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## 6.6 Office Spaces

1 Credit: Implement 2 of 3

- **Required:** All office spaces have furniture sized and arranged to allow people who use wheeled mobility devices to navigate through the entire space.
  - Office spaces are available in various occupancy capacities.
  - Selected office spaces have built-in and user-adjustable privacy controls (e.g., doors, sound proofing, blinds, room dividers, etc.).
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### 1. Overview

Applying universal design to an office benefits all employees regardless of whether or not users currently have disabilities. Workers, especially those aging in the workplace, may develop new needs. Temporary disabilities and permanent disabilities will likely affect the workforce over time. It can be difficult for those who acquire disabilities to return to work. If they come back, then it can be difficult for them to adapt to the office space again.

Reorienting to the office after leaving has its own challenges, and it can be more challenging for someone with a new impairment to get used to their new ability levels. In addition to workers, a visitor should be able to travel into or around the space. Otherwise, they may feel uncomfortable or unwelcome, which prevents social integration because not all people who use the space are treated with dignity and respect.

James L. Mueller is an industrial designer who has served as a consultant to businesses in regards to workplace accommodation. In the *Universal Design Handbook* by Presier and Smith, Mueller writes:

*“Accommodation of workers with disabilities through job and workplace design is here to stay. By instilling a universal design approach among those responsible for the development of work environments and products, the incidence of work disabilities can be reduced. And those accommodations that are required for workers with disabilities will be much more likely to be reasonable accommodations (Mueller, 2001).”*

Mueller’s words reiterate that there will always be people with disabilities, so it is the job of the employer to provide facilities that suit their needs. Employers have great power to affect their employees, and it is their responsibility to provide a socially inclusive workplace. If the workers feel comfortable and valued, then they are more likely to be more productive and invested in their work. This benefits both the employees and employer.

### 2. Issues to Consider

*Prevalence of those with Disabilities:* Sometimes employers do not realize the sheer amount of people who are affected by disabilities in their work place. As of 2010, nearly 1 in 5 people had a disability; roughly 30.6 million had difficulty walking or climbing stairs, or used a wheelchair, a cane, crutches, or a walker (United States Census Bureau, 2012). Ambulatory users may not notice there is a need for different arrangement of spaces because they do not know what to look for. When someone realizes the amount of people affected by the office design and how simple some changes can be to accommodate them, it is more likely that positive change will ensue.

*“Loss of Profits” Myth:* Many employers assume that making their workplace more universally designed is too costly. Hundreds of thousands of employees become disabled each year and leave the workplace permanently. Their former employers must bear the burden of replacing them as well as paying disability benefits, and taxpayers must help fund public benefit programs for them such as Social Security Disability Income (SSDI) (Mueller, 2001). Costs add up for the employer when they take time to hire a new employee, and train them. It can also take time for a new employee to become as efficient as experienced workers.

Providing accommodations for people with disabilities reduces risk of injury and shows that the office values diversity and safety (North, 2016). Accommodating a worker not only prevents a larger financial loss, but also shows others at the company that the employer cares for them as individuals. This can help to create a caring work culture.

*Privacy:* People may need a private space to discuss private matters, or meet a client. Some workers find it easier to work in a quiet environment. If an employee has difficulty working with noise, then it may be more challenging for them to work productively. Privacy may not be necessary at all times, but users should have controls to make spaces more or less private to suit their needs.

*Temporary vs. Permanent Arrangements:* Workers may rearrange different spaces in the building for group meetings. This is acceptable, but should not discriminate from those who use wheeled mobility devices. The office may benefit from instituting a policy that requires employees to place furniture back into an approved pattern after they’ve used a space. This will allow flexibility, while ensuring that the space maintains the goals of suiting a wide range of body sizes and abilities.

### **3. Related Standards**

[ADA 2010 Standards—206.2.8 Employee Work Areas](#) requires that furniture is placed outside common use circulation paths. Modular furniture may be organized in a way that affects circulation accessibility (United States Access Board, 2010). A standard advisory references the Equal Employment Commission (EEOC) requires non-discrimination in the workplace and can provide further guidance on how to reasonably accommodate people with disabilities. These standards are fairly aligned with the *isUD Solutions*. The *Solutions* offer more thorough reasoning and guidelines to accommodate people in the office space.

