

CIPR

DIVERSITY
& INCLUSION
NETWORK

Disability allyship and advocacy

A guide from the CIPR's
Diversity and Inclusion Network



Introduction

For most PR and communication organisations and teams, improving diversity, both internally and in client work, is deemed a priority but often falls down the list as other daily pressures take hold. This can result in mounting pressure and a feeling of being stuck when it comes to Equity, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI), leaving organisations unsure where to start. This series of guides from the CIPR is a toolkit to inspire action and progress wherever you are in your EDI journey. Each guide focuses on a different area of inclusive communications and together they form a versatile and practical resource suitable for people at any level within an organisation.

These guides align with and are written from the perspective of the Social Model of Disability, a model designed and created by and for disabled people. The Social Model takes the view that people are disabled by barriers in society, not by their impairment or disability. Further reading on the Social Model can be found on the [Scope website](#).

Each guide is worth 5 CPD points.

How to use this guide

Allyship and advocacy are critical parts of making public relations an inclusive and representative industry. In relation to disability, allyship and advocacy continue to evolve, both in terms of what they mean and the actions associated with them. This guide should be used as a springboard to continuous learning. Additional resources and links are provided at the end of the guide to further develop your knowledge.

You can use this guide:

- + as an onboarding tool for new employees
- + as a foundation to build inclusive processes and systems
- + as part of an exit interview
- + as a guide to make sure that your organisation's inclusion work aligns with the core values of EDI within the CIPR.

Understanding allyship and advocacy

Understanding allyship and advocacy

We have included both allyship and advocacy in this guide because, although they are increasingly used hand-in-hand, they are different in terms of definition, action, and impact. It is useful to learn these differences in order to better understand our own actions and behaviours. Like many other aspects of EDI within public relations, both terms have become popular in our industry discourse, yet large gaps exist between our words and tangible change. In this guide we have illustrated this with examples of allyship and advocacy with the aim of helping practitioners close this gap.

Defining ally/allyship

The terms 'ally' or 'allyship' have become commonplace and popular words in EDI conversations. In 2021 it was Dictionary.com's word of the year. However, in the context of wider social justice movements, the idea of being an ally and allyship has a rich past which spans many movements and groups.

Definitions of different complexity and depth exist but allyship can be summarised as someone who supports, but is outside of, a particular minoritised or oppressed group. For example, in the case of disability, an ally is someone who supports our right to access.

- + Allyship can be described as support with no action.

Defining advocate/advocacy

An advocate is the next stop along the path from an ally. An advocate fights alongside minoritised and oppressed groups to enact change. They can be someone who sits outside the particular minoritised or oppressed group for which they want to advocate, they may also be part of another minoritised group and wish to support a similarly minoritised group.

Another way of explaining advocacy is action in service of a cause to bring about change. An example of disability advocacy is getting a venue to add a ramp, accessible seating and an induction loop.

- + Advocacy is support alongside action.

Informed allyship and advocacy

However, both allyship and advocacy must be informed by and happen alongside the groups we are trying to support. In the case of disability, very often we see disabled people left out of conversations and actions, spoken over instead of listened to, and their views and opinions diminished because ableism is so pervasive in society. This has led disabled people (and those who belong to other and multiple marginalised groups) to be wary of the ally and advocacy labels, especially when they are self-titled.

Introducing accomplices

An increasingly common term is 'accomplice'. It is often used in social justice movements and, for some, has become a preferred term over both ally and advocate. This is because the focus of being an accomplice is one of dismantling systems irrespective of personal cost. For example, a loss of privilege, benefit, or position which your place in society affords you. In this [video on allyship 101](#) speaker Nikkita Oliver, between 2:17 and 3:18, explains accomplices and gives a good personal example.

Another example may be joining a walk out of employment due to disability discrimination of a colleague. Walking out in solidarity with your colleague to force action or change may put your own job at risk of disciplinary action, but as an accomplice to disabled people this may be necessary action to force change.

Using these terms

Many people self-title themselves as allies and advocates. Whilst there is nothing inherently wrong with this, it is important to ask ourselves if we are using these terms accurately, whether they are reflective of the work we are doing, and whether our use of them is really serving the communities we claim to be advocating for.

Consider the following before claiming status as an ally, advocate or accomplice:

- ⊕ Am I speaking *with* the community or *over* the community?
- ⊕ Is my support conditional?
- ⊕ Is my allyship or advocacy aligned with the wider goals of the community I want to support?
- ⊕ Am I uncomfortable or unwilling to put myself, my profile or position at risk to stand with a community?



