

WHITEPAPER

# Improving Government DEIA Initiatives with Equal Communication

July 2022

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Why including communication accommodations is imperative and how government agencies benefit from equal and inclusive communication

To comply with the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) and other federal requirements, organizations likely already have initiatives for a diverse and inclusive culture, but those initiatives may not extend to everyone. Providing diverse communication accommodations — from captioning to language interpreting — allows organizations to create a space where everyone is enabled to express themselves equally in a genuine and meaningful way while also meeting legal requirements and making the workforce more productive.

## Biden’s Executive Order Emphasizes Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Accessibility

On June 25, 2021, President Joseph Biden released Executive Order 14035 regarding diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility (DEIA) in the federal workforce. This executive order says the federal government’s recruitment policies should “endeavor to achieve a work force from all segments of society” and that “all employees and applicants for employment should receive fair and equitable treatment in all aspects of personnel management” (The White House, 2021). This order confirmed to the federal government that DEIA measures were among the Biden administration’s top priorities.

## Equal Communication Is Required by Law

Legal requirements to provide inclusive communication accommodations come from:

- **The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA).** The ADA requires that state and local governments “communicate effectively with people who have communication disabilities.” The ADA’s goal is to ensure communication is equally effective for people with and without disabilities, allowing everyone to communicate with, receive information from, and convey information to each other (ADA, 2014).
- **President Biden’s Executive Order 14035.** The federal government is the nation’s largest employer, and in March 2022, 34.1% of employees reported as a person with a disability (Department of Labor, 2022). Due to these high numbers, President Biden’s Accessibility Roadmap (part of the DEIA Executive



Order) requires agencies to “consistently design, construct, develop and maintain facilities, technology, programs and services from the onset so that all people, including people with disabilities, can fully and independently use them” (The White House, 2021).

These requirements mean organizations that serve the public must provide qualified sign language interpreters, assistive technology and other hearing accommodations for most situations.

## The Risks of Not Including Equal Communication

Beyond being out of compliance with federal requirements, an organization faces several social risks when they do not advocate for and provide equal communication in the workplace, and the two most prevalent are a lack of diversity in applications and severe social isolation at work for employees with disabilities.

**Less diversity in applications.** If a resume discloses a disability, it is easier to screen that person out and not give them an opportunity to interview for a job due to discriminatory hiring practices (or out of ignorance on how to work with someone with a disability). Whether intentionally or unintentionally, this happens often and laws that protect against this discrimination are hard to enforce. People with disabilities must work even harder to prove their worth in the application and interview process — and are therefore more likely to be cut out early in the hiring process (Manciagli, 2021).

**Isolation at work.** If people with disabilities do get hired, they may quickly become discouraged if they cannot communicate with their coworkers and become isolated. Furthermore, if coworkers don’t know how to communicate with a person with disabilities, that person will become more and more isolated (Manciagli, 2021).

People who are disabled may choose to remain unemployed after experiencing these cycles many times over the course of their career. To maintain a strong and diverse workforce, it is important to consider both the risks of excluding and the benefits of hiring employees with disabilities.



## Including and Accommodating Employees Offers Far-Reaching Benefits

Every person in the government workforce has the right to the same information. While organizations are required to have inclusive communication accommodations, the myriad benefits beyond the legal requirements include:

- **Higher productivity.** Diverse, equitable, inclusive, and accessible workplaces yield higher-performing organizations. A 2019 analysis of diversity in business found that businesses in the top quartile of diversity outperformed those in the fourth quartile by 36% (Dixon-Fyle, Sundiatu, et al., 2022).
- **Reduced conflict.** Social exchanges (including those aided by inclusive communication accommodations) reduce conflict, improve performance, and deepen empathy. These actions also increase tolerance throughout organizations (Cureton, 2014).
- **Increased satisfaction and engagement.** Work culture affects employee motivation, loyalty and success. Those who feel celebrated (whether literally or figuratively) can better engage in work and feel satisfaction, “resulting in high-functioning organizations with a strong culture of community” (Grastorf, 2018).
- **Enhanced openness.** When organizations foster open, inclusive communication, people feel psychologically safe and are comfortable being and expressing themselves (Edmondson, 2011).
- **Reduced stress.** With increased resources, employees are better able to buffer the onset and impact of job-related burnout, which costs the U.S. more than \$300 billion a year through lowered productivity (The American Institute of Stress, 2022).
- **Better health.** Humans need to feel a sense of belonging. Feeling like you belong in a work group can stave off illness and improve employee overall health (Coissard, F. et al., 2017; Jaremka and Sunami, 2017).

Not only should agencies hire employees who are Deaf and hard-of-hearing because it's the right thing to do (and it's the law), they will also realize many of the benefits listed above.



## Answering Equal Communication Questions

When working with people with disabilities, it is natural to have questions. When working to provide equal communication, ask questions often and regularly to provide the best possible work environment. Consider the following questions to get started.

