

# INCLUSIVE COMMUNICATIONS.

Institution of  
**MECHANICAL  
ENGINEERS**

Guidelines v1.0



These guidelines have been adapted from a guide produced by The Employers Network for Equality & Inclusion.

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# 1. Introduction

Whether it's during the recruitment process, your annual employee satisfaction survey or engaging with customers via social media, how you communicate makes a difference. This is because there is a lot of competition for people's time and attention. Communication is a two-way process of understanding others and expressing yourself. An organisation needs to match their communication with the needs of the people who receive those communications. Professional communicators are tasked with ensuring the message is not only received, but also, understood properly. Simply put, the more people you can successfully communicate and engage with, the better.

Ensuring you are doing everything you can to reach the widest possible audience will make your communications work more effectively for your organisation. Mass communications are deliverable at the click of a button, but different factors may prevent some groups of people or individuals from receiving your communications. Despite great advances in technology, there are barriers that will hinder some groups of people or individuals from receiving your communications. The purpose of this guide is to offer guidance on how organisations can get started on embedding diversity and inclusion in their policies and internal/external communications.

## 2. Definitions of inclusive communications

Diversity and inclusion are terms that have been used by employers for some time, and in the context of employment and recruitment they are well understood. The concept of inclusive communications is more recent one.

Organisations that develop and deliver inclusive communications are:

- mindful of the diversity of their audience
- skilled at understanding cultural, language or access barriers
- expert at anticipating the communications needs of their audience.

Generally speaking inclusive communications are:

Communications that have been designed and created to convey information to reach a range of diverse audiences by a variety of different channels. Inclusive communications relate to all modes of communication and address the needs of people of all ages, cultural and language backgrounds, sexuality, gender, and ability.

## 2.1 Accessibility and Inclusion

Accessibility and inclusion are terms that are used frequently, often interchangeably. It is important to understand the differences between these terms and their value in regards to embedding inclusion into every communications campaign.

### Accessibility

Accessibility is ensuring that there are no barriers preventing any person from accessing your communications (website, email, social media, posters, etc). A barrier to access might be only providing materials in hardcopy, font size 10 – or only offering one type of communication route eg telephone contact details but no email or post address. Making something accessible means providing alternative means (formats or options) to access what's on offer if the 'standard' offer is not accessible. Accessibility is a term primarily used in reference to disabled people and communications, but it has a broader meaning.

### Inclusion

By contrast, an inclusive communication is designed to reach as broad and diverse an audience as possible with accessibility for different groups built in and part of the core communication. To sum up the difference, a document might be accessible to a blind person but the overall content, language and imagery might not be LGBT or BAME-inclusive.

## 3. Communicating with diverse audiences

Adopting a thorough approach to diversity and inclusivity in communications is necessary for understanding how to best communicate with, to, and for, a richly diverse British culture in which:

- 51% of the UK population is female, 49% is male.
- 1/5 or 12 million people in the UK identify as having a disability.
- 1/7 or 9 million people in the UK are deaf or have a hearing impairment.
- The average reading age in the UK is 9 years old.
- 15% of the UK population has dyslexia.
- 6% of the UK population identify as gay, lesbian or bisexual.
- 87% of the UK population is white, 7% is Asian/British Asian, 3% is Black/British Black, and 3% are British mixed race.



Consider your audience to be as broad and as diverse as possible to avoid unintentionally excluding people from your communications. We predominately communicate in English, but there are many people in the UK who have English as an additional language. Communications that are clear and use Plain English will benefit someone whose first language is not English as well as someone with a learning disability.

The average reading age in the UK is nine years old. This is not commonly known but it has a significant impact on how your communications are received. The Sun newspaper uses language that someone with a reading age of nine can understand, The Guardian by contrast uses more complex language that on average could be read by someone with the reading age of 14.

