Australian Government
Department of Finance

Universal Design in the Workplace

Universal design is the process of creating spaces, products, and services that are easy to use and understand by as many people as possible[1]. Universal design considers the diversity of human experiences throughout the design process, prioritising inclusion and belonging as fundamental elements of good design, benefiting everyone. The 7 principles of universal design[2] are outlined below with examples of how each principle may be applied in the workplace.

The following universal design principles should be considered in conjunction with the minimum requirements for the design and construction of office buildings (Class 5) outlined in the National Construction Code (NCC) and specified within Australian Standards (AS).

1. Equitable Use

Equitable use means that all users can access and utilise the space comfortably and effectively. Environments are designed in a way that promote inclusion, providing flexible and equivalent options to accommodate different users.

Office examples:

- A well-signed, wide, flat main entrance with automatic doors allowing all users including those who are ambulant and those using mobility aids or prams to enter independently.
- Varied and flexible workspaces (for example, adjustable furniture, individual and group working spaces, quiet spaces, and adjustable sensory elements such as lighting and temperature) that recognise and accommodate differences while enabling everyone to perform their work equally well.

2. Flexibility in Use

The principle of flexibility in use recognises and accommodates for the diversity in user preferences and abilities. This principle ensures that designs are adaptable and offer users choice and flexibility when accessing and engaging in spaces.

Office examples:

[1] https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/convention-rights-persons-disabilities

[2] https://universaldesignaustralia.net.au/7-principles-of-universal-design/

- Availability of quieter work areas or separate quiet rooms, particularly in offices with open floorplans.
- Modular or adaptable workstations (for example, height-adjustable desks, movable partitions or flexible seating options)

3. Simple and Intuitive Use

In the built environment, the principle of simple and intuitive use refers to spaces that are predictable, consistent and easy to understand. A wide variety of users can easily navigate the space, understand its purpose and effectively use the space consistent with its function.

Office examples:

- Clear and consistent wayfinding and signage throughout the premises.
- Intuitive layouts that support flow between spaces (for example, reception and work areas) and understanding of use.

4. Perceptible Information

Design elements that promote perceptible information ensure that essential information is easily recognised and understood by all users. Important information should be presented in multiple formats such as text, images, Braille, or symbols, and easy for everyone to see and interpret.

Office examples:

- Key signage presented through multiple sensory channels (for example, visual, audible announcement, tactile or Braille).
- Clear and accessible instructions for how to use shared equipment such as kitchen appliances and printers, or shared spaces such as meeting rooms.

5. Tolerance for Error

This principle pre-empts and accounts for human error through design. Designing spaces with a tolerance for error means minimising hazards of unintended use, implementing fail safe features, providing warnings of hazards, and considering error feedback.

Office examples:

- Office equipment with clear instructions or warnings to help prevent misuse and automatic shut-off features to reduce hazards if left unattended.
- Layout and arrangement that minimises errors and hazards (for example, wide corridors, non-slip flooring, positioning of frequently used items to be

easily accessible, isolating potentially hazardous items, etc.). The NCC and AS1428.1 require a minimum clear width of 1000mm; however, a minimum of 1200mm is preferred for manoeuvrability. Wider corridors, beyond minimum compliance, are recommended for dignified access and ease of passage.

6. Low Physical Effort

The principle of low physical effort considers the diversity of users to a space and ensures that the design promotes ergonomic positioning and lowers demands for physical exertion and repetitive actions. Spaces are designed to be used efficiently and comfortably by all users.

Office examples:

- Ergonomic layout and setup of workstations and shared spaces (for example, placing frequently used items within easy reach, incorporating adjustable furniture and a variety of options, intuitive and easy-to-use or automatic controls, etc.).
- Inclusive lighting and acoustics to reduce sensory strain and fatigue.

7. Size and Space for Approach and Use

This principle refers to how users approach, access and engage in a space and ensures that designs account for different ways of being in the space (e.g., sitting versus standing), different types of mobility or strength, and different types of supports that may be required to assist someone in the space.

Office examples:

- Shared workspaces designed to accommodate people who may need to sit, stand, or use assistive supports while working or collaborating.
- Intuitive layouts to support users with cognitive or sensory processing differences, enhancing approachability and usability.