



The Human Factor: The Value of Moving Forward Together

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Overview

"If you want to go fast, go alone; if you want to go far, go together." ¹

An exploration of the narrative around what it means to have a disability and the related language choices we make, particularly when it comes to people who have what are conventionally considered disabilities. Are they always disabilities or perhaps just differences and sometimes even a gain?

The impact of categorization

Our brains naturally put things in categories for both social and survival reasons. This innate tendency helps us store information quickly and make sense of our surroundings. If left unchecked, automatic processes of any kind can produce undesired results. It's beneficial to examine these instinctive thought processes to ensure we aren't making an error or overlooking something important.

We learn to categorize ourselves and others in order to know where we belong and even how to spot possible signs of danger in more serious situations. There are many things that can group us: nationality, language, religion, education, career, finances, clothing, health and the list goes on. Keep in mind, categorization affects us all. While our brains are doing this to others, theirs are doing it back to us.

Some groupings we make are comical in retrospect, although uncomfortable at the time. Remember those (dreaded) cliques in junior high and high school? Where do I fit in? Who do I sit with at lunch? Albeit usually painful at times, this was part of the process of forming our identities.

While some of this processing is based on how our brains impulsively operate, what if the distinctions we use to classify ourselves aren't as clear-cut as we think? What if the lines between the groups we put ourselves in are blurrier than they are solid?

If we dropped the word "other" and used "us" instead, what might change? How might we benefit? It's useful not to leave our mental, subconscious processes on autopilot but instead, directly consider how and why we assess the world the way we do, and then be open to expanding our point of view.

As the human race, we ultimately are one community. We have a shared humanity. We all want food, drink, shelter, connection, enjoyment and some level of fulfillment in life. Someone may not look or function like you, but these fundamental desires stay the same. At our core, we are made alike — body, soul and spirit. And every human life, however it looks, functions and expresses itself, has great value and enormous potential.

In the accessibility profession, I have the honor of working with people who are part of one of the most marginalized groups in society,² no thanks to cultural categorizations and the associated stigmas. It's important to note that the disability community is the only minority group that anyone can join at any time.³ In other words, a person might be born with a disability, or it could develop later in life.

People in the United States who have at least one disability make up the largest minority group in the country.⁴ Especially since this group is so big, it makes sense to try to understand it better and re-evaluate any labels and assumptions we correlate with those who are part of it.



My journey in accessibility

This career path started when I was about 19 years old. At that time, one of my jobs was as a personal care attendant for a boy with cerebral palsy. I recall how enjoyable it was to be with him and the enormous trust his mother put in me. He was a happy kid, and we had fun doing regular daily activities together.

Later, I had an administrative role for the Texas Center for Disability Studies⁵ where I worked with people of varying abilities — some walked, some used a wheelchair, one young lady had Down Syndrome and so forth. I learned from each of them about navigating environments that weren't built with them in mind and how to find ways around barriers, both physical and societal. They were expert problem-solvers.

Through my current role in digital accessibility, I've met people of additional diverse abilities and talents, people who are generally viewed as having a disability. In helping teams test their projects with assistive technologies like screen readers, it is exciting when they realize for example, that people who are blind use websites and apps like everyone else (and so much more). It's as if a light bulb turns on, and they become more motivated to ensure their work is accessible.

One of my dearest friends, now passed on, was a man with quadriplegia. I met him at an accessibility conference, where he was teaching, and we eventually became friends. One time, someone commented to me, "He is fortunate to have you as a friend." That surprised me. I thought I was the fortunate one. My friend was well educated, had traveled to over 40 countries and participated in several adventure sports like sky diving, sailing and mountain climbing...all after he became paralyzed. We had lots of interesting things to talk about from his life experiences. I know the comment was meant well, but the feeling I got was a distorted view on people with disabilities.

We're all people. That's the bottom line. We each have skills, likes, dislikes, thoughts, opinions, strengths and weaknesses. Our physical bodies can work differently, but that's an outward matter that can be handled with a little understanding. Sometimes, if not often, our intellectual processing is also different, and that's a beautiful part of diversity — getting the opportunity to see the world from another person's outlook, if you are willing.



