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Persuasiveness of inclusive language in organizational communication

Perswazyjność języka inkluzywnego w komunikacji organizacji

Abstract

The study hypothesized that employees better receive messages containing inclusive forms. A review of the existing literature on inclusive language and its impact on employee well-being and organizational innovation was conducted. As studies from around the world show, inclusive language can: enhance the sense of belonging to an organization, provide a sense of security, and increase engagement. Inclusive language can lead to higher levels of employee creativity and innovation, and also reduce the likelihood of burnout. In our study, we examined whether inclusive language is understandable and whether it can influence the perception of the organization and employee engagement. To this end, we tested three versions of a message: exclusive, non-inclusive, and inclusive – on a sample of 1375 working individuals using the Computer-Assisted Web Interview (CAWI) method in collaboration with IPSOS. Contrary to popular belief, inclusive language was not perceived as more difficult to understand. However, it did influence the assessment of the organization's friendliness. The study indicates that inclusive language can be a valuable asset for organizations.

W badaniu postawiono hipotezę, że pracownicy lepiej odbierają komunikaty zawierające formy inkluzywne. Przegląd dotychczasowej literatury na temat wpływu języka inkluzywnego na dobrostan pracowników i innowacyjność organizacji, wskazuje, że język inkluzywny może: zwiększać poczucie przynależności do organizacji, zapewniać poczucie bezpieczeństwa, zwiększać zaangażowanie, prowadzić do podniesienia poziomu kreatywności i innowacyjności pracowników, a także zmniejszać prawdopodobieństwo wypalenia zawodowego. W naszym badaniu sprawdziliśmy, czy język inkluzywny jest zrozumiały i czy może wpływać na postrzeganie organizacji i zaangażowanie pracowników. W tym celu przy użyciu metody wspomaganego komputerowo wywiadu internetowego (CAWI) we współpracy z IPSOS na próbie 1375 pracujących osób przetestowaliśmy trzy wersje komunikatu: ekskluzywną, nieinkluzywną i inkluzywną. Wbrew powszechnemu przekonaniu, język inkluzywny nie był postrzegany jako trudniejszy do zrozumienia. Miał on jednak wpływ na ocenę przyjazności organizacji. Wyniki badania wskazują, że język inkluzywny może być cennym atutem dla organizacji.

Key words

inclusive language, internal communication, organizations, persuasiveness
język inkluzywny, komunikacja wewnętrzna, organizacje, perswazyjność

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Persuasiveness of inclusive language in organizational communication

Introduction. About inclusive language.

According to our conversations with participants of the workshops we conduct, many people justify their arguments against the use of inclusive language in corporate communication by claiming that such messages will be longer, possibly even too long, or that they will be perceived as unfriendly “newspeak” and will therefore be off-putting—and as a result, not persuasive. The presented study aimed to verify whether these arguments are justified in the current state of language norms.

The main argument for using inclusive language has been to prevent the activation of negative and unfair stereotypes against various groups, especially those at risk of exclusion. But can it also be treated positively as a persuasive technique? Is the main goal of inclusive language to avoid cognitive bias in assessing a minority, or rather to universally increase respect for all people?

This is an important question in the context of rhetoric in contemporary, often global organizations, where the network of affiliations—employees within an industry, employees of one’s own organization versus employees of other organizations—often overlaps with past social divisions.

Paradox of inclusivity

Language is a carrier of group history—it contains a rudimentary division of us-them, and this opposition pertains to humans and gods, humans and animals, and groups of people, among which significant affiliation groups include, for example, family, tribe, nation, etc. The rhetorical creation of us-them is fundamental to

many rhetorical techniques (Lee, 2017; Iao-Jørgensen, 2023; Wiese, 2015; Karim, 2018; Kauders, 2022).

In the second half of the 20th century, human rights discourse developed on the one hand, and on the other hand, national, racial, and ethnic particularisms, which reached their peak in Nazi practices (Gordon & Berkovitch, 2007; Gloppen & Rakner, 1993; Peterson, 1990). It became crucial to find a universal language that excludes no one and no group, whose main aim is not to emphasize difference.

