INCLUSIVE

RECRUITMENT

TOOLKIT

Department for Education | NORTH EAST Chamber of Commerce | TALENTHEADS

FOREW0RD

In today's rapidly evolving workplace, effective communication skills are a cornerstone of success. However, despite their critical importance, many employers continue to report significant gaps in these essential skills.

In the North East, a striking 95% of employers have identified weaknesses in communication among their teams, citing key challenges such as professional client communication, oracy (speaking skills), active listening, verbal telephone communication, and body language.
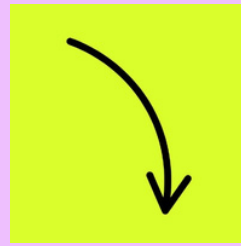
These gaps not only affect internal operations but also have wider implications for customer relations, team collaboration, and overall business performance.

Addressing these communication challenges calls for a fresh approach to recruitment - one that prioritises competence, fosters inclusivity, and actively reduces bias.

The traditional recruitment process, often focused more on qualifications and less on communication abilities, may inadvertently overlook essential traits like oracy or active listening, which are critical for thriving in today's workplace.

95% of employers in the North East report weaknesses in communication skills

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INTRODUCTION

This toolkit explores how we can re-design recruitment processes to focus more on evaluating skills - especially communication - while ensuring that inclusivity is at the heart of our hiring practices.

We promote a fairer recruitment process that values competence over bias, reduces barriers for candidates, and helps build diverse, confident teams.

By eliminating gendered or biased language and ensuring that hiring decisions are based on merit and competence, we can foster a more equitable and productive workforce.

Furthermore, by addressing the ways in which communication skills can be assessed, we not only improve recruitment outcomes but also enhance candidate confidence, which can ultimately increase application rates and contribute to a more vibrant talent pool.

In this toolkit, we will explore practical steps you can take to:

Design an inclusive recruitment process to widen your talent pool based on skills and capabilities

Build a competency based framework

Reduce bias in hiring decisions

Eliminate gendered or biased language in job descriptions and adverts to increase application rates and candidate confidence

Enhance candidate confidence through a transparent and supportive application process based on effective communication skills

INTRODUCTION TO COMMUNICATION SKILLS

Verbal Communication

There are two types of verbal communication, written and oral. Examples include having a conversation or writing a job description.

Active Listening

Listening to other people with complete concentration, giving full attention to their thoughts and feelings.

Non-verbal Communication

Expressing your feelings without using words such as body language, eye contact and facial expressions.
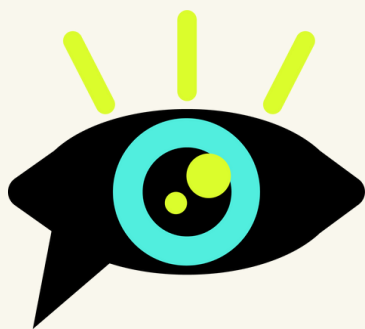
Visual Communication

Sharing thoughts and expressing feelings such as images in blogs, candidate packs, job advert graphics, videos and illustrations.
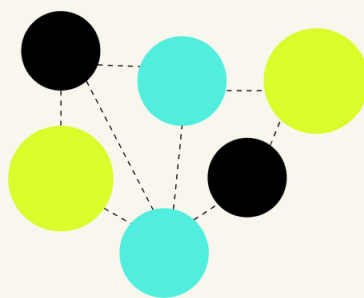
Mass Communication

Sharing information or a message to a larger audience and the ability to communicate effectively to a range of viewers.

Presentation Skills

A set of abilities which are essential to effectively communicate and interact with people and audiences.

EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION SKILLS FOR EMPLOYERS

As employers, how we communicate determines who we attract and how they engage with us.

To connect with top talent, especially in today's diverse workforce, we need communication that's clear, inclusive, and rooted in fairness.

Here's how we apply this across key areas:

Be clear: job descriptions and adverts
(Written and oral communication)
- Minimise the use of jargon. Use plain, inclusive language everyone understands.
- Focus on skills and behaviours, not just qualifications.
- Leave behind biased words.
- Show your commitment to diversity: flexible work, accommodations, inclusive culture.

