

Things NOT to Say to People With Disabilities

By Frank Kineavy

Frank Kineavy is a 25-year-old journalist living with cerebral palsy, and he is not able to walk or talk. Although Frank cannot physically write, he uses a scribe (an adapted keyboard with word prediction and an augmentative communicative device) to write and communicate with others. Frank's scribe also allows him to write articles here at DiversityInc. Frank previously worked in the digital media department at Rutgers University.

Frank earned his BA in Liberal Arts in 2013 from Villanova University. While attending Villanova, he took advantage of many opportunities, including managing the basketball team under Coach Jay Wright and giving a Tedx-Villanova Talk. He was also the subject of the award-winning student documentary "Coming Off The DL." Frank says his fondest memories were while participating in an able-ism



awareness group.

Frank is a resident of Sea Girt, New Jersey. He is an avid music fan, a movie guy and a political buff. During his free time he writes comedy and volunteers as a football, baseball and basketball coach.

Twenty-five years ago, people with disabilities were secluded from society. Often, they were educated only with each other at special schools, lived together in group homes and socialized exclusively with each other. But thanks to a bill signed by President George W. H. Bush, people with disabilities were given access to society.

In the 1990s, it became more common for a 7-year-old to ask their parents if they could have a play date with their classmate who happened to be in a wheelchair. In the 2000s, it became common to sit next to a person with a disability in your college English class. And today, 26 years after the Americans with Disabilities Act was signed, it is slowly becoming more and more common to have a person with a disability in your place of employment.

Like people of color, the LGBT community and women, most people with disabilities do not want and should not get preferential treatment at work, but like everyone else, they have the right to be treated with respect and as a significant member of any organization. Something new is always uncomfortable, and having a person with a disability as a coworker or employee is no different.

On the next page there are six tips to keep in mind when interacting with a person with a disability — but, like everything else in life, the best guideline is your own intuition.

Here are six things to keep in mind when working with employees with disabilities:

1 Never make the ordinary seem extraordinary.

With the ADA's first generation entering adulthood, there is a large number of young adults with disabilities who have known nothing else but to expect themselves to accomplish the same milestones as their peers.

Even though what your employee or coworkers have accomplished may seem impressive, be careful never to refer to them as heroes. Expect the same out of them as any other employee or coworker.

2 Never assume someone you just met with a disability is exactly like someone you know with a disability. Don't give advice on how to assist employees with disabilities just because you know someone else who has a disability.

No two humans are alike. We all have our unique personalities. If you have a friend with a disability and you meet someone with the same disability, probability will tell you two things:

- The two of you probably don't know each other; and
- If he/she is with a friend, the friend probably knows the person with a disability well, so you don't have to tell the friend how to handle the person with a disability.

3 Don't put an employee with a disability in a box or say "your skills are only suited for one job."

With more people with disabilities graduating college, there are more people with disabilities entering the workforce. Like most kids who are fresh out of college, they often have no idea what they want to do. What often happens with people with disabilities is their employer notices a very specific skill they possess and only utilizes them for that skill. This often frustrates the employee, who is eager to explore all facets of the job.



The solution is simply to get to know the person and, from your interactions with them, you will find some have the ability to contribute to your company in other ways.

4 Never assume a person with a disability shares the same political/social views as you, just because they have a disability.

Not everyone you work with has the same worldview you have. It's the same for your coworkers with disabilities. Even if you feel your views are beneficial to people with disabilities, don't push your views on anyone, including people with disabilities.

Obviously, there are some jobs where politics and political talk are inherent to the job at hand, but in this case, make sure you know where the person stands before you assign them a project.

5 Anyone can work with anyone. Don't say one employee can work with an employee with a disability because they are accustomed to it.

Just because an employee is comfortable with a coworker with a disability doesn't mean they always

have to work together. It is healthy for a person with disabilities to have to work with other people, and it would hinder both employees to put that pressure on the comfortable coworker, who has their own job to perform.

This can also be beneficial because everyone should be comfortable with all of their coworkers in a good work environment, and this will never happen if they don't ever get the chance.

6 Never put 1 through 5 ahead of approaching a person with disabilities.

Often in this ultra-politically correct world, the fear of saying something offensive to someone of different backgrounds trumps the desire to approach them.

When trying to decide whether to approach a person with a disability, it is important to realize that people with disabilities are exactly like the rest of us in two ways:

- They are wired to be social creatures in need of human connections; and
- As stated in number two, no two people with disabilities are alike. What is offensive to one person might not be offensive to another.