



BUILT ENVIRONMENT

TOOL 3: Developing an Accessible Design Framework

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DEVELOPING AN ACCESSIBLE DESIGN FRAMEWORK

Developing An Accessible Design Framework

The working environment should be an accessible, usable, and inclusive environment for all applicants, workers, customers, clients, and partners within your business. Facilities, departments, IT, and property teams should be encouraged to go beyond local building codes to create an accessible built environment that can quickly adapt to meet the needs of all individual users. Every refurbishment should contribute to increased accessibility and usability within the workplace. [1] By following a design framework, employers can take the necessary steps to ensure that their built environment is inclusive of all workers.

“Individuals with physical disabilities – including mobility, vision, or hearing – could participate more fully in their workplaces and could work longer hours if their place of work improved accessibility. the Conference Board of Canada estimates 301 million total work hours a year could be added to the workforce by 2030 – about 1.3% of annual ‘work effort’ in Canada – if Canadian employers improved physical accessibility and inclusivity.” – Gibbard et al., 2018 [2]

Opportunities for Inclusive Design

Developing and using a design framework can help an organization make their premises more accessible. Consider using a design framework when any of the following opportunities present themselves. [3]

- Commissioning a new build, refurbishment, or change of purpose
- Moving to new premises
- Expanding, merging, or downsizing
- Reacting to external changes (e.g., the COVID-19 pandemic)
- Reacting to staff and customer needs and feedback (e.g., hybrid work, online services, smaller working hubs closer to where employees reside)
- Responding to need or other significant change (e.g., environmental requirements, security)
- Following legal requirements such as the [Accessible Canada Act](#)
- Other opportunities such as economical and sustainable innovations

Enhancing accessibility is not done in competition with other strategic goals – inclusive design, if done well, can and will bolster other business priorities too.

WHAT DO I NEED TO CONSIDER WHEN BUILDING MY FRAMEWORK?

Identifying Existing Standards [4]

An employer should take on the responsibility to check whether their employees are aware of the Canadian Human Rights Act and the Employment Equity Act. If not, make sure all resources are readily available and accessible for an employee with a disability to access and further have an open dialogue about any possible concerns or questions about accessibility. For more information, please visit <https://laws-lois.justice.gc.ca/eng/acts/A-0.6/>.

Setting a baseline for inclusive design standards is a developmental mandate to help all parties and relevant stakeholders are on the same page. Discussions regarding building code, national standards, and others important notions are needed to create a foundational premise for an accessible built environment.

Selecting a Methodology [4]

The use of the employee's journey as a basis for your methodology

Adopting a methodology to apply to all new and existing buildings and work environments is important for employees to review on their employment journey. The employee journey will take into account the needs of persons with disabilities whether they be mobility-related, sensory, intellectual, or others, along with the needs of all staff in a diverse workforce.

Weighing Risks and Priorities [4]

Develop priorities for heritable buildings

Access for all is entirely possible in new buildings but may be less easy in existing buildings and working environments. For older buildings, it can be difficult to identify where to start. Take a look at what your priorities are, for instance, if there are obvious risks in the built environment, you should address those first. Then, make sure to check whether your building upholds local legislation and organizational standards. Finally, start looking at any requested improvements (i.e., reasonable adjustments) that can be incorporated into building alteration programs, to really make the step towards disability confidence.

Identifying the Benefits of Inclusive Design [4]

Along with risk assessment, it is important to identify benefits as well! By achieving inclusive design in the workplace, businesses will become attractive to the widest pool of talent and enable all to be part of the work community. It will also help unlock the potential of existing employees to everyone's benefit.



WHAT DO I NEED TO CONSIDER WHEN BUILDING MY FRAMEWORK?

Healthy and Safety Check

Keeping workers with disabilities safe during an emergency protocol requires in-depth planning. Provide all staff with information regarding your business's current workplace emergency response procedures. Ensure that key documents, such as emergency procedures, are available and accessible to all. For more information, Accessibility Standards Canada has developed a guideline for accessible communications during emergencies for persons with disabilities:

<https://accessible.canada.ca/resources/emergency-communication-guidelines-persons-disabilities>

Providing Accommodations [4]

Provide means for self-assessment for workplace accommodations

Businesses who are transparent about their built environment standards allow their employees and to self-assess their work situation and request workplace accommodations. For more information, please visit [Accommodations Tool 7 - Breaking Down The Accommodation Process](#)

Practicing Accountability [4]

Place managerial staff in charge of implementing requests for change

Commercial success and responsible operations are crucial for sustainable returns and fulfilling your business's purpose. Equally important is enhancing the employee experience by helping them do more and feel better at work. Delegating responsibility for addressing accommodation requests to direct managers, and fostering dialogue and implementation from both executives and front-line staff, is key. Effective communication from higher-level advice and executive assistance is essential for initiating organizational change.