Older people respond differently to certain types of communications and may face barriers (such as technical ones) that may prevent them from engaging with your organisation. The person reading your communication might not necessarily be the intended recipient. It could be their parent, carer or personal assistant. The benefit of taking an inclusive approach to your communications is that you will reach a wider audience than you first anticipated.

[\*This information on the diversity of the UK audience has been drawn from the 2011 UK census]

## 4. The business case for inclusive communications

The business case for use of inclusive communications is clear. It provides benefits in terms of both cost and user satisfaction. If communications are designed around the needs of the people who receive them, you will save time and money and your communications will be recognised as more user friendly and fit for purpose.

A communications campaign that has actively thought about the diversity of its audience, identified the barriers certain groups may encounter is going to be better at reaching its audience. An organisation that is able to properly communicate with the diverse needs of its audience should find that it carries out its core business more effectively. This leads to services that are more appropriate the user, and services that are more effective and cost-effective.

Internal, external, stakeholder, B2B, B2C, digital, marketing & social communications all have one thing in common: we are telling someone something, so surely we want as many people as possible to know?





## 5. Legal requirements and international standards

The Equality Act 2010 requires service-providers to make reasonable changes to the way services are delivered. This includes a duty to provide information in an accessible format. Making a 'reasonable adjustment' to something in communications terms can simply mean providing an alternative way of receiving the information.

Public bodies in the UK have to adhere to the General Equality Duty that relays steps to meet the needs of people from protected groups where these are different from the needs of other people. The general equality duty obliges organisations to consider how equality and inclusion can be reflected into the design of policies and the delivery of services.

In October 2012, Global Web Accessibility Guidelines WCAG 2.0 (Web Content Accessibility Guidelines) became an International Standard: ISO/IEC 40500:2012 that covers a wide range of recommendations for making Web content more accessible under four main tenants: perceivable, operable, understandable, and robust. The proposed EU directive on the accessibility of public sector bodies' websites to introduce mandatory EU standardised accessibility features to all 761,000 public sector websites by the end of 2015 is currently under review.

## 6. Inclusive language

Inclusive language positively reflects the social and cultural diversity of your audience. It means avoiding language that discriminates, excludes or undermines individuals and groups of people.

References to people's personal attributes such as their race, gender, marital status or religion must be appropriate, relevant to the context and be used consistently for everyone. For example, referring to a colleague as a "single-mother" or a "working-mother" is not necessarily information that the audience needs to know, and they are terms that are not often attributed to male parents in the same way. These particular terms can be undermining and reinforce negative feelings, stereotypes and behaviours.

### 6.1 What is discriminatory language?

Many every-day terms and expressions can create and reinforce bias against individuals and groups of people, used consciously or unconsciously. This can create an environment at work that is humiliating, offensive and alienating. Language is our main form of communication and it plays a powerful role both in contributing to and in eliminating discrimination. Language can also create and reinforce negative stereotypes about particular groups of people by either exaggerating or isolating particular features of that group. Language that is exclusive is harmful because it can inhibit or prevent your communications' potential to reach the widest possible audience.

## 6.2 Terms to use and avoid

Using the wrong kind of language can itself create a barrier. As the English language evolves and adapts so do the terms we use to describe people in communications. How we describe people is important as labels of whatever kind have a habit of sticking. Below are some opposite charts of do's and don'ts when choosing communications terminology.

## 6.3 Gender

Historically in the English-speaking world, language usage has privileged men and often rendered women invisible or inferior. In language terms, the most inclusive strategy is to avoid references to a person's gender for example in job titles, except when it is pertinent to the discussion.

Use	Avoid
Human, humans, humankind, spokesperson, chairperson, quality of work/skill, attend the desk/phones	Man, men, mankind, spokesman, chairman, workmanship, man the desk/phones
Office staff, doctor, cleaner, professor	The girls in the office, woman doctor, male nurse, cleaning lady, female professor
Author, actor, manager	Authoress, actress, manageress

## 6.4 Age

Generalisations based on age can stereotype and undermine people:

- Older people are not all "grumpy" or "boring"
- Women around the age of 50 are not all "menopausal"
- Young people are not all "lazy", or "arrogant"
- Not everyone has a mid-life crisis!

