupy positions where they are guaranteed not to fail.”	Success or failure forms part and parcel of the human makeup. It is often a failure that sets the path for success. You will never know the full potential of a person with a disability until you allow them to fail. Your job is simply to create an equal opportunity for them to succeed.



By: Stella Nolan

I decided to write this article due to most people having no awareness of the protocol when either referring or talking to persons with a disability. For example, shopping centres use the incorrect protocol when referring to accommodations in place for persons with a disability. More often than not, when a radio presenter introduces a person with a disability, they choose to honour them by stating they have achieved despite their suffering and endurance...

It is time to put the record straight. Persons with a disability achieve despite discrimination, not despite their disability. This article may include terminology that may be offensive to some, however, to get the message of disability protocol across it is vital to highlight the exact language regularly used that is not acceptable in both society and the workplace alike. So unacceptable is some of the terminology, that my spell check immediately tried to initiate protocol. This article was written with insight from TFM Magazine contributors Dr Laurentia Truter and Lesa Bradshaw.

Perceptions of persons with a disability ...

Fact

"It is difficult to discipline or dismiss a person with a disability."

The Labour Relations Act, 1995 as amended and other legislation is in place to protect the rights of all employees and give the right to employers to act against all employees making themselves guilty of misconduct or poor performance, consistently. Employees with a disability are as accountable as their counterparts for their conduct and non-performance.

"Persons with a disability are more prone to injuries."

The US Department of Labour, through four national studies, found that persons with a disability experience fewer disabling injuries than other employees when exposed to the same hazards.

"Persons with a disability expect preferential treatment."

Reasonable accommodation measures merely support a person with a disability to perform their job function. It is an equalising factor. An example is a person living with dyslexia utilising the 'read out loud' function to read correspondence with earphones instead of reading.

"Reasonable accommodation measures for persons with a disability are expensive."

To cope with daily life, most persons with a disability already have the tools to assist them like a wheelchair, medication or ability to communicate. Most reasonable accommodation generally involves making minor adjustments to the person with a disability's workstation or flexing on policies to allow adjustments on how things are done. Reasonable accommodation should not cause undue hardship to an organisation.

Promoting discrimination is mostly done unconsciously due to the inherent belief system and makeup of society. Discriminatory practices surrounding race, gender and sexual orientation for the most are openly challenged and tackled by organisations; however, that of disability is quietly accepted and swept under the carpet. Largely, society as a whole continues to hold negative and stereotypical ideas about the value disability plays as a whole. In essence, the result impacts the quality of life and the fundamental human rights of persons with a disability.

"I've learned that people will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel." Maya Angelou



A societal mindset change is required

The protocol, when talking to or referring to persons with a disability, has evolved. It will continue to do so until persons with a disability find their rightful place in the workplace and society alike. It is a result of modern society that persons with a disability are considered 'disabled'. The word 'disabled' has a negative connotation as clearly outlined in the Oxford Dictionary: 'A disadvantage or handicap, especially one imposed or recognised by the law'.

The evolution of disability protocol began in the mid 20th century, where the word 'disabled' became the standard terminology when referring to persons with physical or mental disabilities. The term 'disabled' is an improvement on the offensive language such as 'crippled, defective, backward or handicapped', which was the historic norm.

Although 'disabled' remains a widespread term, due to people making use of an adjective as a plural noun - as in the needs of the disabled - it has negative connotations as it labels persons with a disability as an undifferentiated group, defined by their disability. Therefore, the correct global protocol is 'persons with a disability'. In writing the phrase, there is no need to capitalise it.

The progression of disability protocol continues to evolve, whereby today terminology such as "differently-abled" or "physically challenged" are becoming the norm. Different disability organisations promote different terms. The key is to use language that is not emotive or offensive focusing on a person's disability, not their ability. Always remember the person first, then if necessary the disability.

The protocol further applies to the aids or facilities used by persons with a disability. Anyone can use accessible facilities; they are not special, separate or different. The principles of universal design are the pinnacle of accessibility, whereby environments and items suit the needs of all human beings. Do not view aids or facilities to support independence in a negative light. The language used should reflect this. Here are some examples of protocols to take into account when referencing aids or facilities intended to accommodate persons with a disability.

