

Universal Design for the Workplace

Human Development Institute

This tool is designed for employers to cultivate a welcoming, safe, and inclusive professional environment where all staff can thrive. Learn more about universal design and inclusive workplaces at www.HDI.uky.edu.

Planning, Policies, Programs, Products and Services

Incorporate diversity as you plan, develop products, and evaluate services.

Representation matters. In looking at the groups of people represented in your organization, are they representative of the community? Do you have people with disabilities, racial and ethnic minorities, diverse gender identities and sexual orientations, a range of ages, and other groups in paid positions?

Values start with policy. Do your policies and procedures ensure access to facilities, printed materials, computers, and electronic resources? Diversity starts with recruitment. Are your job postings and hiring processes accessible?

Timely responsiveness is important. Is there a dedicated position or person who responds to accommodation requests?

Intentional planning and review measures progress. Does your strategic planning and evaluation include reviewing access considerations?

Language matters. We use both person-first and identity-first language to refer to people with disabilities, or disabled people. In person-first language, disabilities are a characteristic and not a person's identity ([People First Language, Office of Disability Rights](#)). People preferring identity-first language do not see their disabilities as separate from who they are ([Portrayal of People with Disabilities, AUCD](#)). Identify ways to use language promoting what people can do. Use words like a worker's capacities versus their restrictions or limitations.

Physical Environments and Products

Ensure physical access, comfort, and safety within an environment that includes people with a variety of abilities, racial and ethnic backgrounds, genders, and ages.

Exterior Spaces:

- Parking areas
- Signage indicating accessible spaces
- High contrast striping
- Curb ramps that lead from parking onto sidewalks
- Tactile panel from curb cut into parking lot

Pathways and Entrances:

- Signage indicating accessible route and entrance
- Slip resistant surfaces
- Zero step entrances
- Ramps with at least 36 inches between handrails
- A minimum of 5 feet landing at the top and bottom of every ramp

Interior Spaces:

- Spaces are connected by accessible paths, including elevators
- 60-inch turning-radius for wheelchair users to turn easily
- Pathways are free of tripping hazards (plants, cords, chair, etc.)
- Level flooring that is easy to use with assistive technology (canes, walkers, wheelchairs)
- High-contrast, large-print directional signs throughout the office
 - [ADA Sign Requirements](#)
- Elevators have auditory, visual, and tactile signals
- Elevator controls are accessible from a seated position
- Wheelchair-accessible restrooms are well-marked
- At least part of service counter or desk is at height accessible from a seated position
- Aisles are kept wide and clear of obstructions
- Quiet work or meeting areas with noise and other distractions are minimized and/or facility rules are in place (e.g., no cell phone use)
- Adequate light

[Consult the ADA Checklist for Readily Achievable Barrier Removal for more suggestions.](#)

Employees/Staff

Prepare employees to work with all coworkers, clients, and customers. Staff should be able to:

- Know about the availability and use of Telecommunications Relay Service
- Provide alternate document formats
- Respond to requests for disability-related accommodations, like ASL interpreters

Educate staff on communication issues with colleagues or clients with different characteristics such as race and ethnicity, age, and disability.

Information Resources and Technology

Ensure all information disseminated by your organization is accessible and culturally competent. The following are best practices when creating resources and other products in relation to technology:

- Photos of people include diverse characteristics like race, gender, age, and disability
- Your commitment to universal access is stated on your website/key documents
 - Example statement: *Our goal is to provide accessible materials and services. If you are unable to access any of our products or services, contact _____ for assistance.*
- Printed publications available in alternate formats (Braille, large print, and electronic text)
- [Accessible color contrast and font usage.](#)
- Key documents should be available in languages common in your service area
- Plain Language
 - [ABCs of Plain Language](#)
- Printed materials should be within easy reach from various heights and without obstacles
- Electronic resources, including web pages, adhere to accessibility guidelines or standards adopted by

your organization, project or funding source. Resources:

- www.accessibe.com
- [Section 508 Standards for Accessible Electronic and Information Technology](#)
- [World Wide Web Consortium's Web Content Accessibility Guidelines](#)
- [World Wide Access: Accessible Web Design](#)
- Videos are captioned and/or audio described
- Adjustable-height tables are available for each type of workstation to assist those who use wheelchairs or are small or large in stature
- Adequate workspace for both left- and right-handed users is available
- Staff are aware of accessibility/accommodation needs contact person
- Staff are aware of accessibility options:
 - Enlarged text feature
 - Microsoft Ease of Access www.youtube.com/watch?v=YeDZaCiTDW4
- Procedures should be in place for requests for assistive technology

Note that your organization does not need special technology for every type of disability, but should have assistive technology that can benefit many people. For more information about assistive technology:

HDI CATS: www.hdi.uky.edu/hdicats

**Job Accommodation Network:
www.askjan.org/topics/tech.cfm**

Events

The following are best UD practices when planning events:

- Everyone can participate in events
- Staff, vendors, and volunteers have a basic awareness and information about the ADA and any local laws that may impact attendees with disabilities: [ADA At Your Service](#)
- Accessible parking is available
- Accessible facilities are used
- Accessible entrances are clearly marked
- Information about how to request disability-related accommodations is included in invitations, publications, and promotions
- Accessible transportation available

Communication Hints

Treat people with disabilities with the same respect and consideration you treat others. Here are some helpful hints for delivering a presentation, hosting an exhibit, and otherwise relating to people with disabilities.