Advocacy, allyship and accomplices in PR

Advocacy, allyship and accomplices in PR

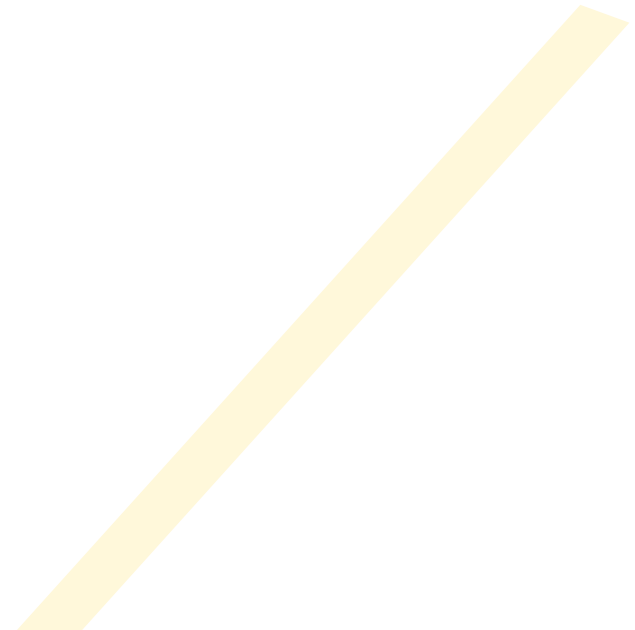
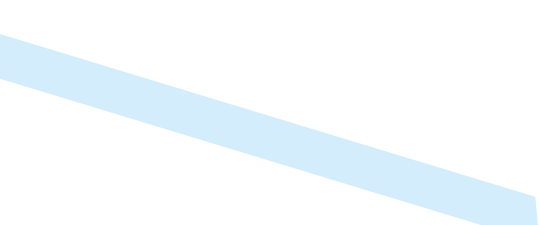
In this guide, we tried to include first-hand accounts and examples from disabled people currently working in PR and comms to illustrate the reality faced by PR professionals who are neurodivergent, disabled, and chronically ill and to show how important advocates and accomplices are to dismantling the many barriers which still exist in our industry.

Similarly, we put out multiple calls for examples of allyship and advocacy of disability in PR to showcase positive examples from which others could learn.

However, we think it is important to be honest and say that we struggled to get either for this guide. Whilst some people were willing to share their experiences privately, very few felt comfortable being quoted or having their experiences shared publicly, even anonymously, due to the risk of negative repercussions.

There was also very little response to our calls for leaders, teams, and agencies to share their positive allyship work around disability.

Whilst anecdotal, our challenges with this speak to wider problems within our industry. The number of disabled people in PR remains low, multiple barriers exist to entry, progression, and success, and ableism is pervasive and actively impacting the lives of disabled, neurodivergent, and chronically ill PR practitioners. Our industry is one struggling to address disability inclusion and support, and, by extension, the issue of inclusion remains problematic within the profession.



Changing the outlook


The page features three prominent diagonal bars: a blue bar in the top right, a black bar in the middle right, and a grey bar in the bottom left. The main title 'Changing the outlook' is positioned in the upper left quadrant.

Changing the outlook

The outlook is not all negative, however. It means that this guide, in addition to the others in the [CIPR Skills Guide series](#), is a vital learning resource to give people suggestions, ideas, and ways forward to becoming allies, advocates and accomplices. The following sections provide ways for those at any level in a PR organisation to be advocates and accomplices.

Advocacy and PR leadership

As a leader of a PR team or organisation there are many ways to support disabled people and be an ally, advocate or accomplice.

- + Assume the presence of disability in your organisation. Because disability visibility is low in PR, we too often assume that it is not there at all unless we are explicitly aware of it. But statistics from the [Invisible Disabilities in Education and Employment Research Briefing in 2023](#) indicate that 70-80% of disabilities are non-visible. It is estimated that there are around 16m people in the UK with a disability, at the lower end of the percentage above, that's approximately 11.2m people with non-visible disabilities. If we break that down further and consider the working age population with a disability, this figure is estimated to be 10.21m people. That's 7.1m people of working age with a non-visible disability or long-term health condition.
 - + Remember that training is a precursor to action. Any disability inclusion or EDI training undertaken by you and your team is your starting point. Create an action plan for you and your team following any EDI training - set three, six, and 12 month goals for implementing what you learn.
 - + Work on unlearning your own biases and ableism through education and critical thinking, both inside and outside your organisation. Whilst we talk about inclusion in professional contexts, we are all human. That means we come into our professional lives with different personal biases which we need to work through independently.
 - + Implement a disability audit. Go through your processes from job postings to how you hold interviews, from where you hold all-team meetings to where your social events take place. Establish where disabled people are likely to be excluded due to a lack of physical or digital accessibility and close the gap.
- 

Advocacy and PR teams

Supporting colleagues with disabilities and advocating for both their inclusion and their rights to a safe and supportive working environment can take many forms.

