



UP Skills for Work Facilitator Guide: Facilitators supporting people with diverse abilities

UP Skills for Work is a program that helps build skills for learning, work, and life.

This introductory guide supports facilitators who are using *UP Skills for Work* resources with **people with diverse abilities** and who don't themselves have lived experience as a person with diverse abilities. People with diverse abilities include learners who have a disability or disabilities that include learning challenges as part of their experience. This guide can be used in addition to the free [online training](#) available for *UP Skills for Work* facilitators.

As a facilitator, it's important to understand the perspectives and experiences that adults bring to the learning environment. When you take the time to listen to and get to know learners, you gain a deeper understanding of what they want and need to succeed. As you read through this guide, take time to identify what your next steps for learning will be.

In this guide, you'll find information about:

- creating an inclusive learning environment
- common barriers people with diverse abilities encounter in the workplace
- what to do if you make a mistake as a facilitator
- resources that can help your learners overcome barriers

Creating an inclusive learning environment

An inclusive learning environment encourages participation and collaboration. Learners are more likely to participate when they feel respected. Take time to talk as a group about what a safer space feels like to help foster a feeling of inclusion.

Here are some things to consider when using *UP Skills for Work* resources.

Use trauma-informed instructional practices

Using a trauma-informed approach to facilitation is important, particularly when you are unsure about your learners' lived experiences. Your facilitation approach should be based on choice, collaboration, connection, strengths-based learning, and skill-building.

- **Build a trusting and collaborative learning environment.** Consider starting the workshop with opportunities for learners to talk about themselves and learn about each other. Make it clear that learners can participate as they feel comfortable to do so. The discussion-based framework used in the *UP Skills for Work* workbooks supports this approach by using open-ended questions that allow learners to guide the discussions. These questions offer plenty of opportunities for active participation, but learners aren't forced to participate or share.
- **Be an active listener.** When you are an active listener, you respect other people's boundaries and preferences. Each learner has a unique lived experience. If learners feel comfortable sharing, it's important to take the time to listen respectfully and not offer opinions or judgement about their experiences. This will also help you identify what each learner needs to succeed. Make sure you thank learners if they choose to share.
- **Support a strength-based approach to learning.** Allow learners to focus on what they excel at. Each *UP Skills for Work* workbook includes opportunities for learners to reflect on and discuss their experiences and consider their next steps for learning.

- **Skip, adapt, or extend activities and discussions when appropriate.** Use the *UP Skills for Work* resources in ways that work best for your learners. When possible, provide opportunities for learners to guide their own learning. Keep in mind that people with diverse abilities will not automatically need extra assistance or extra time. Offer help and support when it's requested. See the *UP Skills for Work* facilitator [online training](#) or [contact a Community Coordinator](#) for more information about adapting materials.

Use inclusive language

The discussion-based framework in *UP Skills for Work* resources provides starting points for meaningful discussion about skills development. When facilitating discussions, be mindful of using inclusive language.

- **Avoid using expressions that are considered offensive or ableist.** **Ableist** expressions can say or imply that people with diverse abilities are less worthy of respect or less able to contribute than others. Some examples include “fall on deaf ears,” “be blind to that,” or “that’s crazy.” Refrain from using sarcasm or figures of speech without clarifying your meaning.
- **Remember that some forms of non-verbal communication are not universal.** For example, some learners may not be comfortable making eye contact.
- **Ask how people prefer to be referred to on an individual basis.** If people wish to talk about their diverse abilities, listen to how they refer to themselves. Use the language they use or ask if you're unsure. For example, one learner might refer to themselves as an autistic person and another might refer to themselves as a person with autism.

Offer accommodations

An **accommodation** is something that supports a person to do their job or live their life more easily. Openly discussing potential accommodations helps normalize the idea that everyone deserves an inclusive environment and that accessibility benefits everyone. No learner should ever be forced to disclose their disability, but they should get the chance to do so if they wish, especially if it helps identify a necessary accommodation. Many individuals will know what accommodations work best for them. If possible, provide opportunities for learners to share what they need before the workshop begins.

Learn about invisible disabilities

It's important to recognize that some people with diverse abilities may have **invisible disabilities**, or disabilities that are not immediately apparent to others. The more you know about invisible disabilities, the more you will be able to help learners who have these disabilities succeed. Remember that some learners may have invisible and visible disabilities, and often more than one. It's possible a learner may choose to disclose only what is visible. It's up to the individual what they wish to disclose and when.