APPLYING YOUR FRAMEWORK TO REMOTE WORK ENVIRONMENTS

Applying your Framework to Remote Work Environments

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, workers with disabilities commonly requested to, and were likely denied from, working at home as an accommodation. However, businesses around the globe were forced to pivot and remote work became the reality for many. Despite the challenges that it has brought, the COVID-19 pandemic had created opportunities for organizations to focus on enhancing the accessibility of workers' built environments. Here are some of the shifts that you could implement: [3]

- Enable staff to continue working remotely
- Offer a flexible or hybrid work model
- Re-purpose your office or site
- Use offices further away from a central hub
- Follow health and safety protocols, such as increased physical barriers, distancing, cleaning stations, etc.
- Review the built environment, and introduce improvements for the organization

Supporting Workers at Home

One of the most challenging aspects of managing workers from home is that you cannot physically be there to see and support them. Staying connected, conducting regular check-ins, and providing workplace supports such as flexibility or accommodations are good practice when a worker is at home. As well, striving to promote your company culture can be difficult across different work environments.

Accessibility Standards Canada has created an excellent resource that details best practices for accessibility when working from home. [5] Their key takeaways are:

- Working from home during an emergency event presents different barriers for everyone.
- Employees with disabilities and their managers both have a role to play in removing these barriers
- Accessibility needs may change depending on the emergency
- Employees and their managers must discuss these needs often.



APPLYING YOUR FRAMEWORK TO REMOTE WORK ENVIRONMENT



Role of Managers

- Discuss accessibility needs with workers
- Create accessible online workspaces for everyone
- Ensure employees' accessibility needs are met



Role of Workers

- Make accessibility needs clear
- Work with manager to find a proper solution
- Discuss these needs often

Working from Home Accessibility Checklist [6]

- ✓ **Equipment:** Do employees have the accommodations they need to work? They should have the same adaptive equipment and software as they do in the office. For example: screen readers, adjustable desks.
- ✓ **Flexible work schedules:** Consider the needs of employees with disabilities and unexpected changes to their regular services and supports.
- ✓ **Accessibility of online meetings:** Are online meetings accessible for everyone? Choose an accessible online platform, assess the needs of employees, test the platform for accessibility and distribute accessible documents.

To help ensure that your employees are optimally supported when working from home, please visit [Accommodations Tool 1 - Understanding Workplace Accommodations](#)

TRAINING YOUR STAFF TO THINK 'ACCESSIBILITY FIRST'

Training Your Staff to Think 'Accessibility First' [3]

All staff need to undergo appropriate training on what accessibility means and how they best can support it in their role. When developing training materials or sourcing training, remember that the scope and depth of the training should be suitable for the position. For instance, customer-facing service agents may require more focused training on accessibility to welcome and serve customers with disabilities effectively and sensitively.

Case Study: The Impact of Accessibility Training

Picture a bank that has sliding doors that open automatically to provide ease of entry. The reception is situated close to entrance, which means that each time the doors open, the staff experience a cold draft in the wintertime. Because the staff have a dress code they must follow, they often become uncomfortably cold. To remedy this, they turn off the automatic doors, and put up a sign directing all clients to enter and exit through a small side door that needs to be pushed. However, workers and customers with disabilities may struggle with the heavy doors or be unable to enter and exit.

How could you effectively manage this situation?

Flexibility is key. Although uniforms, building spaces (i.e., entrances), building temperature, etc. are set in a standard way, always be open to offering alternative options so that all people can fully participate. For instance, you can provide portable heaters stationed at the reception to mitigate the cold drafts of air from automatic doors or alter the dress code so that workers can be more comfortable.

A SPOTLIGHT ON THE GOVERNMENT OF CANADA

A Spotlight on the Government of Canada

The Accessible Canada Act and the Nothing Without Us Accessibility Strategy for the Public of Service of Canada came into effect in June 2019. This strategic vision for the federal civil service serves as a function for proactive changes initiated by disability confident business leaders towards disability inclusiveness. With this, came the establishment of 5 key goals to meet the strategy's vision of creating the most accessible and inclusive public service in the world. For more information, please watch '[Spotlight on ACCESSibility Micro-Learning Series: Built Environment](#)'.

Description: In this video, experts share advice and examples of how the Government of Canada's workplaces can adhere to accessibility requirements and ensure that future service contracts include high standards for accessibility.

REFERENCES

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- [5] Accessibility Standards Canada (2022). Best practices for accessibility when working from home. Government of Canada. <https://accessible.canada.ca/resources/best-practices-accessibility-working-home>
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