On the other hand, it is necessary to talk about these differences to create equal opportunities for socially excluded groups or to meet the needs of employees who possess traits that do not affect the quality of work but do impact their efficiency—such as appropriate architectural accommodations for people with disabilities, neurodiverse individuals, etc. This direction is known as person-first versus identity-first language and has been used in matters related to disabilities (Andrews et al., 2019; Dunn & Andrews, 2015). However, in some cases within the deaf or autistic communities, it is appropriate to use the preferred language of the community, prioritizing identity until you learn an individual's preference (APA, 2020b, 2022a).

In 2022, the European Commission adopted a directive on Corporate Sustainability Reporting (CSRD). The European Sustainability Reporting Standards (ESRS) introduced by the directive have been in effect since 2024 and mean that companies operating in the European Union will be required to report on environmental, social, and governance aspects of their operations. For enterprises, this entails a commitment to achieving social goals, such as gender equality and workplace diversity. Inclusive language becomes a tool for this purpose.

We can understand inclusive language in two ways:

- a) Counteracting unfair judgment of people based on their belonging to a stereotype-laden group. The key tactic here is identifying harmful phrases and their connotations (bias-free communication). To this end, many inclusive language guides have been created, such as the APA's Inclusive Language Guide.
- b) Building community through language that promotes not only the absence of exclusion but also the broadest possible identification (Zagarell, 1988). The key tactic is ensuring respect for all recipients as different but remaining members of one community (access toward common identification), for more effective, tension-free communication in organizations within rapidly diversifying societies.

In this article, we want to treat inclusive language as an extension of Kenneth Burke's principle of identification (Burke 1945, 1969). If a certain identity was dominant, hegemonic, then the language forms used were associated with positive

connotations for that group, such as masculine job titles in Polish (Fibingier, 2022). Analyzing various solutions that can be used in the Polish language, we have distinguished three possible ways of creating inclusive forms:

- a) Either expand enumeratively the groups of recipients (as in the evening gala greeting “Ladies and Gentlemen” which in Polish is analogously applied to addressing employees—“Employees and Female Employees”),
- b) Or seek neutral expressions (often used in English, whose grammar facilitates such actions),
- c) Or create new collective expressions that will show the recognition of differences while simultaneously building a community of goals.

The aim of the presented study is to show how inclusive language affects the ethos of the organization itself, i.e., its perception as the owner of the discourse in which the text is found, as well as how it affects the acceptance of the text itself (pathos) and its persuasiveness. In other words, whether inclusive language is a positive resource for organizations today.

Inclusive language in the organization – literature review

Johnson, Robertson, and Cooper (2018) suggest that there are four organizational factors influencing employee well-being: work (tasks performed), relationships with colleagues, purpose and meaning of work, and leadership and management. The latter is particularly important in the context of creating an inclusive work environment. Regardless of the structure of the enterprise—whether it is more hierarchical or less—an overwhelming majority of working individuals are accountable to a supervisor. This supervisory relationship can—depending on the approach and actions of the supervisor—be an area for displaying dominance or for fostering inclusivity. Especially when considering the expectations of employees. In Poland, 73% of respondents believe that recognition shown by their direct supervisor is important to them (Enpulse, 2022).

Inclusive leaders, respecting their diverse employees, create a common system of motivation, norms, and structures of responsibility with them, which clarify the role of employees in co-creating solutions (Nishii, Leroy, 2020). This fosters a sense of security and openness, which in turn promotes team efficiency, employee proactivity, and a sense of self-efficacy in actions (Carmeli, Reiter-Palmon, Ziv, 2010; Qi, Liu, 2017; Rogozinska-Pawelczyk, 2023; Zhang, 2023; Saatai, Zadrán, Nayel, 2022; Impact of Inclusive Leadership on Employee Innovative Work Behavior and Creativity with the Mediating Role of Intrinsic Motivation, 2022).

