

**Inclusive
workplaces**
designing for
participation



Contents

01	Introduction	03
02	Accessibility	05
03	Signage and visual access	07
04	Sensory-friendly environments	09
05	Flexible layouts	11
06	Technology	13
07	Diverse representation	15
08	Inclusive amenities	17
09	Private spaces	19
10	Conclusion	21
11	Sources	23

Inclusion occurs when a diversity of people are respected, connected, progressing and contributing to organisational success.

Diversity Council Australia



Inclusive workplaces designing for participation







Universal design principles aim to enable access by all people to all parts of the workplace.

Inclusion in the workplace occurs when we feel respected, connected, and able to progress and contribute at work. Designing workplaces for inclusion and participation involves the consideration of multiple aspects of diversity, such as physical abilities, neurodiversity, age, cultural and racial backgrounds, and gender identities.

To enable participation from all staff, physical designs should prioritise accessibility, flexible layouts, ergonomic furniture, sensory-friendly environments, inclusive signage, diverse representation in artwork, and private spaces for religious practices or personal needs.

Why inclusive design?

Inclusive organisations* are more likely to have their people:

-  Be innovative
-  Be willing to work extra hard
-  Work together effectively
-  Provide excellent customer service
-  Stay at the company
-  Be more satisfied at work

*Compared to non-inclusive organisations. Source: *Diversity Council Australia*



Diversity is being invited to the party: inclusion is being asked to dance.

Verna Myers



Participation is having a full dance card + dancing all night!



Inclusive workplaces designing for participation



Key takeaways

- An inclusive workplace is one that values individual differences in the workforce and ensures that physical spaces and organisational culture makes everyone feel welcome, accepted, and able to contribute.
- Universal design, spaces designed for inclusion and participation, benefits everyone – not just those with special needs and preferences.
- There is no one (right) way to design for inclusion and participation in the workplace. Each organisation needs to speak with their people to determine what will work best.

Inclusivity in office design is not simply a trend but a fundamental shift in how we envisage work environments.

This report provides an overview of universal design considerations that support people to participate fully and contribute their best work.

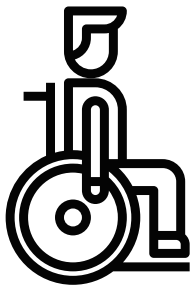
**Design is not
inclusive unless
the design
process is
inclusive.**

Gensler



Accessibility **designing for inclusion and participation**

While building codes require the incorporation of basic accessibility features, universal design principles enable access by all people to all parts of the workplace. When considering the accessibility of workplaces, it's essential to address a range of design considerations to ensure that all individuals, including those with disabilities or other specific needs, can access and navigate the physical environment comfortably and safely.



Designing a workplace that is accessible for people of all physical ability should not just be a box-ticking exercise.

To be truly inclusive, it should go beyond mandatory regulations.

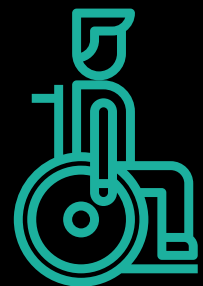
Haiken

Accessibility

designing for inclusion and participation

- Design wide doorways, corridors and pathways to accommodate wheelchair users and individuals with mobility aids.
- Install ramps and elevators to provide access to different levels of the workplace for individuals with mobility impairments.
- Ensure that restrooms, break areas, and other facilities are accessible and equipped with features such as grab bars and accessible sinks.
- Offer accessible parking spaces and pathways to the workplace entrance for individuals with mobility impairments.

Accessibility benefits all employees. Specifically, accessibility considerations enable individuals with mobility impairments, those who are blind or have low vision, and individuals with hearing impairments.



Signage + visual access **designing for inclusion and participation**

Signage and visual accessibility are critical aspects of workplace design that contribute to the navigation, orientation, and overall accessibility of the environment for all employees.



Everyone benefits from clear and easy to understand wayfinding and signage. The diverse range of needs must be considered when planning, designing and implementing accessible wayfinding systems.