Bias-free adverts attract up to 42% more diverse applicants.

Listen up: interviews and candidate conversations
(Active listening)
- Really hear what candidates are saying - don't fill in the gaps with assumptions.
- Ask structured, competency-based questions to level the playing field.
- Be patient - not everyone communicates the same way.

Active listening builds trust and uncovers real potential.

EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION SKILLS FOR EMPLOYERS

Read the room: emotional awareness
(Non-verbal and empathetic communication)

- Be mindful of nerves, different communication styles, or cultural cues.
- Offer flexibility in how people engage (e.g., interview format, prep time).
- Lead with empathy - especially in high-stakes conversations.

Small shifts in tone and body language make a big impact.

Build real connections: day-to-day communication
(All communication skills)

- Develop a culture of respect, listening, and openness.
- Communicate expectations clearly, especially in onboarding.
- Regularly check your communication norms - what works for one person may exclude another.

Inclusive communication = better teamwork, trust, and retention.

Tailor the message: recruitment campaigns
(Mass communication)

- Speak your audience's language - and meet them where they are.
- Share stories that show your values in action.
- Make sure all content is accessible and representative.

Inclusive branding = broader reach, stronger talent connection.

Clear, inclusive, and competency-focused communication doesn't just improve hiring - it strengthens your whole culture. Every message is a chance to attract, include, and empower people.

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COMMUNICATION ASKS FOR FIRST TIME JOB SEEKERS

First-time job seekers may include:
- Young people entering the workforce after education.
- Career changers without formal job experience.
- Refugees or migrants new to the local labour market.

They may not have:
- Familiarity with professional norms.
- Confidence in their skills.
- Knowledge of how applying for a job works.
- Strong written/spoken communication skills in the required language.

Normalise less experience:
Many first-timers feel they're being judged for not having work experience.

Reassure them:
- "We're looking for people who are motivated and ready to learn."
- "Tell us about things you've done in school, at home, or in your community."

Inclusive example:

"We're looking for someone who enjoys working with others and is willing to learn on the job. Training will be provided."

COMMUNICATION ASKS FOR FIRST TIME JOB SEEKERS - EXAMPLES

Typical wording which is less inclusive:
"We're looking for experienced candidates who thrive in fast-paced environments. Submit your tailored CV and cover letter via our online portal."

Inclusive wording for first-time job seekers:
"We're hiring friendly, reliable people who are ready to learn. You don't need work experience - just enthusiasm and a willingness to try new things.
To apply: Send us a short message or CV telling us:
- A bit about yourself.
- What you're interested in.
- Something you've done that you're proud of."

Skill You're Assessing	Inclusive Question Prompts
Motivation & interest	"What made you want to apply for this role?"
Reliability	"Can you tell me about a time you kept going even when something was hard?"
Teamwork	"Tell me about a time you worked with others on something"
Problem-solving	"Provide an example of when you have found a way to make something easier"
Communication	"Can you tell me about a time you explained something to someone?"
Learning attitude	"What's something new you've learned recently?"

COMMUNICATION ASKS FOR THOSE RETURNING TO WORK

People returning to work may have taken time out for a variety of reasons.

This may include -
- Parenting.
- Caring responsibilities.
- Health recovery.
- Redundancy.
- Education, or personal development.

They often bring valuable life experience, maturity, and transferable skills, however individuals may face:
- Reduced confidence.
- Concerns about outdated skills.
- Anxiety about being judged for employment gaps.
- Lack of familiarity with current recruitment processes.

People returning to work may underestimate the value of their experience. It is therefore critical to communicate clearly the interview process and the skills being assessed.

You're often looking for:
- Motivation to return to work.
- Transferable skills from unpaid or informal roles.
- Adaptability and openness to learning.
- Reliability and communication skills.
- Previous experience (even if not recent).