Moreover, inclusive managers increase employee engagement, including in creative tasks—this is possible by building psychological safety (Saha, Satya, Bhattacharya, 2022; Carmeli, Reiter-Palmon, Ziv, 2010). This is particularly important when creating innovative projects, where a crucial element is the ability to propose and test various solutions without fear of negative consequences in the event of a mistake. Inclusive leadership creates a friendly climate for error management (Yuan, Li, Zheng, 2022).

One element of inclusive leadership is inclusive language, which shows respect for all employees and ensures comfort for members of marginalized groups—among other things by reducing stereotypes and discrimination (Pesce, Etchezahar, 2019; Lister, McPherson, Coughlan, Gallen, Pearson, 2019; Itam, Bagali, 2018). Inclusive language promotes employee engagement (Afridah, Lubis, 2024).

Another important advantage of inclusive language in the organization is considering and appreciating diverse perspectives. A study by Jolly and Lee (2021) found that inclusive leadership encourages employees to speak up (understood as expressing ideas, concerns, and opinions). Encouraging diverse perspectives and valuing all voices can drive innovation and improve organizational performance. Wu and Li (2023) reached similar conclusions, showing that inclusive leadership reduces employee silence. This is important, the authors emphasize, because employee silence has a detrimental effect on creativity, and managers are deprived of knowledge about the challenges employees face, limiting the effectiveness and quality of their decisions.

Inclusive language not only encourages creative activity but also reduces burnout (Kalina, 2019). This is significant because research shows that burnout affects a significant portion of the workforce. For example, in 2024, nearly one-fourth of female employees faced burnout (Deloitte, 2024). Half of those born after 1983 (millennials and Generation Z) report experiencing the effects of burnout (Deloitte, 2023).

Creating an inclusive organizational culture, co-created by managers, is therefore important for both the development of the enterprise and the employees themselves.

The topic of inclusive language in Polish research has appeared relatively recently. Many publications concern feminine forms – feminatives, especially in the context of the social discussion on this topic (Bidzińska, 2020; Bortniak, 2022; Latos, 2020; Szpyra-Kozłowska, 2019; Szpyra-Kozłowska, 2023; Rak, 2022; Solarz, 2023; Adamowicz, 2020; Gałczyńska, 2023; Chebdowska, 2021). An increasing number of works concern neutral forms in Polish (Gębka-Wolak, 2022; Misiek, 2021; Walkiewicz, 2022). Some Polish researchers conduct comparative analyses of inclusive forms in Polish and other languages, comparing

the possibilities offered by each of them (Bolek, 2020; Krysiak, 2021; Lindę-Usiekniewicz, 2022; Pachniewska, 2020; Tyrała, 2023). There are also analyses examining inclusive language in the past (Hołojda-Mikulska, 2016; Rodek, 2023). In this comparison, the work of Doroszevska and Jankowska (2024) deserves special attention, presenting the results of a study on attitudes towards inclusiveness in medical communication, showing, among other things, how patient-oriented communication functions in the Polish health service and in what situations inclusive language forms prevail.

Methodology

In the context of objections raised against the use of inclusive language, especially in conservative environments such as legal professionals, we formulated three research hypotheses:

1. Inclusive formulations in a message make it more persuasive.
2. Inclusive formulations do not lower the level of comprehensibility.
3. Inclusive formulations positively affect the perception of the workplace (organization).

Research material

We prepared three short messages as research material: an email to employees encouraging participation in an innovative project, a job advertisement, and an invitation to a company event. In this article, we focus on evaluating the persuasiveness of the text, thus we will primarily describe the text encouraging participation in the project. In the other texts, we examined correctness, acceptance of forms, and various indicators of the organization's friendliness.

