

**In this issue of the EAO Supervisor Newsletter, we discuss ways that Universal Design principles can be used to foster an inclusive working environment.**

### **What is Universal Design?**

Universal Design is the process of making a product, experience, or environment accessible to and usable by as many people as reasonably possible without the need for special adaptation.<sup>1</sup> The goal of Universal Design is to eliminate unnecessary barriers and support all people accessing a space (whether physical or not).

A classic example of Universal Design in the built environment are curb cuts. Instead of steep drop-offs from the sidewalk to the street, many streets have sloping curbs with raised bumps called "curb cuts" that make it easier and safer for physically disabled and visually impaired citizens to move in a city. Curb cuts also benefit people using bicycles, strollers, or carts on the sidewalk. Universal design benefits everyone by considering a more diverse group of needs in the community.

### **Why should managers think about Universal Design?**

Employees come from diverse backgrounds, and everyone thinks, communicates, and works in different ways. In the workplace, Universal Design can be used to develop solutions that meet the needs of all employees. Universal Design is all about considering **everyone's** needs, to **everyone's** benefit.<sup>2</sup>

Universal Design can also benefit employee mental health and sense of belonging at work. Some employees prefer to complete their work without accommodations but feel that the workplace is not designed with them in mind. They may be able to complete their work well, but it may take an outsized amount of effort or be unnecessarily stressful. Others may feel that their accommodations single them out and set them apart from other employees, particularly in more rigid workplace environments. Universal Design can help make every employee feel valued and included no matter their circumstances.

Universal Design is **not** a replacement for individual accommodations that are tailored to an employee's specific needs. Those clearly identified accommodations are necessary for many employees, and managers must honor them. However, Universal Design embraces the many differences that can exist in a workplace, including language, age, disability, and neurodiversity. Universal Design, paired with formal accommodations for some, creates a more inclusive working environment where all employees can flourish.

### **How can managers use Universal Design principles to support employees?**

Managers can use Universal Design principles to create a more inclusive work environment. Instead of making assumptions about how employees think or function, consider offering a range of options that allow everyone to fully participate. These are just some of the many ways that

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<sup>1</sup> <<https://www.housing.wisc.edu/2022/04/inclusive-language-series-ableism-universal-design/>>

<sup>2</sup> <https://differentbrains.org/addressing-neurodiversity-through-universal-design/>

supervisors can make their workplace more welcoming, productive, and inclusive using Universal Design:

- **Convey information in multiple ways:** Not all employees process information best by reading an email. Incorporating verbal and visual representations of the same information alongside a written explanation can ensure that multiple learning preferences are included in your message. When providing written materials, consider including text-to-speech, Braille, digital text and large print.
- **Make presentations accessible:** Presentations can be challenging to process for some employees, and often impart important information. When possible, record presentations so that employees can reference them later to clarify their understanding or refresh their memories. To make presentations more accessible, turn on captioning and use a microphone if you're talking in front of a group. Instead of providing accommodations after the fact, start planning an event with the assumption that your audience will have a variety of visual, auditory, and information processing needs.
- **Rethink participation:** Think about the ways that you evaluate presence and participation in the workplace. Instead of relying on social norms and body-language cues, like eye contact, think about the tangible contributions that an employee has made. Provide multiple ways for employees to engage with their work, and assess their work on multiple dimensions. Some employees may not show their engagement visibly, and that's okay. In virtual meetings, some employees may strongly prefer to keep their cameras and microphones off. Whenever possible, allow employees to have agency and decide how they'd prefer to engage during virtual meetings.
- **Provide clear instructions:** Not all employees successfully "read between the lines" in interpersonal communication. As a supervisor, give explicit and clear instructions to employees, including what they should do if they're struggling with a task or need help. As well, do your best to let people know what to expect in meetings, trainings, and other work events. A clear agenda or meeting description can turn a meeting with a supervisor from an anxiety-inducing nightmare to a meaningful, psychologically safe encounter.
- **Provide low-stakes feedback:** Don't assume that employees have an inherent or objective understanding of their own work performance. Offer clear, frequent, and growth-oriented feedback to employees, so they can reflect on their achievements and any new goals they need to set in order to thrive in their role. Employees benefit from reassurance that they're doing well, and can make changes early if you identify an area that needs improvement. This practice also makes performance evaluations more psychologically safe and less stressful for employees, as they've practiced having these conversations over time and know that their manager wants them to succeed.

Using universal design principles promotes inclusivity in the workplace and helps all employees meet their full potential. You can take your learning a step further with the following resources:

- For questions on specific accommodation policies for employees, contact [Employee Disability Resources \(EDR\)](#).

- To find inclusivity guides, or to access synchronous and asynchronous trainings on Disability and Ableism Awareness, visit [Accessibility @ UW Madison](#).

### **LifeMatters Support Session**

Empathia will be hosting an open conversation with one of our experienced behavioral health clinicians. The emphasis is on recognizing common struggles, normal reactions and effective coping strategies. You will have an opportunity to submit questions during the session.

Host: Haleh Pals

Date: Monday, December 12, 2022

Time: 12:00 pm, Central Standard Time (Chicago, GMT-06:00)

Session number: 2663 942 5576

Session password: 3EaxSJpMm44

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To join the training session  
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1. Go to

<https://prohealthcare.webex.com/prohealthcare/k2/j.php?MTID=t823f95b66d252caf7dbb5f3d5eed8f56>

2. Enter your name and email address.

3. Enter the session password: 3EaxSJpMm44 4. Click "Join Now".

5. Follow the instructions that appear on your screen.

To view in other time zones or languages, please click the link

<https://prohealthcare.webex.com/prohealthcare/k2/j.php?MTID=t017b7578fe02c01be10641801865aa6e>

### **LifeMatters Monthly Promotions and Resources**

Our affiliate partner, LifeMatters, offers promotions, newsletters, webinars and more! Go to [mylifematters.com](http://mylifematters.com) and sign in with Bucky2. Webinars are located under "Quick Links."

This month's promotional content includes:

Flyers:

- Domestic Violence
- Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder
- Domestic Violence Concerns (for Managers)

Posters:

- PTSD
- Reach Out
- Rest Well