Inclusive example:

"In this interview, we'd love to hear about your previous work, as well as anything you've done more recently - whether that's volunteering, supporting others, or managing things at home."

COMMUNICATION ASKS FOR THOSE RETURNING TO WORK - EXAMPLES

Typical wording which is less inclusive:
"We're looking for someone with a strong career track record in..."

Inclusive wording for those returning to work:
"We value all kinds of life experience - whether gained in paid work, volunteering, or personal projects."
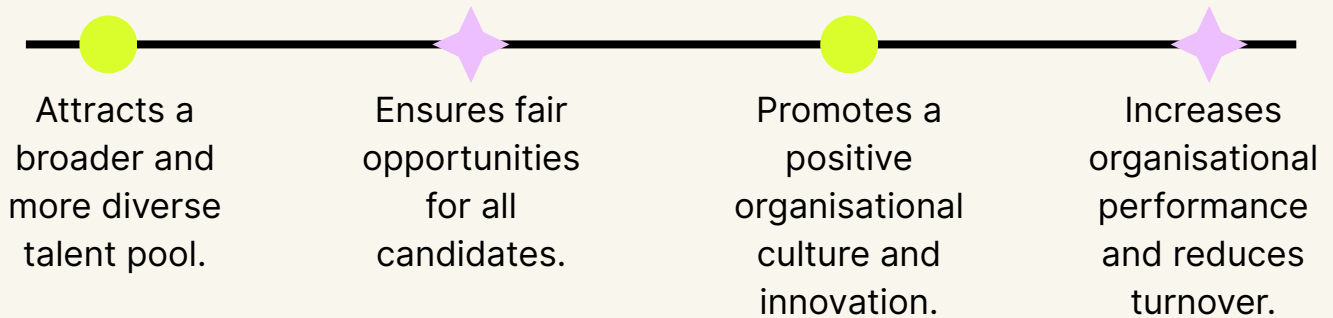
This broadens the definition of what counts as relevant experience, making it more welcoming to those who've built skills outside of formal employment.

Typically Asked Question	Inclusive Question Prompts
"What relevant experience do you have for this role?"	"Which of your skills do you think would be most useful in this role?"
"Can you explain the gap in your CV?"	"What motivated your decision to return to work at this time?"
"Tell me about a time you handled a workplace conflict."	"Can you describe a time when you helped resolve a problem or disagreement?"
"Where do you see yourself in 5 years?"	"What would success look like for you in this role over the next year?"
"What were you doing before your career break?"	"Tell us about any experiences - formal or informal - that has helped you grow your skills during your time away."

INCLUSIVE RECRUITMENT

An inclusive recruitment process focuses on evaluating candidates based on skills, competencies, and potential, rather than qualifications or inherent biases.

Benefits of an inclusive recruitment process include -

Attracts a broader and more diverse talent pool.	Ensures fair opportunities for all candidates.	Promotes a positive organisational culture and innovation.	Increases organisational performance and reduces turnover.

Key principles of inclusive recruitment include -
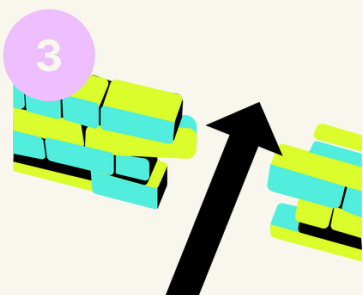
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Equality and Fairness

Ensuring equal opportunity for candidates, regardless of gender, ethnicity, or background.

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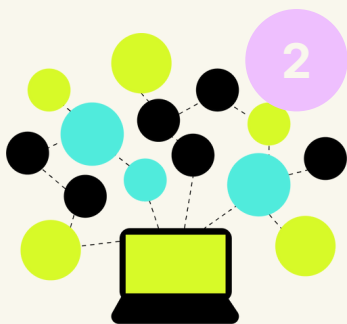
Diverse Candidate Pool

Broadening recruitment criteria to ensure representation of underrepresented groups.

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Diverse Candidate Pool

Reducing the reliance on unnecessary qualifications that may exclude talented individuals.