- + Believe your disabled colleagues. Believe them if they say they feel excluded and believe them if they disclose that they're being discriminated against.
- + Respect disabled colleagues' right to privacy about their health and disabilities and remember that they are experts in their own health.
- + If you see something that could be improved to make your team or workplace more inclusive, or see something that is obviously exclusionary, don't wait or assume a disabled colleague will address it. Raise it as a suggestion with your team or management.
- + Be conscious of what content you share with or tag colleagues in - a lot of disability led stories are what's termed 'inspiration porn', or feature disability in a negative light. Just because disability is in the news it doesn't automatically mean a disabled person will want to read it.
- + Consider your team or organisation's support of awareness days and months like Disability History Month or Global Accessibility Awareness Day (GLADD). Is it performative, or is your team committing to improving opportunities and inclusion of disabled people within your organisation? Additionally, is the organisation of, or participation in such events, being left to disabled colleagues?

Advocacy and the PR industry

Collectively, we can make significant progress in disability inclusion in our industry and advocate for better inclusion and representation of disabled people. Community is an important aspect of any social justice movement and there are different ways advocacy within the PR sector can work.

- + Advocate for accessibility as standard. Often, requests or enquiries about accessibility come from those who need accommodations. This means that they remain exceptions, rather than the rule.
- + Collective advocacy can influence support for a cause. In the instance of disability, the more people who advocate for better disability inclusion, the higher the level of importance this is given at a system or organisational level.
- + Collective advocacy can help more disabled people working in PR to access resources and support. The more education and awareness that exists about disability, neurodivergence, and chronic illness the more likely it is that access to support will increase, from signposting to schemes like Access to Work, to setting up or connecting people with employee or community disability groups or networks.

Advocacy and disclosure of disability in the workplace

Disclosure of disability is often a personal choice influenced by many factors. Being an active advocate for disabled people can positively impact this experience.

This can look like:

- + Having a clear and easily accessible disclosure policy.
- + Including specific disability policy information as standard in your application/onboarding process (i.e. disability leave, cultural inclusion, accommodations).
- + Talking openly about steps your organisation is taking to improve disability inclusion.
- + Meaningful participation in disability related events like Disability Pride Month, Global Accessibility Awareness Day or Disability History Month.

It is important to remember that whilst, as employers, you may not perceive any barriers to disclosure, that may not be the perception of disabled people looking at your organisation from the outside.



Creating an equitable future in PR



Creating an equitable future in PR

Thanks for reading this guide looking at allyship and advocacy, brought to you by the CIPR D&I Network.

In this era of increasing EDI awareness, accessibility should be at the front of every communicator's agenda but can often be forgotten. It is vital that we work to ensure equitable access and understanding for all our audiences, allowing for the continuum of human ability and experience. These needs vary but often relate to living with a disability. Disability is still often overlooked and has not received the focus that some other areas of D&I have. Many fixed and outdated views of disability remain, and we must remember many disabilities are hidden including mental health challenges (the main cause of disability globally), and that with age, disability becomes more prevalent. Although we tend to think 'it won't happen to us', one in four 20-year-olds will have a disability before they retire. The reality is that many of us will find ourselves living with a disability at some point in our lives and may face accessibility challenges in the future.

Alongside our role as PR Professionals, we must also look to our own industry and how we can best create fairer workplaces that are welcoming, flexible, and enable people living with disabilities, impairments, or other accessibility barriers, to work, progress, and succeed. This series of guides will address accessibility from a range of perspectives including a review of language – a powerful tool that can empower, include, and acknowledge – as well as events and advocacy. The guides are practical as well as thought provoking and aim to support skills development: more critical than ever as initiatives addressing a lack of diversity increase and society recognises the need for change. We hope they support better communications, engagement, and action for better accessibility.

I would like to say a big thank you to Sara Thornhurst and Vickie Cox for all their hard work on the guides which has made this initiative possible, and to the rest of the CIPR D&I Network for their continuing focus on making our profession a more inclusive community.

Avril Lee
Chair of the CIPR Diversity and Inclusion Network

Resources

Scope for business – [How to be a disability ally](#)

World Institute on Disability – [How to be a good ally to disabled people](#)

ALSO – [8 ways to advocate for people with disabilities](#)

Always looking up podcast – [Being an accomplice versus being an ally](#)

TEDx Talk – [Simple steps to better disabled allyship](#)

A membership organisation for inclusive employers – [Inclusive Employers](#)

Purple Goat – [Exploring intersectionality in disability](#)

Disability Rights UK – [Inclusion and Intersectionality: An online resource to support Disabled People's Organisations \(DPOs\)](#)

Chartered Institute of Public Relations

+44 (0)20 7631 6900

@CIPR_Global

cipr.co.uk



31 July 2024