Inclusive SA



Signage + visual access

designing for inclusion and participation

- Use high-contrast colors and bold text for wayfinding and navigation throughout the workplace.
- Provide Braille signage and tactile maps to assist individuals who are blind or have severe visual impairments.
- Ensure that lighting levels are adequate and consistent to support individuals with low vision, while also including some spaces where lighting can be controlled by the individual to support neurodiverse needs.
- Use clear and intuitive wayfinding systems with consistent signage, common symbols for common spaces, and directional cues to assist individuals in navigating the workplace environment.
- Ensure that meeting rooms and common areas are equipped with assistive listening devices or loop systems for individuals with hearing impairments.
- Provide captioning or sign language interpretation for meetings, presentations, and other communication events.

The above visual accessibility considerations benefit everyone in the workplace to orient themselves and find their way. These ideas specifically enable individuals with low vision or visual impairments and hearing impairments to better participate at work.



Sensory-friendly environments designing for inclusion and participation

Designing workplaces with sensory-friendly features, including adjustable lighting, sound absorption, and flexible work arrangements, is essential to support the diverse sensory needs and preferences of employees.



It is essential for organisations to create a workplace that welcomes neurodiversity, supports mental wellbeing, + allows employees to work + achieve in their own way.

Haiken



Sensory-friendly environments designing for inclusion and participation

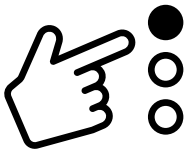
- Create quiet zones or sensory-friendly spaces where individuals with sensory sensitivities or neurodiverse conditions can retreat when needed.
- Minimise visual and auditory distractions in open office environments to support individuals with attention-related challenges.
- Implement sound-absorbing materials, such as acoustic panels, carpets, and curtains, to reduce noise levels and minimise auditory distractions in the workplace.
- Use adjustable lighting systems with dimmable options and natural light sources to accommodate varying sensory sensitivities and preferences.
- Minimise glare and flickering lights to reduce visual discomfort and sensory overload for individuals with light sensitivity or sensory processing differences.
- Offer flexible work arrangements, such as remote work options, to accommodate the diverse needs and preferences of neurodiverse individuals.

Sensory-friendly workplaces benefit individuals with diverse sensory needs and preferences. Whether or not someone is neurodiverse, these features support people to do their best work while in the office.



Flexible layouts **designing for inclusion and participation**

Organisations might consider flexible layouts in their workplaces: it's essential to design spaces that can adapt to the diverse needs and preferences of employees, supporting collaboration, productivity, and well-being.



**It's all about personal
choice in how and
where to work when in
the office.**

Gensler



Flexible layouts

designing for inclusion and participation

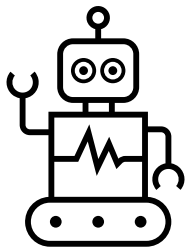
- Use modular furniture and movable partitions to create adaptable workspaces that can be easily reconfigured to accommodate different team sizes, activities, and work styles.
- Design open and collaborative areas, such as coworking spaces or breakout zones, where employees can gather for informal meetings, brainstorming sessions, or social interactions.
- Create a variety of meeting rooms and huddle spaces with different sizes, layouts, and technology capabilities to accommodate various types of meetings and collaboration needs.
- Implement non-assigned seating and shared workstation policies that allow employees to choose where and how they work based on their preferences and activities.
- Provide storage solutions and personalisation options to accommodate employees who share desks or workspaces.

Flexible layouts benefit employees who require varied workspace configurations for different tasks or projects, including individuals who collaborate frequently or work in teams; and those who value flexibility and autonomy in choosing their workspace and schedule.



Technology designing for inclusion and participation

Workplace technology solutions aim to enhance inclusivity, accessibility, and participation for all individuals, regardless of their abilities, preferences, or backgrounds. Organisations can create more inclusive and supportive workplace environments that empower employees to thrive and contribute their unique talents and perspectives by leveraging innovative technologies.



Though provision of accommodations and use of assistive technology can assist in retrofitting an environment, it is more cost-effective to proactively implement universal design.