COMPETENCY BASED RECRUITMENT PROCESS

A competency-based process focuses on the practical skills and behaviours required for a role, rather than relying solely on formal qualifications.

This approach helps employers identify candidates based on their ability to perform key tasks, promoting a more inclusive and effective hiring process. By prioritising competencies over qualifications, businesses can access a broader talent pool, reduce biases, and ensure a better job fit.

To create your competency based approach consider -

Defining core competencies:

Identify the essential skills for each role (e.g. communication, teamwork, adaptability).

Job descriptions and adverts:

Write job descriptions and adverts which focus on skills and abilities rather than qualifications.

Assessment tools:

Use tasks, scenarios, or interviews to evaluate competencies in candidates.

Training for hiring managers:

Train interviewers to assess candidates based on competencies rather than qualifications.

INCLUSIVITY IN RECRUITMENT

Bias in the recruitment process is when personal prejudices, whether conscious or unconscious, influence hiring decisions.

Examples of types of bias -

GENDER BIAS

RACIAL BIAS

AGE BIAS

CULTURAL BIAS

Bias effects decision-making as it -

- Leads to discriminatory hiring practices
- Misses out on valuable talent from diverse backgrounds
- Can impact organisational culture, diversity, productivity and innovation

Example of Age bias - Front-End Web Developer

A tech startup is hiring for a front-end developer. The job posting:
- "Must be fluent in modern JavaScript frameworks like React or Vue."
- "Looking for someone who lives and breathes code, always experimenting with the latest tools."
- "Fast-paced, agile environment - need someone who can pivot quickly and hit the ground running."

An applicant in their 50s applies. They have 20+ years of experience in software development, have used React for the last few years, and can code efficiently. However:
- The hiring manager assumes that the applicant may not be as "up-to-date" with newer frameworks, despite their CV saying otherwise.
- They believe older candidates may struggle to adapt to rapid changes or won't fit with the "young, fast-moving culture."
  Even though the candidate demonstrates skill in coding and project management, they're overlooked in favor of a younger applicant with less experience but seen as more "tech-savvy."

IDENTIFYING AND MITIGATING BIAS

Different types of bias exist and can be identified throughout the recruitment process.

Some examples and how to mitigate them include -

Affinity Bias:
Tendency to favour people who are similar to ourselves.
- Halo Effect: Letting one positive trait (e.g., shared background or interests) create an overly favourable impression.
- Horns Effect: Letting one negative trait influence an overly critical impression.

Mitigation: Diversify hiring panels, review applications blind to reduce reliance on subjective impressions.

Confirmation Bias:
Tendency to seek out or interpret information that supports pre-existing beliefs.
- Halo Effect: Favouring evidence that reinforces a positive first impression.
- Horns Effect: Focusing on information that confirms a negative initial judgment.

Mitigation: Use structured interviews with clear, consistent evaluation criteria to ensure objectivity.

Tools to reduce bias -

- Implement software that anonymises CVs.
- Train hiring managers on recognising and mitigating bias.
- Use standardised questions in interviews to ensure fairness.

IDENTIFYING AND MITIGATING BIAS

Example of Affinity bias - First time job seekers

- A manager unconsciously favours a graduate from their own university or program, giving them more mentoring time and opportunities.
- Impact: Others feel left out and undervalued, affecting morale and development.

Mitigation Tip:
- Implement blind allocation of mentors or buddy systems based on skills/needs instead of background.

Example of Affinity bias - those Returning to work

- A team leader reconnects more easily with colleagues they previously worked with and overlooks a returner for a new project because they "don't know them as well anymore."
- Impact: The returner feels excluded and may miss key opportunities to rebuild their confidence and visibility.

Mitigation Tip:
- Encourage structured team reintroductions, check-ins, and fair project allocation based on skills, not familiarity.

IDENTIFYING AND MITIGATING BIAS

Example of Confirmation bias - First time job seekers

- A supervisor assumes a new hire with no industry experience will struggle with complex tasks, so they only assign them low-level work. When the new hire excels, it's seen as a fluke.
- Impact: The new hire becomes demotivated and underutilised.