Incorrect & Correct Protocol

<p>Never refer to a 'Disabled Bathroom' but rather an 'Accessible Bathroom'.</p>	<p>A 'Disabled Bathroom' in effect would not be in working order.</p>
<p>Do not refer to 'Disabled Parking' but 'Accessible Parking'.</p>	<p>The position and thought process are taken into account when allocating 'Accessible Parking' which makes it just that, 'Accessible' and in no way 'Disabled.'</p>
<p>A person using a wheelchair is a wheelchair user.</p>	<p>A wheelchair user chooses to use it as a mobility aid. They are not bound or defined by it. Never take the lead and assist a wheelchair user unless you ask first. Unlike a person who has never navigated a wheelchair, the user is familiar with its safety limitations.</p>
<p>A guide dog or working dog is an accessibility aid for visually impaired people.</p>	<p>Bear in mind that a guide dog is a working dog trained explicitly to navigate a visually impaired person. Therefore, one must never pet, feed or interfere with the dog at work.</p>

Here are some protocol tips relating to unacceptable vocabulary, the rationale behind it and the acceptable protocol.



Unacceptable vocabulary

Rationale Why

Acceptable protocol

“That paraplegic guy; the blind girl or the Albino.”

Never define a person by their impairment or medical condition. Always remember the person first.

Refer to the person first followed by the impairment, for example:

- > A person with paraplegia or a wheelchair user.
- > A person who is visually impaired.
- > A person with albinism.

Steer clear from describing a person with a disability as :

- > Someone who is suffering from
- > Being afflicted with
- > A victim of
- > Being stricken with

All four phrases cast a negative connotation. ‘Suffers from’ indicates ongoing pain and torment, which is not the case for most persons with a disability.

‘Afflicted with’ or ‘stricken with’ denotes a disease, which most disabilities are not.

‘Victim of’ implies a crime on the person who has a disability which subsequently gives the notion of helplessness.

Protocol dictates - A person with (their disability) for example, a person with a visual impairment or a person with a disability.

“A person is ‘bound’ or ‘confined’ to a wheelchair.”

A person who uses a wheelchair views it as a mobility aid, not a tool of confinement.

The ‘bound’ or ‘confined to’ phrases contradict the fact that many people with mobility impairments engage in activities without their wheelchairs, for instance, driving and sleeping.

Remember that a wheelchair is an aid that ensures mobility and independence.

Refer to a person who is a wheelchair user. By making this reference one is focussing on the person before the mobility aid.

“That person is an AIDS victim.”

Some diseases by legal definition are considered disabilities. It is victimisation to define a person by their disease.

A person has HIV/AIDS.





Unacceptable vocabulary	Rationale Why	Acceptable protocol
“The deaf guy or the lady who cannot hear.”	People who consider themselves part of Deaf culture refer to themselves as “Deaf” with a capital ‘D’. The reason is mainly due to their culture deriving from their unique language. There are unique sign language dialects that originate from different parts of the world.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> > A person who is Deaf. > A person from the Deaf Community > A Deaf sign language user. > Deaf People.
“That person is brain-damaged, mentally challenged or retarded.”	These are derogatory terms and inaccurate.	A person with an intellectual or cognitive disability.
“That person is crazy, psycho or a lunatic.”	Conditions such as Bi-Polar and others are generally managed through medication, whereby a person can adequately function in society and the workplace alike.	A person with a mental, psychiatric or emotive disability.
“That person is dumb, stupid, slow, backward, remedial or retarded.”	<p>These words are tactless, offensive and carry negative connotations.</p> <p>Always remember a person with a learning disability learns differently from others.</p>	A person with dyslexia, ADHD or a learning disability.
“That person is a dwarf or midget.”	These references place the disability first and ignore the person. The terms are inappropriate and not acceptable in society.	A person of short stature.
“That person is deformed, has a deformity or is defective.”	A person may be born ‘without limbs’ or with ‘a congenital disability’; this, however, does not make them ‘defective’. Steer clear of negative phrases.	A person born without arms/ legs; or with a congenital disability.

Now armed with a knowledge of offensive terminology, the correct protocol and the reasoning behind it, the last point of guidance is to simply remember your manners. Just as it is not polite to approach a stranger to ask them how they became so fat, so it is not polite to approach a person with a disability to ask them what happened to them. When engaging with persons with a disability, all that is required is basic manners, common sense and respect for their dignity on equal footing.

“Look beyond the disability, see the person.”