Each message was prepared in three versions in Polish, differing in the level of inclusivity. These were the exclusive version (containing phrases criticized by proponents of inclusivity), the non-inclusive version (the standard language version), and the inclusive version (containing recommended phrases). In linguistic terms, the texts differed in the degree of exclusion:

1. An exclusive text addressed to homogeneous groups and containing linguistic markers related to those groups (e.g., inviting spouses).
2. A non-inclusive text: not excluding others but not including marginalized groups (e.g., inviting couples).
3. An inclusive text, explicitly indicating group expansion – e.g., inviting couples regardless of gender, inviting people of different ages and experiences.

The versions of the messages differed in the above phrases found in the same place in the structure of the message. In the inclusive version of the encouraging email, we added phrases containing: a) Peer relations (sharing ideas). b) Equal weight of life and professional experiences and viewpoints. c) No preliminary evaluation of ideas – every idea can be valuable. d) Indication that the designated person does not evaluate ideas but collects them from everyone.

Ultimately, the construction of the email encouraging participation in the project presented to the respondents was as follows for each version:

Version	Exclusive	Non-Inclusive	Inclusive
General Text:	Good morning! In our company, we are starting a new project called Progress. Your department will participate in its implementation. The company cares about this project, so I am sending the information I received directly from the management:		
Difference in Version	Only constructive ideas and specific comments about the project should be submitted to manager Michał Lutostański.	If you have any ideas or comments about the project, submit them to manager Michał Lutostański.	If you have any ideas or comments, don't hesitate to share them in the forum. Your diverse life and professional experiences are important because they help us better develop our product, avoiding mistakes. The manager of your department, Michał Lutostański, has been designated by the management to present all your ideas and comments, so please feel free to share your perspective.
Ending	Best regards, Anna Martenka Human Resources Department		

Table 3. Versions of the Email Encouraging Participation in the Project. Source: Authors' own elaboration.

The research method we used is CAWI (Computer-Assisted Web Interview); the study was conducted on the IPSOS Poland research panel.

The study group consisted of 1,375 randomly selected people (panel participants), who work in Polish companies. Each text was evaluated by approximately 450 people. Each respondent assessed 3 different versions of one of the three different texts: inclusive, non-inclusive, and exclusive versions. For example: the first group of respondents (N=453) saw 3 texts: an email to employees – version inclusive; an email to employees - version non-inclusive; an email to employees – version exclusive etc. The texts were assessed in a sequential-monadic scheme – each version was displayed as the first to a similar number of respondents. For the discussed text (message), the exact number of participants in each group is indicated in the table below:

Respondents Evaluating 3 Versions of the Message: N=453		
Evaluated the inclusive version first: N=152	Evaluated the non-inclusive version first: N=149	Evaluated the exclusive version first: N=152

Table 4. Respondents Evaluating 3 Versions of the Message: N=453. Source: Authors' own elaboration.

The texts were evaluated using statements (on a scale of 1-5); respondents also indicated (by marking in the text read) words/phrases that were:

3. Important
4. Unimportant/redundant
5. Annoying
6. Indicative of the company being employee-friendly

Results. Comprehension evaluation

In the first question, respondents evaluated the comprehension of the text they read. A common criticism of inclusive language is its perceived lack of clarity. Instead of using established phrases or well-known expressions, inclusive language often employs new terms—ones that, for instance, build community or avoid stigmatizing or stereotypical elements. An example of such a formulation is the advocacy for changing the term “illegal immigrants” to “people with irregular legal status.”

In our case, this included the phrase “various life and professional experiences” and the fact that the inclusive version was significantly longer than both the exclusive and non-inclusive versions. The comprehension evaluation pertains to all texts.