Use	Avoid
Seniors, older adults, mature	The old, the aged, the elderly, geriatric, senile
Young people, younger person, young adults (18–25 years)	Kids, girls, boys (when referring to young adults)

## 6.5 Disability

The linguistic portrayal of disabled people has traditionally emphasised the disability rather than the person. People with a disability are often and inappropriately seen as helpless, to be pitied and to be cared for rather than as equal and contributing members of society. Terms such as 'wheelchair-bound' or 'sufferer' convey an image of the person with the disability as dependent and ignores the reality that a wheelchair enables someone to live an active life.

Use	Avoid
Disabled person or person with disability	The disabled, handicapped, crippled
Person or non-disabled person, Dwarf, person of short stature, person of restricted growth	Able-bodied person, normal person, Midget
Person with a certain condition or impairment	Sufferer
Wheelchair or mobility-scooter user	Wheelchair or mobility-scooter-bound or confined
Learning disability	Retarded, backwards, slow, mentally handicapped
Deaf people/hearing impaired Blind people/visually impaired	The deaf The blind
Brain injury	Brain damage

## 6.6 Sexual orientation and gender identity

The enduring bias in society against lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans and intersex (LGBT+) people makes many people feel invisible, marginalised and inferior to heterosexual/'cisgender' people. This means an organisation's communications should ensure the language it uses to refer to people's sexual orientation and gender identity is accurate and appropriate.

General phrases to avoid: That's so gay, fag, dyke, homo, queen, she-male, he-she, it, tranny (and similar epithets).

Use	Avoid
Gay, gay man, lesbian, openly lesbian, openly gay	Homosexual, gay/homosexual lifestyle, admitted homosexual, avowed homosexual
Partner	Boyfriend or girlfriend
Sexual orientation	Sexual preference

## 6.7 Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME)/culture

Ethnic and racial labels, names and expressions can be created and used to portray certain groups as inferior or superior to others. Sometimes this usage is unintentional and stems from the continued dominance of white mainstream culture; other times, it is deliberately used to marginalise, demean and discriminate.

Use	Avoid
Minority ethnic group	Minority group, visible minority
Black, Black British, Asian, Asian British, Jewish, mixed race, traveller community	Coloured person, person of colour, Yid, Jap, Chink
Mixed race	Half-caste, half-breed
Traveller community	Gypso, pikey



## 6.8 Forms of address

For customer, employee or stakeholder communications it is important that the form of address is correct. Offering a choice of options for individuals to choose from is considered best practice. Some organisations limit the options to Mr. & Mrs., but there are a large number of alternative forms of address that could be offered:

Mr	Prof.
Mrs.	Dr.
Miss	Imam/Rabbi/Rev.
Master	Lord/Lady
Ms.	Sir/Dame
Mx. – entered into the Oxford English Dictionary in 2015, Mx (pronounced Mix or Mux) is a gender-neutral form of address that is now commonly accepted by government departments, councils and many businesses including Royal Mail.	



## 7. Inclusive design

How we present our communications visually is an important component of the overall campaign. There are several factors to consider that will make your communications more inclusive:

### 7.1 Layout

Most people in the UK read from left to right, so it is best to left align your copy. When your text is left aligned, the eyes and brain know where to go at the start of every line. When text is centralized the reader has to work harder to find the start of each line.

Often we underline words or titles to add emphasis, but this can make the word harder to read for some people. Your eyes have to work harder to separate a word from the line to read it. Use underline to highlight clickable links only.

Italics are commonly used to denote a real name or a quote to add emphasis, but they can make the words more difficult to read. The slant of the letters changes the weighting of the font in the reader's eye, making it appear less solid. Your readers need to work harder to identify the letters and words, so avoid using italics unless absolutely necessary.