Sheppard-Jones et al



Technology designing for inclusion and participation

- Ensure that meeting rooms and common areas are equipped with assistive listening devices or loop systems, and provide captioning or sign language interpretation for meetings, presentations, and other communication events.
- Provide access to physical technology assets and tools for accessibility including screen readers, adaptive keyboards, and switch devices.
- Use AI tools to support inclusivity such as natural language processing (NLP) for speech recognition and language translation, and computer vision for image recognition and object detection.
- Ensure that content on intranet platforms and workplace apps are designed to focus on usability, accessibility, and user experience (UX), providing all employees with access to essential information, resources, and communication channels.

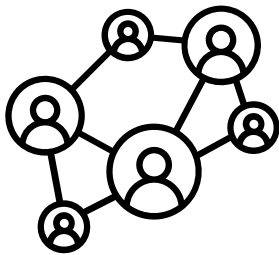
Inclusive technology solutions benefit all employees. Organisations can create more supportive workplace environments that empower employees to thrive and contribute their unique talents and perspectives by leveraging innovative technologies.



Diverse representation designing for inclusion and participation



Designing workplaces with diverse representation involves creating environments that celebrate and reflect the unique identities, backgrounds, and perspectives of employees from various demographic groups.



Space can be used as a platform to celebrate diverse cultures and rituals, and allows for self-expression, play, and social interactions to increase a sense of belonging.

Gensler

Diverse representation designing for inclusion and participation

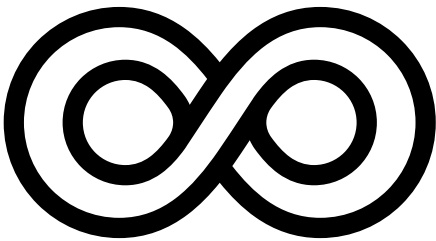


- Incorporate artwork, decor, and visual displays that showcase diversity and inclusion. Ensure that artwork and decor are inclusive and respectful, reflecting the diversity of the workforce and promoting a sense of belonging for all employees.
- Use inclusive imagery and branding materials in signage, marketing materials, and company communications to depict diverse groups of people in a positive and authentic manner.
- Implement diverse hiring and recruitment practices that prioritize equity, fairness, and inclusion in the selection and promotion of employees from diverse backgrounds and identities.
- Promote diversity and inclusion in leadership positions by appointing individuals from underrepresented groups to leadership roles and decision-making positions.

Diverse representation in the workplace benefits everyone, not least employees from diverse racial, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds who feel valued, represented, and affirmed by seeing their identities and experiences reflected in the workplace environment and in an organisation's visual identity and branding.

Inclusive amenities **designing for inclusion and participation**

Inclusive amenities play a crucial role in creating a welcoming and supportive workplace environment for all employees, regardless of their gender identity, personal needs, or preferences.



The focus should be on creating spaces to help all employees feel accepted, comfortable and able to perform.

ADT Workplace



Inclusive amenities

designing for inclusion and participation

- Designate gender-neutral restrooms that are accessible to all employees, regardless of their gender identity or expression.
- Ensure that gender-neutral restrooms are equipped with adequate facilities, including toilets, sinks, and privacy partitions, to provide a safe and comfortable environment for all users.
- Install sanitary product dispensers in restrooms and other relevant areas to provide free or low-cost access to menstrual hygiene products, such as pads and tampons, for individuals who menstruate.
- Ensure that sanitary product dispensers are easily accessible, well-stocked, and discreetly located to promote dignity and convenience for users.

These inclusive amenities benefit employees who identify as transgender, non-binary, or gender non-conforming, as well as individuals who prefer more private or inclusive restroom options; and those who menstruate, including women, transgender men, and non-binary individuals, who require access to menstrual hygiene products during the workday.



Private spaces designing for inclusion and participation

Organisations can incorporate private spaces into workplace design to accommodate the diverse needs and preferences of employees, supporting their physical, emotional, and cultural well-being while promoting inclusivity and respect for individual differences.



These should be relatively minimalist settings with plenty of space for mental clarity, as well as some soft seating for relaxation and comfort.