### What is a reasonable accommodation?

A reasonable accommodation is a modification or adjustment to a job, environment or process so a qualified individual with a disability can have an equal employment opportunity. Job applicants are entitled to reasonable accommodations during the interview and application process, and employees are entitled to equal access to general information, employee benefits and training opportunities available to other employees (National Association of the Deaf, 2022). According to Section 501 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, reasonable accommodations are required to:

- Ensure equal opportunity in the application process.
- Enable an employee to perform an essential function of a job.
- Allow an employee to enjoy equal benefits and privileges of employment (1973).

Some reasonable accommodations include amplified telephones, captioned telephones, assistive listening systems and devices, captioned audiovisual information, permission to bring service animals into the workplace, and more.

### I am working with someone with a disability — what should I keep in mind?

Not all people with disabilities are the same, and each person and situation will require different accommodations and communication. Go into situations like this with good communication skills and be ready to provide accommodation, when necessary, without judgment (National Deaf Center, 2021).

### I am working with someone with hearing loss — how do I interact with them?

When interacting with coworkers with hearing loss, approach conversations with plenty of eye contact. Eye contact is a critical part of communication because many people with hearing loss use lip-reading to understand speech, and it is a good way of connecting with anyone. Speak normally and be patient. While some follow-up questions may seem repetitive, the coworker only wants to make sure they comprehend everything you're saying (Manciagli, 2021).



## What if I need a quick way to communicate with someone with hearing loss and there isn't an interpreter around?

Sometimes accommodations may not be appropriate for a casual, quick conversation. Some "simple fixes" that might be appropriate for conversations that don't immediately need an interpreter include:

- Writing with paper and pen.
- Texting.
- Emails.
- Speech-to-text apps.

Remember, these may not always be appropriate, but they can help you communicate with someone with a disability when necessary (National Association of the Deaf, 2022).

## What resources are available to me to provide equal communication?

You aren't alone in your journey to provide equal communication to employees. Several resources are available to you, including:

- **Technology.** Much technology is available today to help with communication, from real-time captioning software to digital closed captioning. Technology is key in providing equal communication so qualified individuals can do their jobs effectively.
- **Interpreting and captioning services.** Various captioning services, spoken language interpreting, translation and more can help everyone communicate — these services have been proven to improve retention, comprehension, vocabulary and clarification for everyone, whether they have a disability or not.
- **Relay services.** Callers can use a camera and screen on a videophone, computer or other mobile device to communicate with an interpreter that is communicating with others on a standard phone (National Association of the Deaf, 2022).

When looking for resources, look to see what may be provided to you for little or no cost.



## I just hired someone with a disability. How can I maintain equal communication throughout their time here?

When an employee with a disability makes a mistake, it might be easy to attribute those mistakes to their disability. Remember that you need to listen and respond to this employee the same as you would with any other — listen to their side of the story and treat them equally. According to Dana Mancigli, president of Job Search Master Class, “Just as with all workers, clear communication is the key to having successful working relationships” with individuals with disabilities (2020).

## How can I show my commitment to equal communication?

How a company acts, and is viewed, externally when it comes to DEIA can make a difference in who you attract, and which employees stay. For example, 50% of all employees say they would consider switching jobs for a company with a more built out DEIA strategy or greater pay equity (Mancigli, 2021). To show your commitment, you can:

- **Learn.** Learn all you can about employees with disabilities experiences at work. Consider leading a Diversity Training Day, implementing a Universal Design Model, or looking to other companies or sources, such as the National Association of the Deaf.
- **Brand.** Brand yours as a company that cares and implement equal communication with badges, positive reviews, hashtags, etc., to cultivate an inclusive environment.
- **Hire.** Hire and work side by side with employees who are disabled. Regularly practice equal communication.
- **Comment.** Speak out on social justice issues, even when challenging, in an authentic way that is in line with your company values. Almost 90% of employees say that businesses should take a public position on societal issues relevant to their businesses, and 74% say businesses should take a position on issues even when they aren't directly relevant to their businesses (Mancigli, 2021).
- **Engage.** Take part in community engagement and partnerships whenever you can.



All humans value human interaction — so don't be afraid to ask questions and talk openly with employees with disabilities (National Association of the Deaf, 2022). That's an important step when making meaningful change in communication.

## Moving Beyond the Legal Requirements Creates Meaningful Change

Now, with presidential administrative backing, agencies can take part of the important, broad change to act toward equal communication. The numerous benefits surpass simply meeting legal requirements, and it's the right thing to do. Individuals who need accommodations have unique perspectives that will enrich the workplace. What's more, these benefits are within grasp when DEIA initiatives are embraced, even though they might be intimidating at first. Start a journey to have a diverse and inclusive culture that extends to communication for people with disabilities today.





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