

## Member's Quarterly

Summer 2020 Edition

### Feature

# Moving beyond the "Dear Sirs"— It's Your Obligation

*Incorporate inclusive language into workplace vernacular*

**E**xpressions such as "Dear Sirs" or "Chairman" are outdated, exclusive and should not be used in today's workplace.

Employers are required to provide employees with a workplace that is free from harassment and discrimination. Legislation such as the *Human Rights Code* and the *Occupational Health and Safety Act* as amended by Bill 168 is designed to ensure that employers take these responsibilities seriously.

Language in the workplace continues to evolve as employers better understand their legal obligations and as workplaces become more diverse.

Not only is language changing, but how an employer communicates with its diverse workforce is evolving. This includes verbal and written communications, the breadth of which is significant and can include: job advertisements, communications to employees, images on company intranets and websites, meetings, emails, brochures and publications.

Some Canadian public sector employees have published guidelines and handbooks to help employees to communicate in a more inclusive manner. They point out that ideas and practices based upon the norms of the dominant culture can result in experiences of exclusion and discrimination for employees from diverse backgrounds. Inclusive communication, by contrast, recognizes diversity.

Here are some important points to consider:

### Apply gender neutral language

Back in the day, collective agreements only referred to men. In the 1990s, there was a trend to include a clause stating that the reference to "males" and "men" also referred to "females" and "women".

Today, we go beyond that and should remember to refer to the position and not the gender. The point is to not re-gender, but to de-gender. Some examples include:

- "foreperson" rather than "foreman"
- "the best person for the job" rather than "manning the desk"
- "workforce" or "staff" rather than "manpower"
- "chair" or "chairperson" rather than "chairman"
- "server" instead of "waitress" or "waiter"
- "artificial" or "manufactured" rather than "manmade"

### Don't assume sexuality

Don't assume the sexuality of your employees. The law in this area is growing rapidly. In 2012, "gender identity" and "gender expression" were added as prohibited grounds to the *Human Rights Code*. A couple of years ago, employees may not have known the meaning of "gender fluid", "cisgender", "trans" or what the letters in the LGBTQ+ spectrum stood for, but today these words are part of our workplace vernacular.



**Alison Renton**  
LL.B  
Lawyer  
Bernardi Human  
Resource Law LLP

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Some tips:

- Refer to "spouses" or "partners" rather than "husband and wife" or "boyfriend and girlfriend"
- Considering having employees identify their preferred pronouns (he/him, she/her, they/them) in their email signature line

### Personal identifications

Prior to last year's federal election, the media reported that Jagmeet Singh, the leader of the federal NDPs, was called "Jimmie" while growing up because it was easier to pronounce and sounded "less weird".

Being inclusive in the workplace requires that all employees correctly identify one another without resorting to nicknames, shortening or "anglicizing" names. It is important not to have a surprised reaction to a name that is diverse. Practice, practice, practice saying an employee's name to make sure it's pronounced correctly.

When referring to an employee's racial, religious or ethno-cultural group, remember the principle that it's the person before the country, location or creed. Therefore, it's "person from Pakistan" rather than "Pakistani", or "person from the Jewish community" rather than "Jew" or "Jewish person".

### Abilities/Disabilities

There has been a significant transformation in the language that is used to address employees with disabilities. Instead of using negative or value-laden terms that emphasize the severity of the disability, such as "poor" or "victim", there is a focus on the person rather than the disability. Accordingly, it is "a person who has schizophrenia" rather than "the schizophrenic", "employee with a hearing impairment" rather than "deaf" or "an employee with a disability" rather than "handicapped employee" or "disabled employee".

Similarly, when referring to employees who require supportive devices, use objective descriptors such as "a person who uses a wheelchair" rather than "wheelchair bound".

### Visual Representation

There is immediate visual response when seeing an organization's communications. About 10 years ago, a prominent legal magazine was criticized for only putting white men on its covers rather than reflecting the diversity of licensees.

When preparing communications, recognize the diversity of your workplace and be mindful of portraying the following:

- males, females, trans, gender fluid
- person using mobility devices
- different ages
- different cultural backgrounds
- different colours
- same gendered couples
- people with different physical, intellectual and linguistic abilities

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A final consideration is whether employees presented in pictorial materials are shown in different and non-traditional occupations and different levels of authority.

### Take away

Using inclusive language in the workplace is not hard, but it takes mindfulness, awareness and practice to choose communications that are inclusive. Let's work on inclusive language and make sure the "Dear Sirs" remains a greeting of the past.

*Alison Renton is a Lawyer and Human Resource Advisor with Bernardi Human Resource Law LLP and can be reached via email at [arenton@hrlawyers.ca](mailto:arenton@hrlawyers.ca).*