BUILT ENVIRONMENT

TOOL 2: DISMANTLING BARRIERS TO ACCESSIBLE BUILT ENVIRONMENTS

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Who is this for

High priority
- Executives and Senior Management
- Safety and Facilities

Practical Information
- Legal team

Useful to Know
- DEI and HR Professionals

What guidance does it provide?

- Understanding the misconceptions surrounding accessible built environments
- How to identify and address barriers to creating accessible built environments

Take-home points

- Inclusive design aims to offer solutions to all users, across their broad spectrum of intersectional needs, perspectives, and behaviours, and across time:
  - It welcomes the provision of accommodations and adjustments for anyone who may require them to use features within the built environment
  - It explains that an important aspect of design is including a diverse group of people in the design process
  - It focuses on building for the present and the future, to promote sustainability in design

Tackling Stereotypes about Inclusive Design

Many employers may be hesitant or unsure of adopting an inclusive design approach because they perceive it as challenging or too difficult. However, for equitable access for all people to become a reality, inclusion needs to be at the forefront of design. Here, we address some common misconceptions about inclusive design: [1],[2]

Myth

Inclusive Design is only for people why physical disabilities

Fact

Inclusive Design does not seek to single out any particular group, or part of the community. Rather, it is based upon the concept that people use spaces in diverse ways, and focuses on designing for as many abilities as possible. Inclusive Design is liberating, because it works for everyone.

Myth

Disability happens to other people, so Inclusive Design does not reflect my needs

Fact

People who have not experienced a chronic illness or disability may not have had to think about the barriers to employment that exist in the built environment. However, people's needs and abilities change throughout their life-course. Inclusive design improves access for the majority of users now, as well as in the future.

UNPACKING INCLUSIVE DESIGN AND ACCESSIBLE BUILT ENVIRONMENTS

Myth

Accessibility is covered by building codes

Fact

Inclusive Design isn't simply about the physical environment - it covers entryways, to wayfinding, to emergency preparedness and exiting, and more! It considers people's need for access in a variety of situations. It recognizing the full spectrum of needs among people with and without disabilities. It's simply not the same as building codes or standards.

Myth

Inclusive Design is too expensive

Fact

Sometimes, the cost of Inclusive Design may seem higher up front. People may design buildings to meet the bare mininum standards, and expect that they, or someone else, will adapt it later to increase accessibility. Unfortunately, this way of thinking leads to inaccessible spaces with profound barriers for users. At the same time, the business may be losing money, because the accessible design would have saved them costs in the long run.

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Myth

Inclusive Design is uncreative, or ugly

Fact

Inclusive Design challenges architects and designers to think outside of the box and create a space that works for all users, or as many users as possible. Inclusive and accessible design is an opportunity to create features in the built environment that delight all.

Inclusive design aims to offer solutions to all users, across their broad spectrum of intersectional needs, perspectives, and behaviours, and across time: [3]

- It welcomes the provision of accommodations and adjustments for anyone who may require them to use features within the built environment
- It explains that an important aspect of design is including a diverse group of people in the design process
- It focuses on building for the present and the future, to promote sustainability in design

Why are Inclusive Built Environments So Important?

Businesses need to think about how to build back better post COVID-19. Whether it's visitors, clients, or workers, everyone should be able to access buildings and enjoy spaces, regardless of disability. Incorporating accessibility into the built environment is critical for success – inclusive built environments will:

- **Attract and retain diverse staff.** Creating a welcoming and inclusive environment can make you a more competitive employer – not only will you be more attractive to jobseekers with and without disabilities, but you will be more likely to retain the diverse staff, and their unique skillsets, you worked so hard to secure.
- **Draw in new customers, clients, and collaborators.** Just as talented jobseekers with disabilities will be selective of where they work, potential customers, clients, and collaborators will also pay close attention to your company's values and accessibility.

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- **Save on costs in the long run.** Hidden costs, such as managing staff absences, high turnover, and recruitment processes can be significant. As well, the cost of retrofitting or adjusting the environment after it is built will likely incur greater costs, than if it was designed in an accessible and inclusive manner in the first place. If the built environment is difficult to use, there will likely be reduced productivity in the workforce, along with a greater need for workplace accommodations.
- **Meet and exceed legal requirements.** Instead of designing to meet standard building codes, incorporating accessibility at the heart of your design strategy will enable you to meet and exceed accessibility-related legal requirements. Considering accessibility as early as possible will also reduce the risk of fines or non-compliance.
- **Reinforce that you are an employer that stands for diversity, equity, and inclusivity.** Having an accessible built environment can help you maintain or improve your organization's reputation within the community and encourage other organizations to follow your leadership.