Use "quotation marks" to signal a quote or a name and use a bold font for added emphasis if required – but use it sparingly as large chunks of bold font are hard to read. A word of caution, some screen readers will shout out words in bold, this might not achieve the desired impact you were hoping for when you bolded the word. (A screen reader is a device which reads out what is on screen).

We learn to read words that use lower case letters, only using capital letters at the start of sentences. Using capital letters for full words, titles or sentences makes it harder for the reader to identify the words. Our brand identity uses capital letters for our headlines and some L1 headers, and it is an important part of our who we are, but other content, wherever possible, should use sentence case, as it is the most accessible style of writing to read.

Any document or communication should be laid out clearly and simply in order to ensure accessibility of the information. The main things to consider with layout are:

- **Headings:** Ensure headings are clearly marked. This is important for people who might be reading your document using a screen reader or text-to-speech software. If headings are not correctly marked in the body of the document then the screen reader will not understand what it is reading. Using the headings function in programmes like Word will help you to structure your document properly.

- **Visual order:** If you are using tables in a document that have multiple columns or if you are laying out your text in more than one column you make sure that the underlying structure of the document (how it is technically set up) actually corresponds to the visual order of the information. Screen readers or text-to-speech software will read the text in the order it is presented technically in the structure of the document or web template, not how it is presented visually as part of a graphic design.
- **Images:** If images are important for your communication clearly position them and make them distinct from any text, shading or overlay. If you do use text over images, then please ensure there is sufficient contrast between the text and the background. It will be helpful to some of your audience to position images consistently in the same place (eg left aligned). This will help to give clarity to your layout and provide your communication with a structure. Where appropriate, images should be labelled or given a title. This is especially important in digital communications – this can be done using the alt text label – alt text means “alternative text” and should give a brief description of what the image is otherwise the screen reader will just say something like, “image: blank”, leaving a visually impaired reader confused. To check whether the images on your website have alt text labels, hover your cursor over the image, the alternative text should appear. If you don’t have any alt labels either ask your web agency or find the image title field in your content management system.

## 7.2 Font

Our brand guidelines provide guidance on font selection, minimum sizes and spacing, which ensures legibility and accessibility of our communications. We use sans-serif fonts for our body copy as these are the most accessible in both print and digital communications.

## 7.3 Images

Different people respond to certain elements of communications and a well-chosen image, design or diagram can serve to reinforce the main message of your communication. Some people receiving your communications may not be able to view the image in the same way (eg visual impairment or a learning disability). In electronic communications, it is essential that all images and graphics are ‘tagged’ so that those using a screen-reader also get an idea of the image being used even if they can not see it.

If using photographs of people to illustrate your communications, it is best practice to ensure that your selection is a diverse range of people and where possible, try to ensure images of different groups are positively portrayed. But, you need to avoid tokenism and images that do not look or feel natural. Do not get hung up on trying to ensure that one image ticks all the boxes, you are asking too much of that one image. Instead, ensure where possible you vary the use of images throughout a specific campaign or suite of communications.



Shading or pictures behind text can reduce the colour contrast between the text and the background. A blurring of the colours or a weakening of the definition between text and shading/images can make the communication more difficult for some users, so always ensure there is sufficient contrast between the text and background image. Words or key facts can be highlighted by placing them in a low-contrast text box if required.

## 7.4 Colour

The use of colour is a central part of our communications and our brand management. We have an official palette of Primary and Secondary colours set out in our brand guidelines and these have been designed to work together, while maintaining contrast and ensuring accessibility. Please ensure you familiarise yourself with the colour section of the brand guidelines to better understand how to successfully combine colours. Too many different colours, might distract the reader and make it harder for your message to be understood. Over-use of colour might be problematic for people with learning disability, people with a lower than average reading age or for those whose first language is not English.