Haiken



Private spaces designing for inclusion and participation

- Establish quiet rooms or relaxation spaces where employees can rest, recharge, or take breaks away from the demands of work.
- Designate quiet and secluded prayer and meditation rooms where employees can engage in religious or spiritual practices, reflection, or mindfulness exercises.
- Provide comfortable seating, soft lighting, and calming decor to create a peaceful and tranquil environment conducive to prayer and meditation.
- Provide multi-purpose private spaces where employees can attend to personal care needs, such as administering medication, conducting medical treatments, or addressing health-related concerns.
- Create private lactation rooms equipped with comfortable seating, nursing stations, and storage facilities for breastfeeding or expressing milk.

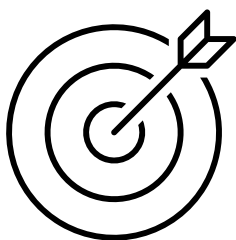
These private spaces benefit employees who observe religious practices, engage in meditation or mindfulness practices, or seek moments of solitude and reflection during the workday; nursing mothers; those who require privacy and discretion to manage medical conditions.



Inclusive workplaces designing for participation

Universal design - spaces that are usable by all people - reduces stigma and reduces the need for individual accommodations while promoting inclusivity and improving productivity in the workplace. Importantly, inclusive organisations better attract and retain good people.

User journey mapping can improve the inclusive design process, while post-occupancy user feedback can help architects to better design for inclusion. By incorporating these design considerations, workplaces can become more accessible and inclusive environments that support the needs of individuals with diverse abilities and requirements, enabling them to participate fully in work activities and contribute their skills and talents effectively.



**The first step towards
designing an inclusive work
place is acknowledgement +
acceptance of differences.
It is about offering choices
to people.**

Forbes

Inclusive workplaces designing for participation

So what do you do?

Puzzle have seen the good, the bad and the downright ugly of how these issues have been addressed in many different sized public and private organisations. At a high level the good tend to:

- **Consult their people.** An inclusive workplace design that works for one organisation might not for another. Senior leaders need to find out what their people need to do their best work.
- **Make purposeful design decisions.** Organisations need to tailor solutions for their own context, and not simply follow what others are doing without reason.

If you'd like to know more about how Puzzle can help, please [reach out](#) for a chat!



Inclusive workplaces designing for participation

Our research

At Puzzle, we love good data, and nothing excites us more than uncovering practical insights to help our clients transform their workplaces and ways of working.

Sources

Australian Human Rights Commission (2021). IncludeAbility Guide: Creating an accessible and inclusive workplace.

<https://includeability.gov.au/resources-employers/creating-accessible-and-inclusive-workplace>

ADT Workplace (2024). Creating an inclusive office through workplace design. <https://adtworkplace.com/inclusive-workplace-design>

Diversity Council Australia (2024). Mapping the state of inclusion in the Australian workforce. <https://www.dca.org.au/research/inclusion-at-work-index-2023-2024>

Forbes (2018). How Do We Design Workplaces For Inclusivity And Diversity. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/pragyaagarwaleurope/2018/07/19/how-inclusive-is-your-organisation-here-is-how-to-use-inclusive-design>

Gensler (2023). Why Inclusive Design Is Critical to Workplace Transformation. <https://www.gensler.com/blog/why-inclusive-design-is-critical-to-workplace-transformation>

Haiken (2022). Celebrating Diversity in the Workplace: A Guide to Inclusive Office Design. <https://www.haiken.com/insights/celebrating-diversity-in-the-workplace-a-guide-to-inclusive-office-design>

Inclusive SA (2019). Accessible wayfinding and signage. <https://inclusive.sa.gov.au/resources/state-authority-resources/accessible-wayfinding-and-signage>

Office Principles (2024). A Guide to Inclusive Office Design - Celebrating Diversity in the Workplace. <https://officeprinciples.com/insights/importance-inclusive-office-design-workplace>

Sheppard-Jones et al (2021). Reframing workplace inclusion through the lens of universal design: Considerations for vocational rehabilitation professionals in the wake of COVID-19. *Journal of Vocational Rehabilitation*, 54(1), 71-79.

Zallio & Clarkson (2021). Inclusion, diversity, equity and accessibility in the built environment: A study of architectural design practice. *Building and Environment*, 206.





PUZZLE