[Whole Building Design Guide—Office](#) provides guidelines for designing an office space. Over 50 percent of workers in the U.S. spend the workday in office buildings and spaces, and employers today increasingly bear the responsibility of providing a quality workspace (Whole Building Design Guide, 2016). Thus the office space type is typically a flexible environment that integrates technology, comfort, safety, and energy efficiency to provide a productive, cost-effective, and aesthetically pleasing working environment (Whole Building Design Guide, 2016). This resource provides perspectives for employers to consider when designing spaces for their workers. These objectives can be considered in conjunction with the *isUD Solutions*.

### **4. Measurement and Verification**

Space requirements for universal design strategies should be allocated during the schematic design and design development phases. The *isUD Solutions Chapter 2: Space Clearances and isUD Clear Floor Space and isUD Turning Space* sections apply to office design, especially the arrangement of furniture.

After the furniture is in place, the workers may wish to rearrange it at certain times. If they want to rearrange a space for a few hours or a day, they should replace furniture when they are

finished. If they want the furniture to be rearranged for days or months, however, they may need to provide a sketch to receive approval. This would likely be necessary if employees wanted to rearrange their workstations. Furniture in a lounge would be more easily reorganized since it would directly affect fewer people. The office should post diagrams in areas where the furniture can be moved. The diagrams should illustrate different arrangements of the furniture that allow wheeled mobility device users equal access.

## 5. Design Considerations

1. **Required:** All office spaces have furniture sized and arranged to allow people who use wheeled mobility devices to navigate through the entire space. When someone is not physically able to travel through a space, it segregates them from their peers. The person who works at the office may stick to certain routes rather than travel around the office freely like their peers. Or a visitor may not be able to enter the office easily. A universally designed office space lets users, including visitors, easily navigate through the entire space. “[Universal design] creates a strong first impression. [...] Comfortable seating, clearly labeled signs and optimal lighting can keep your guests in a good mood and put them in a position of responsiveness during meetings” (North, 2016). Physical access to a space is the first requirement to grant use of the space. Selecting furniture and arranging them in the space are simple tasks that do not require much, if any, extra time or money. It does, however, make an important statement that the business is committed to inclusion.

