



“When I consult with a company on how to make their office space accessible, I first ask what the company hopes to achieve? And then ask them to picture how their employees, whether they are abled or disabled, navigate the exterior of their building, through the interior and to their individual work space. Are they free to access their work space independently and comfortably? Are they able to work unobstructed by any noise, visual or tactile obstacles? Are they able to quickly and efficiently evacuate the building in a worst-case scenario?”

Bawa mentions some of the, often overlooked, ways a company can make their workspace universally accessible.

“Something like moving a door handle lower down on a door is just one way you can ensure that all employees are able to open and close doors unassisted,” he says. “Or creating plug points higher up on a wall so that someone who is in a wheelchair wouldn’t have difficulty bending over to plug something in.”

“Many people take things for granted but little things can become big obstacles for some.”

He explains that correct signage is actually one of the most important aspects of Universal Access.

“It’s very important that employees and visitors to your workplace are able to find their way around the building easily. That means there has to be enough of the correct signage. You have to think about the letter height and the font on the signs, the colour contrast, is it easy to see? Does it provide enough information? Does it use international symbols? You should also provide signs in braille for sight-impaired people.”

Workplace Universal Access is focused on ensuring a comfortable working environment for all, where their work is not hindered by any external factors. For example, having the right acoustics in an office space so that background noise is absorbed rather than enhanced, or having appropriate lighting for specific activities, not just standard lighting.

One thing Bawa says is often overlooked by companies is a detailed and comprehensive evacuation plan for all employees.

“Apart from a fire alarm, there should also be strobe lighting as an emergency device, for the hearing impaired, as well as an evacuation chair in the fire escape staircase for employees who are in wheelchairs.”

While companies start to look at Universal Access or Design to ensure compliance with Health and Safety regulations, both Bawa and Khumalo believe that UA is more than just ticking a box.

“Companies need to think beyond compliance,” Khumalo says. “Universal Access is about equality for all. There are three aspects of Universal Accessibility: *infrastructure, information, and communication & collaboration*. I believe that it all starts with communication and collaboration. Honest conversations and a willingness to include everyone in all discussions will lead to effective adaptation.”

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