Mitigation Tip:
- Use regular skills audits and trial-based task assignments to identify and challenge assumptions early.

Example of Confirmation bias - those Returning to work

- A colleague assumes a returning parent will be less committed or have less time and interprets their need to leave on time as a lack of dedication.
- Impact: Their performance is unfairly scrutinised or undervalued despite meeting expectations.

Mitigation Tip:
- Encourage managers to use objective metrics and regular feedback cycles to evaluate performance fairly.

GENDERED OR BIASED LANGUAGE

Gendered language can unconsciously discourage certain candidates, especially women, from applying to your open vacancies.

Using neutral and inclusive language increases the likelihood of attracting a diverse applicant pool.

Best practices for gender-neutral language:

Instead of 'He/She'	Use 'Candidates' or 'You'.
Instead of using gendered language like 'Aggressive' and 'Independent'	Use neutral language such as 'Motivated' and 'Collaborative'.
Instead of focusing on personal traits (e.g. protected characteristics such as age, race, religion, sex and national origin and traits unrelated to job performance	Focus on skills, competencies, and responsibilities.

GENDER NEUTRAL ADVERTS

Previously written in a gender biased way, the below is now an inclusive and welcoming advert which will increase application rates and candidate confidence by appealing to a wider audience.

Job Title: Sales Executive (Full-Time)

We are looking for a **motivated and collaborative** sales executive to join our growing team. The ideal candidate will be someone who thrives in a fast-paced environment, **demonstrates strong relationship-building skills**, and is **driven to pursue new opportunities**. We are looking for someone who **can work effectively both individually and within a team.**

Requirements:
- Bachelor's degree in Business or related field **(or equivalent experience)**
- Previous sales experience is required **(experience in [specific industry] is a plus)**
- Excellent verbal communication skills **and active listening abilities**
- Strong **collaboration** and **team-oriented mindset**
- **Comfortable** working in a target-driven environment

Preferred:
- Experience working with clients in the tech industry
- Proven track record of **achieving** sales goals

WHAT EMPLOYERS SHOULD BE ASKING

To attract the right talent with inclusivity as a focus it is imperative to use the correct language and communication within candidate attraction strategies, job descriptions and job adverts.

Instead of saying 'Excellent Communication Skills' try being more specific. Examples could include:

Confidence to speak on the phone

Speaking to other team members across different departments

Ability to use communication equipment such as walkie-talkies across sites

Sending emails to those outside of the business

Meeting and greeting visitors to the site

Putting together presentations for the departments

COMMUNICATION SKILLS - SCENARIOS

Verbal Communication

Verbal communication is more than just speaking clearly. It's about exchanging ideas in a respectful, inclusive, and accessible way. Whether face-to-face, remote, or supported by technology; effective verbal communication fosters collaboration, clarity, and a positive workplace culture.

Example: *Comfortable expressing ideas and feedback in meetings, discussions, or presentations.*

Active Listening

Active listening is a crucial skill for effective communication, fostering mutual respect, collaboration, and problem-solving. It requires not just hearing words but fully engaging with and understanding the message, making space for diverse perspectives, and responding thoughtfully and empathetically.

Example: *Demonstrates understanding by responding considerately and asking clarifying questions when needed.*
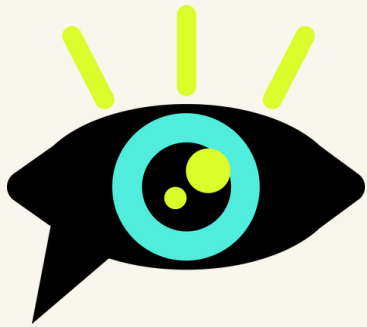
Non-verbal Communication

Non-verbal communication encompasses all the non-linguistic ways people express ideas, emotions, and messages - whether through body language, facial expressions, tone, or visual aids. It plays a key role in effective communication, relationship-building, and ensuring messages are understood across different contexts.

