



  
**DISABILITY**  
Etiquette Guide

**M**y humanity is bound up in yours, for we can only be human together.  
**ARCHBISHOP DESMOND MPIOLO TUTU**

**THANK YOU TO OUR PUBLICATION SPONSORS**

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“Our vision at Merck is to be the #1 trusted health care partner to all people globally. We view people with disabilities as differently able, and as key customers who have in many cases out of necessity become uniquely adept at navigating the health care system, no matter where they live in the world. We are pleased to contribute to the contents of this guide, and hope it will be utilized to work towards full inclusion of people with disabilities, across industries, our workforce, workplace and marketplace. We look forward to future editions of the guide that will cover a broader range of disabilities, and applaud the approach that Cook Ross adopted to developing this content with partners from across various advocacy organizations for people with different types of conditions. This exemplifies the wishes of the disabled community that anything meant to serve us is, ‘Not about us without us.’”



**DEBORAH DAGIT**  
Chief Diversity Officer  
Merck

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People with disabilities are first and foremost people.

“At AOL, our mission is to ‘connect, inform and entertain our world.’ One of our core value statements is: ‘We are in the business of helping people. Period.’ Our sponsorship of projects such as this Disability Etiquette Guide marry our mission and values and remind all of us of the positive impact education and innovation can have on the lives of people with disabilities and the lives of their family members, friends and professional colleagues. This is a guide for everyone. We are proud to be associated with efforts that enhance people’s skill to relate across ability and the wide range of human strengths and differences. Innovations like Instant Messaging can serve as a reminder to all of us of the positive impact accessible mainstream technologies have on the lives of people with disabilities. Instant messaging revolutionized communication, but more importantly it enabled independent conversation between people who are deaf and their hearing family members and friends anywhere, anytime without the need of assistive technology like a TTY device. Here’s to expanding our collective commitment by continuing to leverage the power of people, innovation and technology to create a more inclusive culture for everyone.”

**Aol.**

**TOM WLODKOWSKI**  
Director of Accessibility  
AOL

“At Booz Allen, we believe in empowering our staff—regardless of background or physical ability—to achieve his or her full potential. With a deep foundation in diversity and inclusion, we know that our people make the difference in our ability to serve clients. To us, diversity means all the ways we are unique. Inclusion is how we value that uniqueness at every level. As one of our Core Values, diversity is reflected in our policies. Our fundamental Equal Employment policy is ‘to identify, attract, retain, and advance the most qualified persons, without regard to their race, color, religion, sex, national origin, age, marital status, sexual orientation, gender identity and expression, disability, veteran’s status, genetic information, or any other status protected by law.’ In addition, we have implemented policies on Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome, Flexible Work Arrangements, Persons with Disabilities, U.S. Domestic Partner Benefits, Sexual Harassment, and Workplace Harassment, among others. It’s important to us that we not only recognize and understand differences, but that we leverage innovation born through difference to bring the very best solutions to our clients. At Booz Allen we hire people based on their skills and we provide the work environment necessary to enable our people to be productive and grow their careers.”

Booz | Allen | Hamilton

**MARK MCLANE**  
Director of Diversity and Inclusion  
Booz Allen Hamilton

# DISABILITY ETIQUETTE GUIDE

## INTRODUCTION

How do you shake hands with someone who doesn’t have hands? Or has a prosthetic hand? Should a team member with a stutter be discouraged from leading verbal client presentations? Is it acceptable to offer to reach a high elevator button for a person using a wheelchair?

We all want to do “the right thing.” We all struggle to treat everyone with dignity, respect, and courtesy. But when it comes to dealing with people with disabilities, we sometimes allow our apprehension about doing “something wrong” to prevent us from authentically and fully engaging with people with disabilities.

“Etiquette” indicates a set of written and unwritten rules that articulate what constitutes socially acceptable behavior in a broad array of circumstances. Breaking these rules can sometimes cause personal and professional embarrassment and discomfort, and has the potential to alienate important clients, customers, and colleagues.

Our concern about doing something accidentally inappropriate can sometimes cause us to behave awkwardly, be tentative, make unintentional mistakes, and cause injury or insult.

This *Disability Etiquette Guide* is intended to not only convey critical information, but also to increase your confidence that you are being courteous and not condescending. Always remember that a person with a disability is a person. He or she is like and unlike anyone else.

Top-performing businesses and organizations know that the demands of global commerce require mature diversity management skills. Customers and co-workers come from a variety of backgrounds, and their customs, thinking, behavior, values, and communication styles vary accordingly. Our cultural understanding and literacy, along with our assumptions about business etiquette, are being challenged by major demographic shifts that bring us face-to-face with new people and unfamiliar ideas. Successfully navigating the ever-evolving workforce and marketplace requires effective and respectful communication between people with different linguistic, cultural, and individual backgrounds.

People with disabilities currently represent the largest minority in the world. Nearly 20 percent of Americans (54 million people) qualify as disabled. Disabilities can occur across the whole life span and vary in duration,



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degree, and location of impact. Because people’s experiences with and attitudes toward their disabilities also range widely, communication and interaction sometimes appear particularly complicated.

In recent decades legal, social, cultural, and economic changes have drawn attention to the reality that disability is often less about physical or mental impairments than it is about how society responds to real or perceived physical, mental, and cognitive differences. As disability becomes a more common factor in the workplace, the need for inclusive approaches to communication and interaction increases.

The *Disability Etiquette Guide* identifies key barriers that, when unknown, may compromise inclusion, trust, and cooperation. Too often we make “automatic” or “snap” decisions about the capacities, abilities, and preferences of others. The guide highlights tools and information for fostering interactions that are comfortable, meaningful, and inclusive. We hope, as a result of reading this guide, that people will begin to ask more questions, gather more information, and relate to each other in a more honest fashion. We also believe this guide will support all readers in questioning their assumptions and judgments about all people—not just people with disabilities.

**It is very important to note that this guide provides information about broad-based disability cultural frameworks and archetypes.**

People with disabilities are first and foremost people. These categories are intended to dispel common misconceptions, foster greater understanding, and enhance access between people. Archetypes are deeply imprinted (learned or inherited) unconscious ideas, patterns of thought, beliefs, or behaviors that broadly apply to a large group of people. They are not assumed to apply to each individual group member.

**Remember that cultural patterns are *not* universal.** We all must be vigilant to avoid generalizations and stereotypes about groups of people. Variation within and among cultures and communities always exists. In addition to these variations, millions of people in our multicultural world identify with multiple identities. It is important to maintain respect for the infinite complexity of each unique human being, which always defies simple categorization.

**NOTE:** *In establishing the categories for this guide, we have used a combination of those established by the 2007 U.S. Disability Status Report, the World Health Organization, and common American disability terms. We do so for ease of navigation, and acknowledge that these may be controversial to some readers.*

#### MULTIPLE DEFINITIONS OF DISABILITY

Since there are so many definitions of disability (including those covered by the Americans with Disabilities Act), we want to thoroughly discuss them in the guide’s first section. Proper disability etiquette is not possible without a good understanding all of the various meanings of disability.

**Medical model.** In Western biomedicine, disability generally refers to physical and mental impairments that limit the typical ways and range of a person’s ability to perform activities. This often is referred to as a



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