

The background of the entire page is a photograph of a modern office soundproof booth. Two women are seated on a purple upholstered bench, facing each other across a small wooden table. They appear to be in a collaborative meeting, with one woman gesturing while speaking. On the table are a white mug, a laptop, and some papers. A single white pendant lamp hangs from the ceiling, illuminating the space. The booth's walls are also upholstered in purple, and the floor is made of light-colored wood.

Designing for *Neurodiversity and Inclusivity*

Principles for Creating Spaces
That Empower Everyone

Introduction

3

Understanding Neurodiversity in Workspace Design

3

The Need for Inclusive Design

4

Principles of Inclusive Design for Neurodiversity

5

The Benefits of Inclusive Design

8

Implementing Inclusive Design Practices

9

Guidelines and Recommendations

10

Conclusion

11

Contents



Introduction

Understanding Neurodiversity in Workspace Design

Neurodiversity encompasses the natural variation in cognitive functioning within the human population, such as but not limited to ADHD, autism, dyslexia, neurodegenerative conditions, and trauma. These differences bring unique strengths and challenges that traditional office designs often overlook. This omission can hinder productivity and well-being, especially for those who may struggle with overstimulation, understimulation, disorientation, or inadequate support.

Understanding neurodiversity’s relevance in workspace design means recognising that inclusive environments are not just beneficial but essential. Thoughtful, inclusive design can foster a sense of belonging, boost morale, and unlock the full potential of all employees, creating a productive and harmonious workplace.

This whitepaper aims to provide actionable insights to guide organisations in creating inclusive workspaces that support every employee’s potential.

². National Library of Medicine - National Center for Biotechnology Information
³. National Cancer Institute - Division of Cancer Epidemiology and Genetics

Neurodiversity at Work

15-20% of the global population exhibits neurodivergence ^{2,3}. Inclusive design benefits everyone, fostering a more harmonious workplace.

The Need for Inclusive Design

Inclusive design in office spaces goes beyond basic accessibility; it seeks to cater to the diverse needs of all employees. Here are five key reasons why inclusive design is essential:

Mitigating Sensory Overload and Underload	Traditional offices don't consider sensory differences that may include high noise levels and visual acuity that may be affected by lighting, temperature, and hues. Incorporating sound-dampening materials and adaptive lighting can make these spaces more comfortable.
Enhancing Orientation, Wayfinding, and Signage	Clear signage and intuitive space planning help reduce disorientation and anxiety for those who may struggle with spatial awareness. Proper wayfinding fosters independence and boosts confidence.
Creating Zones for Varied Workstyles	Different people thrive in different environments. Offering the choice of quiet areas, collaborative spaces, and flexible furniture allows employees to choose spaces that match their work preferences and needs.
Reducing Workplace Stress	An inclusive design approach can help reduce workplace stress and increase productivity by improving mental health and enhancing overall well-being for everyone.
Boosting Employee Retention and Engagement	Inclusive spaces contribute to higher job satisfaction and a sense of loyalty among employees. When individuals feel supported, they are more likely to remain with the company and contribute meaningfully.

Principles of Inclusive Design for Neurodiversity

Designing workspaces that cater to neurodiverse individuals requires a combination of both intentional and adaptive planning and thoughtful implementation. Principles of inclusive design should focus on creating environments that are not only functional but also adaptable to varied cognitive and sensory needs.

By integrating specific elements that support different workstyles and preferences, organisations can ensure that their office spaces foster inclusivity, comfort, and productivity for all employees.

Below, we outline the core principles that organisations should adopt to create spaces that empower everyone to thrive:

Sensory and Cognitive Considerations	Provide choice and flexibility within office spaces, including adaptable lighting, varied acoustic solutions, and temperature control to prevent overstimulation, under stimulation and enhance comfort.
Wayfinding and Spatial Orientation	Use clear signage, intuitive layouts, and visual cues to help individuals navigate spaces easily and confidently.
Flexible Work Zones	Design offices with functional zones such as quiet areas, collaboration hubs, private and semi-private workstations to accommodate different workstyles and preferences.
Inclusive Design Elements	Implement adjustable workstations, adaptable furniture, Biophilic Design, accessibility, and the desire to use a space to ensure all employees feel included and empowered.
Inclusivity in Aesthetics	Thoughtfully choose colours, textures, and natural elements to create a soothing or stimulating environment that supports focus and relaxation.

Key Insight

Simple design adjustments, like adaptive lighting and clear wayfinding, can transform an office into a space that supports all

Insights from Industry Professionals

Inclusive-Design Architect Gillian Burgis-Smith of Strawberry Leopard Limited shared how her journey through personal challenges, including navigating spaces post-stroke from a physical to physiological and psychological context, shaped her approach to inclusive design.

Health and Built Environment Lead Rob Hayles of Citizens with Experience emphasised the resilience and equity that inclusive practices bring to workplaces, highlighting the broader benefits for both employees and employers.



Examples of Positive Change

Organisations that have implemented inclusive design strategies report higher employee satisfaction, increased productivity, and improved retention. Simple interventions, such as reconfiguring layouts and using Biophilic Design elements, have shown to support neurodiverse employees meaningfully.

This includes those with visible and non-visible disabilities (permanent, temporary, situational, degenerative, and episodic). Their methodologies look at current strategies and systems. Through action research and outlier design, they provide regenerative actions and recommendations.

The Benefits of Inclusive Design

Embracing inclusive design in workplace environments yields numerous advantages that extend beyond supporting neurodiverse individuals. By creating spaces that cater to varied needs, organisations can foster a more engaged, innovative, and resilient workforce. This will increase productivity for the employer and benefit for the employee.