**Example:** *Awareness of how tone, pace, and presentation can impact communication.*

COMMUNICATION SKILLS - SCENARIOS

Visual Communication

Visual communication in employment is about about making information more understandable, accessible, and engaging for a wide range of people. As work becomes more visual and digital, inclusive visual communication is a key professional skill across industries.

Example: *Able to convey information clearly through visuals, presentations, or accessible formats.*
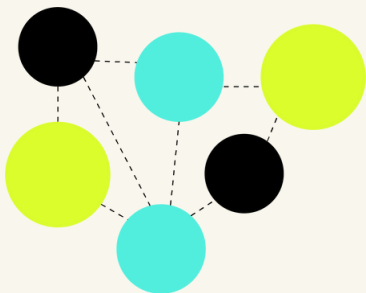
Mass Communication

Mass communication in the workplace is a strategic tool used to inform, engage, and align large groups- internally and externally. In inclusive organisations, it prioritises clarity, accessibility, cultural sensitivity, and diverse audience needs, making it a core skill in roles like communications, HR, marketing, and leadership.

Example: *Skilled at sharing information through digital, written, or broadcast channels in a way that engages and informs.*

Presentation Skills

Presentation skills involve more than public speaking - they're about clearly and accessibly communicating information to others in a way that supports understanding, collaboration, and informed decision-making. Inclusive presentation skills emphasise clarity, flexibility, and consideration of diverse audiences and formats.

Example: *Skilled at organising and delivering information in an engaging, clear, and accessible manner.*

BUILDING CANDIDATE CONFIDENCE

Focusing on skills rather than qualifications and maximising how we communicate empowers candidates to apply, even if they don't meet all the traditional requirements.

A welcoming recruitment process boosts candidate morale and trust in the organisation.

A candidate is 38% more likely to accept a job offer after a positive candidate experience!

(Source:IBM)

✓ Creating an inclusive culture:

A focus on competencies and inclusive language makes candidates feel respected and valued.

✓ Encouraging diverse applicants:

Highlight how your company values and diversity and inclusion in your job postings and share testimonials or success stories of employees from diverse backgrounds.

✓ Building trust:

Create transparent recruitment processes that builds trust between the organisation and candidates.

RE-DESIGNING RECRUITMENT PRACTICES

To truly tap into a diverse and capable talent pool, employers will benefit greatly from redesigning recruitment practices with inclusion and equity at their core.

By moving away from traditional methods that rely heavily on rigid qualifications or biased language, and instead emphasising a competency-based approach, employers can more effectively identify and attract candidates based on their actual skills and potential.

To begin re-designing your recruitment practices, consider the following strategies:

1 **Use skills-based language in job descriptions and adverts.**
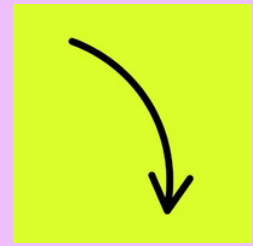
2 **Create open-ended interview questions that allow candidates to showcase their abilities.**

3 **Avoid overemphasis on irrelevant qualifications that could intimidate potential applicants.**

FURTHER INFORMATION & RESOURCES

Podcasts:

- Consciously Inclusive Recruitment | ted Learning Podcast

- Let's Get Inclusive Podcast

- Equal, Diverse & Inclusive Recruitment | The Sticky From The Inside Podcast

- Inclusive Recruitment Podcast: Episode One | NHS Employers

- Talking Inclusion With...

- Inclusive Recruitment: The Catch22Minutes Podcast

- How Inclusive Recruitment Training Can Benefit Every Business

Blogs:

- Embrace the Unique Talents of People with Learning Disabilities

- Inclusive Recruitment: Build a Diverse and Equitable Workforce

- Inclusive Recruitment Processes – What Are They, and How Can We Adopt Them? - The Inclusivity Project

- 10 Steps to Developing a More Inclusive Recruitment Process - SEE Change Happen

- Inclusive Recruitment: Top 10 Ways to Make Your Recruitment Process Inclusive