A new perspective on disability

When I began studying ASL (American Sign Language) in 2015, I got to see even more perspectives on what it means to be a community and how we connect. The language itself is complex, capable of communicating the deepest of thoughts, just like other languages. Also, sign language is an efficient mode of communicating and unifying to those who use it. As someone who enjoys and studies language, I think a lot about words. Along with their meaning, words carry power and energy. They have an effect. Through life, we've all had experiences with words expressed toward us that made us feel good...or not. We've also communicated things ourselves that we either felt positive about or wished we could take back.

So, this word "disabled," which encompasses over 1 billion people worldwide⁶ including over 70 million US adults⁷, what does it really mean? What is a disability, and why do we call it that? If you think of it as something a person cannot do, well that applies to everyone. We all have things we can and cannot do, even to varying degrees. Some so-called disabilities are apparent, and some are not. Examples of apparent disabilities are an amputation, paralysis, someone using a walking cane or a wheelchair. Non-apparent disabilities are things such as mental health conditions, dyslexia, migraines and fibromyalgia. Typically, the word "disability" is used to reference such health conditions — either physical, cognitive and/or sensory — and tends to imply a restriction.

What if instead of a limitation, we saw a disability as an advantage, an edge, even a hyper-ability?

- Specifically, people who are Deaf or hard-of-hearing typically see a broader range with their eyes⁸ and more quickly. Also, those who are deaf can have enhanced focus on tasks since they aren't distracted or bothered by surrounding noise.
- Then, people with autism frequently excel at recognizing patterns and performing jobs that require attention to detail.
- In customer service roles, people with disabilities tend to show greater empathy and care for solving client issues.
- And if people who use wheelchairs often have increased upper body strength, which can make them especially skilled at security jobs with their strength and the speed of the wheelchairs, is that a disability?

The list goes on, and these aptitudes can also simply be viewed through the lens of matching certain job requirements.⁹

Being inclusive means valuing others, offering a sense of belonging and connection. Accessibility is about fairness and treating others with respect.

The economic case for inclusion

In addition to the social and emotional value, there are economic benefits to inclusivity and accessibility. Designing products, places and services so that the most number of people can participate, use and enjoy them is good for business. With over 1 billion people worldwide having some type of disability, the accessibility community makes up a big section of the economic market, having more than \$6 trillion in spending capacity.¹⁰ Add friends and family to that, and it's even higher. The yearly discretionary spending of people with disabilities in the US is over \$200 billion.¹⁰ Imagine the power of what that can produce for those who care enough to connect with this part of the market, not only in terms of revenue, but in product innovation and quality of life for those involved.

Having a definite commitment to accessibility can show that your company has a true sense of corporate social responsibility, enhancing your brand's reputation. This has the potential to attract and keep customers as well as future business partners and investors.

Within the workplace, when internal systems are accessible, employees can be more productive. And of course, by following accessibility laws, the risk of legal action is reduced. Perhaps the "cherry on top" is that when things are done with accessibility in mind, they usually end up benefiting almost everyone — the "curb cut effect."¹¹ So, accessibility is not just a social imperative, but also a business opportunity. It's all-around the right thing to do.

The importance of respectful language

When it comes to describing people, it's ideal to only mention disability status when necessary or if it adds important information to the communication. Otherwise, a person's name usually suffices. If descriptors are needed, I have found that a reliable route is to start with your best judgment of the most respectful word choices, and whenever appropriate, ask the person involved what their preference is. Many people think the word "handicap" is rude and outdated, but some still think it's an appropriate word choice in certain situations.

There is no one-size-fits-all with adjectives, and there are respected resources like the Disability Language Style Guide¹² that are helpful to reference for selecting the most considerate words, but each person's individual preference always takes priority.

It goes a long way if your heart and mind are open to possibilities and to changing. We are all learning, even those of us who have been on the accessibility path for a while. The suggestion here is not that we become overly sensitive, but that we think twice about the words and descriptors we use, that we consider how we'd personally like to be referenced and viewed and then give that same consideration to others.



Conclusion:

Moving forward together

In a way, people with supposed or even claimed disabilities are not all that different from any other person. Let's question ourselves, our own implicit biases and ask, "Why do I think that? Could there be another reason, another option?" Let's deepen our understanding of what it means to be human, to be a community. Look at each other gently and generously, allowing for all the potential of our amazing abilities. Practice viewing everyone in a capable way. Isn't that how you'd like to be seen? Let's unite by respecting and including each other, and there's a very good chance we'll all go farther and be better for it.



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