General

- Ask a person with a disability if they need help before assisting.
- Talk directly to the person with a disability, not through their companion or interpreter.
- Refer to a person's disability only if relevant to the conversation.

- Avoid derogatory slang or negative descriptions of a person’s disability.
For example, “a person who uses a wheelchair” is more appropriate than “a wheelchair-bound.”
- Information in multiple methods (written, spoken, visual/diagrams)
- Do not interact with a person’s guide or service dog unless you have received permission to do so.
- Do not be afraid to use common terms and phrases, like “see you later” or “let’s go for a walk.”
- Do not touch mobility devices or assistive technology without the owner’s consent.
- Do not assume physical contact is okay, like handshakes, high-fives, or hugs.
- Understand that not everyone uses eye contact.

Learning Differences

- Offer content in multiple formats (verbal and written).
- Provide qualified readers when requested to assist individuals in performing job tasks effectively.
- Avoid jargon or words that might be hard to understand.
- Use and observe body language and facial expressions.
- Be flexible in volume and rate of speech. Follow the lead of the person you are communicating with.
- Check with the person to confirm you have understood their communication.
- Allow for extra time for task completion and give prompt feedback.
- Use flexible formats for communication (face-to-face, email, phone).
- Modify workspaces when visual and auditory stimuli are distracting.
- Provide noise-canceling headsets, timers and other devices to assist with time management, task completion and privacy.
- Use verbal, written or visual instructions to navigate various environments.

Mobility Differences

- Consider speaking with a person with a mobility impairment from a seated position.

Sensory Differences

- Allow for flexible work schedules or remote work.
- Foster cultural awareness around eye contact and body language.
- Allow the use of silent fidgets.
- Create low-traffic, low-light spaces with comfortable furniture and minimal distractions.

Noise Sensitivity

- Provide noise canceling headsets and/or white noise/sound machines.
- Schedule chats and meetings ahead of time to minimize interruptions.
- Create quiet spaces that provide individuals with breaks from noise or environmental distractions.
- Allow individuals to move away from office machinery or high traffic areas

Light Sensitivity

- Replace fluorescent lights with LEDs when possible and have dark room availability.
- Provide anti-glare monitors

Chemical or Fragrance Sensitivity

- Maintain indoor air quality. Invest in an air filtration system in high traffic areas.
- Introduce a fragrance-free policy.
- Use unscented cleaning products.
- Encourage fresh air breaks.
- Use chemicals when there will be little exposure to others.

Touch Sensitivity

- Have a flexible dress code to allow for individual comfort.

Temperature Sensitivity

- Have a consistent, comfortable workplace temperature.
- Allow small fans and heaters in workplaces.
- Allow use of heated or cooling clothing.

Blind or Low Vision

- Be descriptive. Say, “The computer is about three feet to your left,” not “The computer is over there.”
- Speak all projected content when presenting.
- Describe the content of charts, graphs, and pictures.
- When guiding people with visual impairments, offer your arm rather than grabbing or pushing them.
- Offer verbal descriptions with your introduction on video calls and in person.
- Have introductory information about your organization available in braille.

[Producers of Braille Documents, American Council of the Blind](#)

Speech Considerations

- Listen carefully. Repeat what you think you understand and then ask the person with a speech impairment to clarify or repeat the portion that you did not understand.

Deaf or Hard of Hearing

- Face people who are Deaf or hard of hearing and avoid covering your mouth so that they have access to your facial expressions.
- Avoid talking while chewing gum or eating.
- Speak at a natural pace and volume. Do not exaggerate mouth movements.
- Repeat questions from audience members.
- Use paper and pencil or voice-to-text on a smartphone or tablet as additional tools for communication. Lip reading is not always a reliable form of communication.
- When using an interpreter, speak directly to the person who is Deaf. When an interpreter voices what a person who is Deaf signs, look at the person who is Deaf, not the interpreter.
- Explore assistive listening devices for your staff or customers: [219 and 706 Assistive Listening Systems](#)

Mental Wellness

- Build a trauma informed workforce.
- Speak openly about mental health.
- Realize the widespread impact of trauma.
- Create an inclusive environment where employees feel valued and represented.
- Offer trauma informed, resilience-oriented training.
- Offer training for staff to learn to recognize symptoms of anxiety, depression, substance use and trauma in themselves and others.
- Promote Employee Assistance Programs (EAPs) with clear instructions on how to access them.
- Integrate knowledge about trauma into policies, procedures, and practices.
- Provide a physically and psychologically safe environment that promotes trust, fairness, and transparency.
- Recognize practices that may trigger trauma histories.
- Invite staff with lived experience to share their stories of healing and recovery.
- Provide a workplace that is gender responsive, responds to racial needs and addresses historical trauma.
- Educate staff about signs of stress and burnout.
- Encourage staff to take time off when needed.
- Offer professional development opportunities.
- Provide staff with a clear path toward career advancement.
- Provide opportunities for mindfulness and other wellness practices and encourage workplace participation.
- Provide employees with information about behavioral health program options.
- Perform check-ins on a regular basis with staff in their preferred form of communication (in person, email, phone, etc.)
- Provide support with executive functions, like goal setting.
- Utilize apps and other tools designed to encourage mental wellness
- Develop and promote resilience through decision making, skill building and meaningful connections.