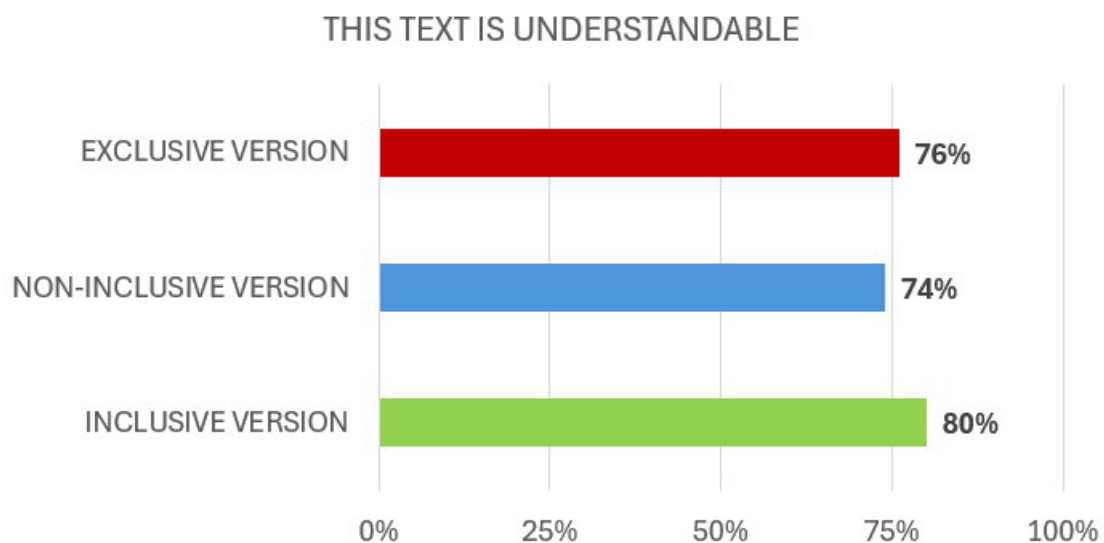


Figure 1. Please evaluate this text in terms of: Comprehensibility; inclusive: N=152; non-inclusive: N=149; exclusive: N=152. The figure shows the sum of the percentages of responses rated 4 and 5 on a five-point scale (where 5 is the highest rating). Source: Authors' own elaboration.

This shows that arguments regarding the comprehensibility of inclusive language are not necessarily related to the actual clarity but rather to the individual's attitude toward such a text.

Evaluation of the organization that sent the text

As previously demonstrated, inclusive language impacts the sense of belonging and community within organizations. Therefore, we asked our respondents questions regarding their evaluation of the company that communicates with its employees in this manner.

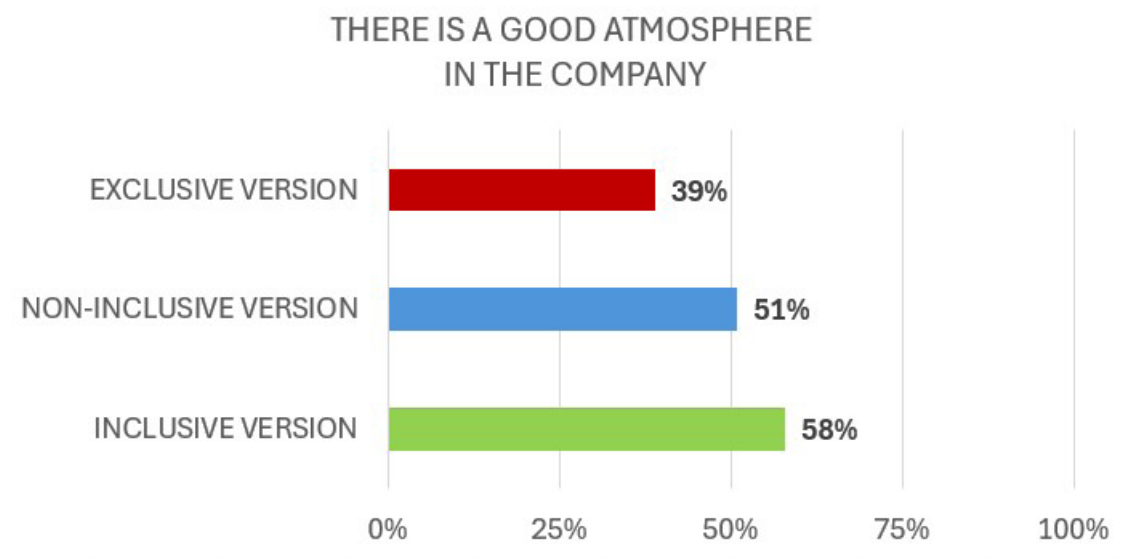


Figure 2. Please assess what this mode of communication says about the company—how well each statement fits the company. N=152/149/152 (respondents who evaluated each version of the text first). The figure shows the sum of the percentages of responses rated 4 and 5 on a five-point scale (where 5 is the highest rating). Source: Authors' own elaboration.