Get to know your learners

One aspect of getting to know your learners is learning about their lived experiences. While everyone's lived experience is different, there are some common barriers people with diverse abilities frequently encounter in the workplace. Barriers in the workplace can be due to multiple factors. Try to take the time to get to know the learners you're working with and to understand the specific barriers they've encountered.

Common barriers in the workplace

Some examples of barriers are listed below though they may not all be relevant to learners. Barriers in the workplace can be due to multiple overlapping factors so it's important to take the time to listen and learn from the learners you're working with.

Lack of representation

When people with diverse abilities don't see other people with diverse abilities in their workplace, especially in leadership roles, it can lead to a feeling of isolation. This lack of representation can also lead to the perception that there are limited opportunities for professional growth within the workplace. As a result, some people with diverse abilities may feel like they need to hide their disability or feel burdened as a lone advocate for an equitable workplace.

Discrimination

Many people with diverse abilities encounter ableism in the workplace. Examples of ableism include ideas, stereotypes, attitudes, or practices that say or imply people with diverse abilities are less worthy of respect. Ableism can be explicit and overt, or implicit and subtle.

Some workplaces have ableist policies. An ableist policy is one that doesn't comply with disability rights laws or that prevents the implementation of reasonable accommodations for workers.

Ableism often occurs in the form of **microaggressions**. Microaggressions are everyday remarks or actions that imply negative associations and insults toward an individual or group. Microaggressions can include using harmful terminology, being condescending towards someone, or making inappropriate jokes. A co-worker or supervisor may say or do something casually, with no real intent to inflict harm. But the remarks or actions can have long-lasting effects. Those impacted by microaggressions can feel unwelcome and emotionally exhausted. Many workplaces have policies in place to prevent and address bullying, but microaggressions might not obviously break any official rules. This makes addressing microaggressions in the workplace difficult.

Accessibility

Many employees require or would benefit from the use of accessibility tools and accessible policies. For example, remote work options, flexible schedules, and technology such as screen readers can benefit many employees. Not all workplaces reliably provide options for their employees. Some employers may be open to providing accommodations but may not know or understand what is needed unless the individual brings it to their attention.

Hiring practices

Standardized hiring practices at many organizations can exclude people with diverse abilities. For example, the traditional interview process doesn't always allow for alternative communication styles. It can also perpetuate biases surrounding how a person is expected to present themselves in an interview.

What to do if you make a mistake

As a facilitator, you'll likely make mistakes from time to time. Perhaps you accidentally use an outdated or ableist term in casual conversation or maybe you use an identifying term that isn't what someone prefers to use. Think about your mistakes as an opportunity to learn and grow.

Decide if you should address the mistake in front of the group or in private on a case-by-case basis. If the mistake occurs in front of the group, you may wish to openly acknowledge the error and take responsibility in front of the group. In some situations, it may be better to acknowledge your mistake and apologize privately and directly to the person involved to avoid embarrassing them.

Here are some suggestions for what to do if you make a mistake.

- **Take responsibility.** An important first step when you make a mistake is to acknowledge it. Don't be defensive. Explain that you understand why what you did or said is a problem. Avoid making excuses for why you made the mistake.
- **Apologize.** Be sincere and specific about what you did wrong, but don't over-apologize. Respectfully correct yourself or if you don't know the proper correction, thoughtfully and politely ask for clarification.
- **Learn from the mistake.** Every mistake is an opportunity to learn. Take time to reflect on the mistake you've made and what caused it. This will help you avoid making the same mistake in the future.

Other resources

When you take the time to understand your learners and their unique needs and experiences, you have a better understanding of how to support their growth by choosing relevant instructional approaches and resources. Visit upskillsforwork.ca for more information about resources in the *UP Skills for Work* program that you can use with your learners to support the development of key workplace and life skills.

Extension activities

UP Skills for Work offers a series of activities that expand on content in the core workbooks. Examples of activity topics that may be relevant to your learners include setting boundaries, understanding your rights at work, and dealing with microaggressions. Visit upskillsforwork.ca to download activities.

UP Skills for Work for People with Diverse Abilities

Two workbooks in the *UP Skills for Work* program have been written specifically for people with diverse abilities: [*Communication: Understanding social cues*](#) and [*Adaptability: Self-regulation*](#).

Glossary of terms

Ableism

A belief system that views people with disabilities as being less worthy of respect and consideration, less able to contribute to and participate in society, or of less inherent value than others

Accommodation

Something that supports a person to do something or live their life. A workplace accommodation is something that supports a person to do their job.

Invisible disability

A disability that is not immediately apparent to others

Microaggressions

Remarks or actions that imply negative associations and insults toward an individual or group

People with diverse abilities

People with a disability or disabilities that include learning challenges as part of their experience

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