Below, we explore the key benefits that inclusive design brings to the table:

Improved Engagement and Productivity Employees working in environments that cater to their specific needs are more engaged and are, therefore, more productive.	Increased Well-Being Thoughtful design can reduce stress, resulting in happier, healthier employees.	Enhanced Creativity A diverse workspace that supports varied cognitive styles can foster innovation and new ideas.
Lower Absenteeism When employees feel comfortable and supported, they are less likely to take time off due to stress or mental health issues.	Greater Collaboration Spaces that accommodate different communication styles encourage more inclusive teamwork.	Stronger Talent Attraction & Retention Companies known for supporting diverse needs are more appealing to top talent.
Long-Term Adaptability Inclusive designs are inherently flexible, allowing organisations to pivot and adapt as needs change over time.	Reduced Presentism Inclusive environments enable individuals to fully utilise their skills and perform at their best in the office.	Increased Customer Base Inclusive design showcases a commitment to diversity, attracting neurodivergent customers and partners through external advocacy.

Implementing Inclusive Design Practices

Implementing inclusive design practices requires a proactive and thoughtful approach that considers the diverse needs of all employees.

By embedding inclusivity into the foundation of workplace design, organisations can create environments where everyone feels valued and supported. This not only addresses the unique challenges faced by neurodiverse individuals but also sets a standard for a more adaptable and forward-thinking workspace.

To successfully integrate these practices, organisations should take concrete steps that ensure inclusivity is part of the design and operational strategy. From auditing existing spaces to adopting modular solutions, these measures enhance well-being, productivity, and long-term resilience across the workforce while remaining cost-effective.

Below, we outline essential steps for creating truly inclusive workspaces.

1.

Audit Current Environments

Review existing office layouts to identify potential challenges for neurodiverse employees, such as high noise levels or poor lighting. Modular changes can often address these issues effectively without extensive redesigns.
2.

Engage Stakeholders

Include employees, especially those with neurodiverse experiences, in the design process to capture their insights and needs. Modular feedback sessions can make it easier to implement smaller, impactful adjustments.
3.

Adopt Best Practices

Introduce sensory-friendly zones, adaptive furniture, and user-friendly navigation aids as standard elements of office design. Focusing on modular, scalable solutions ensures cost-effectiveness while accommodating evolving needs.
4.

Educate and Train

Provide training for all staff on the importance of inclusive design and how to utilise the new spaces effectively. Highlight the cost-efficiency and adaptability of modular changes as part of the training.
5.

Continuous Assessment

Regularly evaluate the effectiveness of inclusive practices and make necessary adjustments based on feedback and evolving needs. Modular upgrades, rather than specific permanent changes, ensure flexibility and sustainability over time.
- By leveraging modular, incremental testing and solutions whilst focusing on inclusive practices and action research organisations can address both the immediate and long-term needs of employees, fostering a workspace that balances inclusivity with cost-efficiency.

Guidelines and Recommendations

Adopting inclusive design practices goes beyond initial implementation; it requires an ongoing commitment to creating and maintaining supportive work environments. Here are key guidelines and recommendations for organisations looking to enhance their workplace inclusivity:

Prioritise Employee Feedback	Regularly engage with employees, particularly those with neurodiverse needs, to gather insights on the effectiveness of current designs and identify areas for improvement.
Stay Updated on Best Practices	Continuously review industry standards and emerging research on inclusive design. Develop customised strategies to align your organisation's goals with the latest advancements in workplace inclusivity.
Leverage Adaptive Technology	Integrate tools and technologies that allow employees to personalise their workspace, such as adjustable lighting, noise-cancelling solutions, and choice of work settings that cater to individual preferences.
Incorporate Inclusive 360° Training ¹	Educate staff on neurodiversity and inclusive practices, fostering an organisational culture that values understanding experience, behavior, and adaptability.
Plan for Scalability	Design spaces that can evolve with your organisation's growth and changing needs, allowing for the integration of new inclusivity solutions as they become available.

1. Inclusive 360° Training. This comprehensive training approach includes mutual SWOT analysis, where individuals identify their own strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats, and then receive similar insights from their peers. Reverse exercises and gap analyses ensure a holistic understanding of individual and team dynamics, fostering a supportive and adaptable organisational culture.



Conclusion

Inclusive design is more than just meeting standards; it is about fostering an environment where every employee feels valued and supported. By addressing the diverse needs of all individuals, organisations can create spaces that drive innovation, engagement, and productivity.

Incorporating inclusive design is a commitment to long-term growth and adaptability. As workplace expectations evolve, inclusive practices ensure organisations remain resilient and prepared to meet future challenges.

By prioritising design equity, companies can unlock the potential of every employee, creating a workplace where creativity, well-being, and success thrive.

Real Life Reflection

Gillian Burgis Smith's story underscores the transformative power of inclusive design: "Personal experience reshaped my understanding of what makes spaces truly supportive, inclusive and regenerative."

Ready to transform your workspace into an inclusive environment where everyone thrives?

Contact **AW SPACES TODAY** to discuss how our team of workspace design experts can help you design an office that champions neurodiversity and supports your team's well-being and productivity

Let's bring your spaces to life.

Reach out to us at **020 3988 0057** or **HELLO@AWSPACES.CO.UK**.
Or visit **AWSPACES.CO.UK** for more information.

For more detailed recommendations or specialised insights on inclusive design, feel free to connect with:

Gillian Burgis-Smith,
Inclusive-Design Architect at Strawberry Leopard Limited
gillian@strawberryleopardltd.com

Rob Hayles,
Health and Built Environment Lead at Citizens with Experience

Together, we can create environments that empower
every individual.



Designing for Neurodiversity and Inclusivity
AW Spaces 2024
Prepared by: Sebastian Holding