With the statement “The company has a good atmosphere,” 58% of those reading the inclusive version agreed, 51% of those reading the non-inclusive version agreed, and 39% of respondents reading the exclusive version agreed. The difference is statistically significant between the exclusive and inclusive versions.

Let's now examine the results for the evaluation of phrases that, according to our respondents, indicated the company's friendliness in each version.



Figure 3. Words indicating the company's friendliness. N=152/149/152 respondents who evaluated each version of the text first. The font size has been scaled according to the number of mentions of each word (the larger the font, the more mentions). Source: Authors' own elaboration.

As shown in Figure 3, the highest number of mentions appeared among people reading the inclusive version. According to the respondents, the words especially indicative of friendliness were “don't hesitate... share” and “your various life and work experiences.” In the non-inclusive version, these were “ideas,” “comments,” and the word “report.” In the exclusive version, they were “your” and “the company cares.” Detailed data on the mentions are provided in the table below:

Version	Exclusive	Non-Inclusive	Inclusive
Minimum percentage of mentions for the word	0	0	1
Maximum percentage of mentions for the word	31	23	13
Average for the word	7,2	6,3	5,4

Table 5. Words indicated by respondents as suggesting that the company is employee-friendly. Responses indicating “nothing suggests this” were excluded. Source: Authors' own elaboration.

As we can observe, the inclusive text elicited significantly more reactions than the other two versions, especially the exclusive version. Both the frequency of word mentions and the number of words indicated by each individual were much higher. This shows that words related to encouraging employees to take initiative and appreciating their potential play an important role in building the friendliness—and thus the inclusivity—of an organization.

Let's now examine whether, based on the text they read, respondents would want to work at this company—and whether they would want their children to work there.