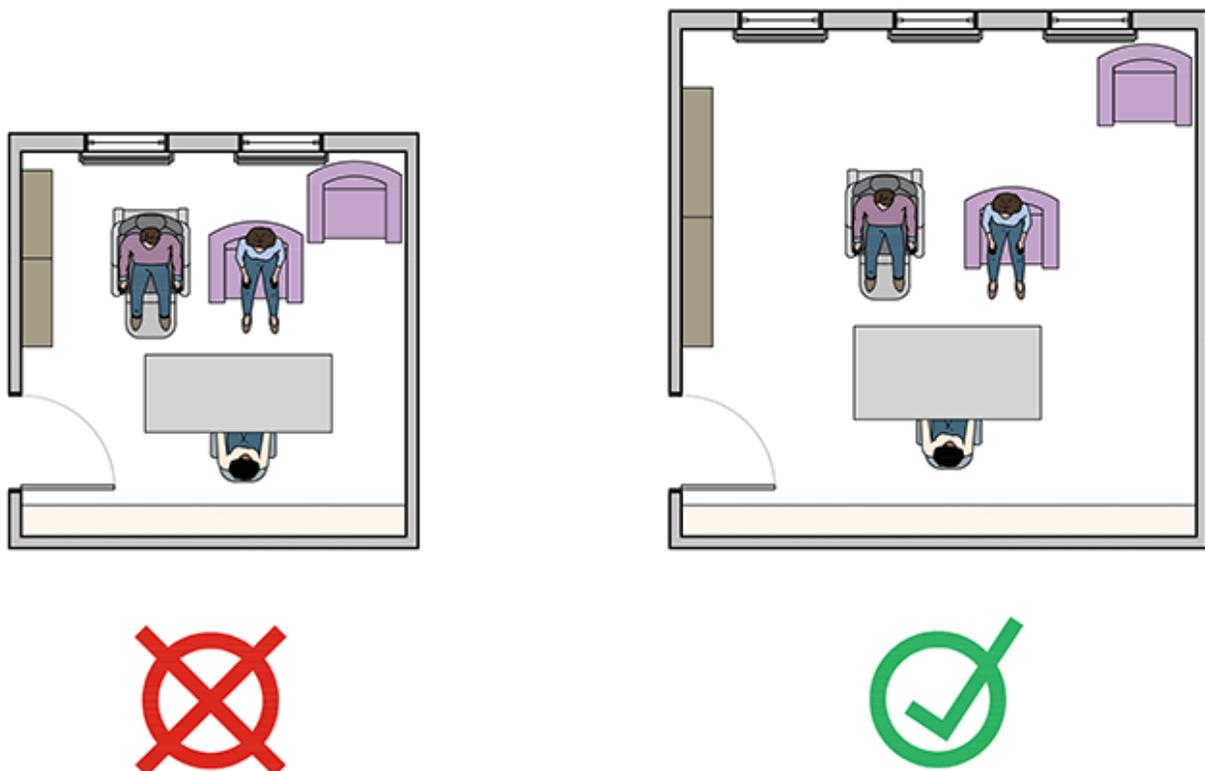
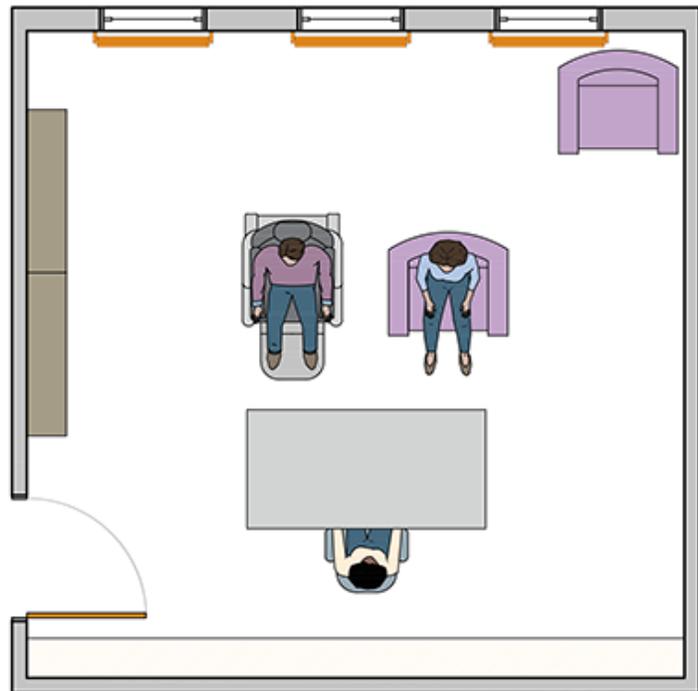


Figure 1: On the left, the room is not large enough for the furniture selected, making it difficult for people to maneuver when others are seated. On the right, users can navigate the space without disrupting the surrounding space and furnishings.

2. *Office spaces are available in various occupancy capacities.* Office spaces can be large or small, private or open, and traditional or alternative in design. Different spatial designs allow users to speak with clients, give in-house presentations, and work in groups. Providing varied office spaces could allow the users to choose what spatial arrangement is best for them. When users are more comfortable in a space, they can focus on the task at hand (Croasmun, 2004).
  
3. *Selected office spaces have built-in and user-adjustable privacy controls (e.g., doors, sound proofing, blinds, room dividers, etc.).* Open floor plan offices have become a popular trend in office design. One downside to this trend is that privacy is usually taken away from the workers. Workers can hear and see one another; even people that are several feet away can be heard. One way to allow users personalization is to provide built-in and user-adjustable privacy controls.

In *Figure 2*, the window blinds and a sound proof door add privacy to the office area. It is also possible to add higher visual partitions and glazed privacy screens to cubicles. Office workers should be able to request certain meeting spaces so that they are able to make calls to clients. This way the workers and the client can hear each other better, focus better, and keep from distracting nearby coworkers. The room should be accessible to wheeled mobility device users and have an outlet for a laptop or phone charger.



*Figure 2: Office with sound proof door and window blinds.*

[Steelcase](#) is a company that provides furniture and room designs to accommodate various workplace needs. Their products include a small enclave for a quick call, an enclosed space for two people that supports concentrated collaboration, and a quiet space for a worker to be alone and rejuvenate, among others (Steelcase, n.d.). Room designs need to be evaluated for universal design properties, but this company's work serves to show that there is a trend in providing private spaces in an open office. Similar solutions allow employees to be more focused on their work and accommodate those who prefer to spend some time in more private work spaces.

## 6. Definitions

The following definitions are adapted from...

Ambulatory user	Someone who is able to walk and does not require an aid
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## 7. References

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