There are a variety of free tools on the internet which allow you to check the colour contrast of text on a certain background:

- **Colors on the Web, Color Contrast Analyzer:**  
<http://www.colorsontheweb.com/colorcontrast.asp>.
- **Juicy Studio, Luminosity Colour Contrast Ratio Analyser:**  
<http://juicystudio.com/services/luminositycontrastratio.php>
- **The Paciello Group Colour Contrast Analyser:**  
<http://www.paciellogroup.com/resources/contrastAnalyser>
- **WebAIM, Colour Contrast Checker:**  
<http://webaim.org/resources/contrastchecker/>

Colour brightness and luminosity are different factors to consider. You will also need to consider the type of communication you are producing; the application of certain colour combinations works well in a digital format with the back-lighting you get on-screen, but you may find on paper that the effect is dulled or that the sheen of the paper makes it harder to distinguish the colours.

## 7.5 Communications channels

- **E-Newsletters:** Sending out our organisation's news in an e-newsletter is the most efficient and cost-effective way of reaching all your audiences and stakeholders. Best practice is to ensure correct labels, headings, provide plain text version, alt tags for images, sans serif font and unsubscribe option.
- **Social media:** Social media as a way of communication brings its own accessibility challenges. In general terms, remember that not everyone is interested in using social media as a way of keeping informed about the world. So do not rely solely on communicating via social media as you will not reach everyone that way.
- **Images:** Social media relies heavily on images. Describing photos, or putting alternative text (alt text), for people who are blind or partially sighted is really important as it allows them to build up a mental picture of what someone who is sighted is seeing automatically.
- **Hashtags:** When you're using hashtags, always use CamelCase and capitalise the first letter of every word. This means that the words in the hashtag are read out correctly by screen readers. It also makes them easier to read for everybody else. For example, you would write #HowISee, rather than #howisee.
- **Emojis:** Don't go emoji crazy. Text-to-speech software reads out a description for every single emoji which is used, so be careful with the amount of emojis you include. For example, if someone puts four star emojis, the software will read out: "star star star star".
- **Videos:** To ensure our videos are accessible, we include subtitles where possible. We use a service called Happy Scribe but there are lots of free apps available which make adding subtitles to your videos really easy.
- **Mobile applications (Apps):** The same rules as web accessibility apply here. Ensure accessibility options are provided, buttons are clearly defined, avoid the use colour to convey meaning (eg press red tab to continue), incorporate a changeable font size and check that the app works on different types of devices.
- **Portable document format (PDF):** PDFs can often be inaccessible, so creating an accessible version of PDF files is vital. This involves the use of content lists and bookmarks to help navigation, use of style sheets to identify hierarchy of text (eg Heading 1, Heading 2, Paragraph), alt texts to label pictures, and removal of repeated information from the tagged reading order.
- **Infographics:** There is a huge trend towards using infographics to communicate complex information on one page. An infographic can be accessible if it is designed correctly. This involves not using colour to convey meaning, specify the reading order, and providing a text alternative.

## 8. Better practice checklist

- Have you included accessibility as an essential requirement for each project? An explicit reference to inclusive and accessible communication should be made in your scoping document so that any colleagues or suppliers know what has to be produced from the beginning.
- Are your designs and use of images inclusive?
- Has the language within the content been checked to ensure discriminatory language has been avoided?
- Have you followed best practice in web accessibility ([WCAG guidelines](#)) for all digital communications and have your digital communications tested for accessibility and usability by different groups before you launch them?
- Do all social media images also have Alt-Text?
- Have you used CamelCase in your social media hashtags?
- Do your videos feature sub-titles for the visually impaired?

**Institution of  
Mechanical Engineers**

1 Birdcage Walk  
Westminster  
London SW1H 9JJ

+44 (0)20 7973 1293  
[enquiries@imeche.org](mailto:enquiries@imeche.org)  
[imeche.org](http://imeche.org)

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