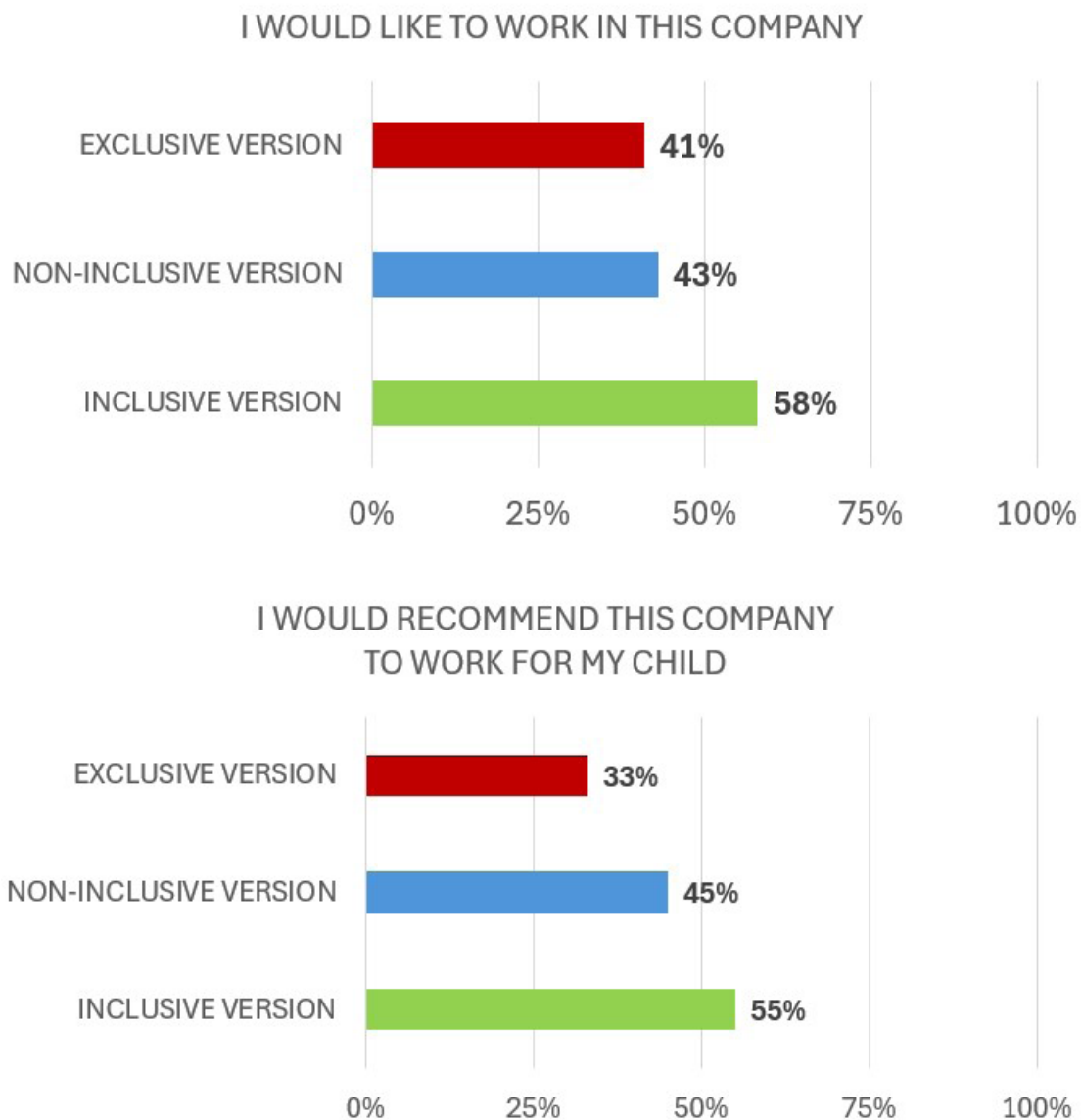


Figure 4. Please evaluate what this method of communication says about this company – to what extent each statement fits it. N=152/149/152 (respondents who evaluated each version of the text first). The percentages represent the sum of the responses rated 4 and 5 on a five-point scale (where 5 is the highest rating). Source: Authors' own work.

In the company that writes in this way, 58% of respondents reading the inclusive version, 43% of those reading the non-inclusive version, and 41% of those reading the exclusive version would like to work. There is a statistically significant difference between the indication for the inclusive text and the others.

We often pay more attention to the atmosphere in a place when we think of someone we care about. To tap into this sensitivity, we asked respondents about their recommendations regarding their child. 55% of respondents reading the inclusive version would recommend the company to their child, 45% of respondents reading the non-inclusive version, and only 33% of those reading the exclusive version.

This last difference particularly emphasizes the role of inclusive language (the difference between the inclusive and exclusive versions is statistically significant).

We asked the participants a question regarding the persuasiveness of the text. We wanted to determine which version, and to what extent, might influence a potential employee to take action in the given company. The assessment of persuasiveness—encouragement to act—is one of the key variables. According to Enpulse (2022), the employee engagement rate in Poland in 2022 was 65%.

The results of the evaluation of contact with each version of the text are as follows:

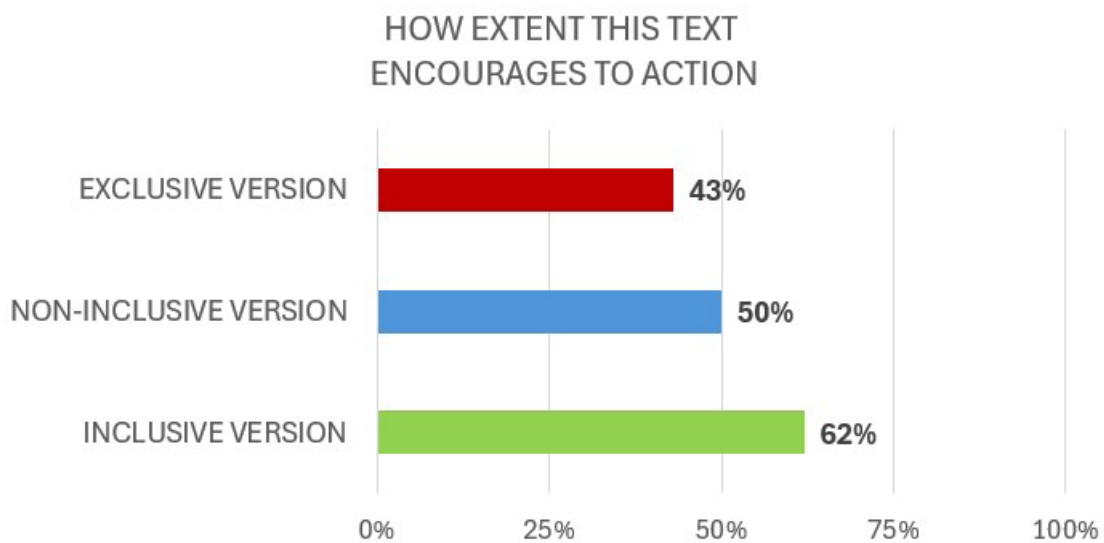


Figure 5. To what extent does the text encourage action? N=152/149/152 (respondents who evaluated a given version of the text first). The sum of the percentages of responses 4 and 5 on a five-point scale (with 5 being the highest rating) is presented. Source: Authors' own study.

It turns out that 62% of respondents who read the inclusive version rated it as encouraging action. Similarly, 50% of those who read the non-inclusive version and 43% of respondents who read the exclusive version felt the same. These differences are statistically significant between the inclusive version and the other two versions.

Conclusions and implications

The hypotheses formulated for our study were supported. The quantitative research indicated that:

1. Inclusive language formulations make the message more encouraging: There is a noticeable difference in how texts were evaluated by different, randomly selected employees, some of whom may not have even heard of inclusive language.

2. Inclusive formulations do not lower the level of comprehensibility: All texts were rated at the same level of comprehensibility, despite differences in their length.
3. Inclusive formulations positively influence perceptions of the workplace and build the organization's image as recommendable.

What conclusions can be drawn? Firstly, inclusive language formulations can be an asset to organizations. This is the most crucial takeaway related to using inclusive rhetoric in organizational communication. Language reflects the work atmosphere and can either discourage or build a positive image of the employer. For this effect, it may sometimes be worth prioritizing inclusivity over brevity, even though technology often prefers or necessitates conciseness.

Secondly, inclusive forms should not be used ritually as mere replacements for other words. Exclusive language creates certain ritualistic forms that convey the attitudes embedded in that language. These attitudes can be perceived as irritating, regardless of whether they pertain to the level of eloquence of a sentence, paragraph, or the structure of the message itself, as well as the relationship between the communicator and the audience.

Thirdly, it is essential to consider all diverse groups collectively. A simple "word swap" might address some groups while excluding others. The ultimate goal should be to encompass respect and inclusion as broadly as possible in the communication. It is about naturally incorporating those who are heard and considered into the community, not about adopting a new ritual or jargon. Only then can language be viewed as an asset rather than just another alien communication algorithm.

However, it is important to remember the limitation of our study. The assessment of the company in which people work results from receiving many messages that reach employees through various communication channels. In our study, these were only single messages that reached respondents through only one communication channel. Our study is rather a contribution to conducting more in-depth research in the field of inclusive communication in the workplace. It would be beneficial to investigate how several different messages (inclusive and non-inclusive) affect the perception of a company or whether different senders of messages affect the reception of the same text. For example, whether an email will be evaluated in the same way if it is sent to employees by the CEO, direct supervisor or a teammate in a similar position.

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