Taylor

I remember my first day at work, I had to use the bathroom but… Women's or men's room? My struggle of a lifetime, a dreaded moment, until I realized that the bathrooms were gender neutral. The feeling of relief in every way possible was indescribable.

Salima

That feeling of relief and comfort is so very important. I am a single mother, with a disability and a woman of faith. I wear a hijab and if possible, would like to pray during lunch time. Some people meditate, I pray. We have a quiet room for those who need some time to pray or meditate or just to relax. That prayer I do at work resets my mind and energizes me for the rest of the day.

"555,000 Canadians with disabilities would be able to work more if workplace access was improved. These improvements would also increase the GDP by $16.9 billion by 2030" – Gibbard et al., 2018 [5]

How Can the Built Environment Impact an Employee with Disability?

The built environment can affect a person with a disability in many ways. In some cases, a seemingly small change can significantly alter, for better or worse, how a person accesses, navigates, and uses a premises.

Case example 1:

A worker in your office has requested changes within the workplace environment to accommodate their vision loss. They have requested to change the contrast level of the signage for better readability and have suggested that you use higher contrast on the edge of stairs, glass structures, and corners for safe usability.

What do you do?

In addition to adding higher contrast to signage, edges and corners, and glass structures, you can increase lighting levels in darker areas in the work environment. Common adjustments to lighting can help employees feel safe and productive in their current workstation. However, it is important to keep in mind that bright light, high gloss, and high contrast can be overwhelming and symptoms like headaches for some people. This is especially true for those with light sensitivity, which can be common among neurodiverse persons. Here are some solutions that may be inclusive for everyone:

- Adjustable lighting
- Light-absorbing wall panels and matte paint
- Desk lamps
- Allowing people to choose the location of their desk or workspace, such as by a window
- Avoiding big contrasts between light and dark spaces

Case example 2:

Imagine you have just hired a worker who is a wheelchair user. They have advised you well in advance of the onboarding period what they will need, including access to a fully accessible toilet. You check the accessible bathroom and discover that the facility has been out of use for a few weeks. You chase up the repair person and tell them that it is urgent. When the employee begins working, it is quickly apparent that the repair has not occurred. How does this make the new employee feel? What will happen when they need the toilet? What does this say about the organization?

What do you do?

In addition to adding higher contrast to signage, edges and corners, and glass structures, you can increase lighting levels in darker areas in the work environment. Common adjustments to lighting can help employees feel safe and productive in their current workstation. However, it is important to keep in mind that bright light, high gloss, and high contrast can be overwhelming and symptoms like headaches for some people. This is especially true for those with light sensitivity, which can be common among neurodiverse persons. Here are some solutions that may be inclusive for everyone:

- Including people with different mobility requirements (and who use wheelchairs) in building design can make sure you get it right for everyone
- Bear in mind that wheelchairs are different sizes; don't assume that because bathroom is accessible for one wheelchair user, it is for another
- Ensure that accessible toilets are free from clutter and not used as additional storage space – this can happen when people believe that they are rarely used

Challenges to Achieving Inclusive Design and Accessible Built Environments [4]

As with any type of organizational change, adopting inclusive design and making the built environment more accessible can be challenging. Here are some common barriers that you may face, and recommendations for how to overcome them:

- **Buy-In:** Cross-organizational support and buy-in among leadership are often difficult to gather, regardless of the issue at hand. Resistance to change may be rooted in lack of knowledge or unawareness of the benefits that come with accessibility and disability inclusion across an organization. Start by presenting the rationale for disability confidence to senior leaders and visit our tools on changing workplace culture. For more information, please visit <u>Culture Tool 2 - Changing Workplace Culture in Partnership with People with Disabilities</u>

- **Accessibility Standards:** Depending on the resources that you are referring to, different recommendations or standards for the built environment may be suggested. For example, standards offered in one country may conflict with legislation in another country. In Canada, the Accessible Canada Standards for the Built Environment are currently being developed. While you may refer to multiple resources to strengthen the accessibility of your built environment, you must meet the forthcoming Accessible Canada Standards.

- **Healthy and Safety:** A critical priority of inclusive design is protecting the health and safety of all potential users in the built environment, including people with disabilities. It can be challenging to find a solution that works best for everyone. However, remember that inclusive design recognizes the broad spectrum of intersectional needs, perspectives, and behaviours. Take your time and engage a diverse group of people during the design process. Speak with potential users to understand not only what works, but what is important to them in the built environment.

Union representatives bring an integrated experience lens on occupational health and safety hazards. These skills translate well to critical examination of barriers in the built environment.

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