

Morgan Lovell



Insights

# Designing workplaces for diversity, equity and inclusion



# Designing workplaces for diversity, equity and Inclusion

Now that businesses are returning to the office, albeit in varying degrees, many are examining the spaces they inhabit through a new lens. Increasingly, business leaders realise that diversity, equity and inclusion (DE&I) are essential elements for a happy, healthy, and productive workforce and have learned the value of incorporating DE&I into their workplaces.

Research by **Gartner** suggests that DE&I makes business sense too. A diverse mix of perspectives, styles and approaches reflects our wider society and fosters better

performance.<sup>1</sup> Real DE&I covers a broad spectrum so, to create a workplace with a sense of belonging, consideration must be given to a wide range of needs.

In a recent Morgan Lovell survey of 500 employees, more than one in three (35%) said their workplace is an example of good DE&I but with areas for improvement. However, nearly half indicated that their workplace was not a positive example of DE&I. This suggests that the dial is moving, and many organisations are improving their approach to DE&I, but there's still much work to do.

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.gartner.com/smarterwithgartner/diversity-and-inclusion-build-high-performance-teams>

# The different DE&I factors

Most people will be familiar with the term 'diversity and inclusion'. Equity is a relatively new addition to the acronym that addresses fair treatment, equal opportunity and ensuring access to information and resources for all. The number of factors businesses must consider when it comes to DE&I has also increased in recent years, from traditional ones, including age, gender and physical disability to more modern considerations, such as neurodiversity. According to Harvard Health, Neurodiversity describes the idea that people experience and interact with the world around them in many different ways; there is no one "right" way of thinking, learning, and behaving, and differences are not viewed as deficits.





## Accessibility

Workspaces must be suitable for those with physical disabilities. It's a legal requirement in the UK that areas such as entryways, stairwells, lifts, thoroughfares and washrooms have wheelchair access. Likewise, the office must have areas that are spacious, ergonomic and adjustable to accommodate people with different physical needs. This means incorporating variety and choice into the office design, including desks that can adjust for wheelchair users and people at different heights and meeting rooms large enough so that people using wheelchairs, motorised scooters or service animals feel comfortable.

You must also consider those who are visually impaired and people with hearing difficulties. The office should be easy to navigate while offering human and virtual support where appropriate.

Despite nearly 1 in 10 of the population suffering from colourblindness, many companies fail to accommodate these challenges into the workplace design. **Research** has found that identifying colours is an integral part of the job for 9 out of 10 people with a colour vision deficiency, yet 75% have reported that being colourblind slows them down at work.<sup>2</sup> So you may want to think about how you use colour to signpost everything from fire access points to designated work areas.

<sup>2</sup> <https://enchroma.app.box.com/s/edqysublnpo25joj5qilo412ablvgzhw>



## Age

42% of the UK workforce is over 50,<sup>3</sup> and people in this age group can face challenges in the workplace. According to the Centre for Ageing Better, the number of people in their 50s and 60s who feel unsatisfied at work and in less control has increased in recent years.<sup>4</sup>

One factor behind these trends is that many companies make workplace decisions based on misconceptions about what people need at different stages of their lives. There has been a focus on the idea that Millennials and Generation Z want to find jobs with purpose and work for responsible employers. Since lockdown, the conventional wisdom is that young people also want their workplaces to provide connections, social capital, and learning and development opportunities. However, it's important to remember that older employees need these things too.

Designing social spaces, from kitchens and breakrooms, lounge areas with soft seating and added back support, for example, to exercise space and games rooms, should be for every age group. Around the ping-pong table, for example, everyone benefits with a few comfortable chairs to watch the game from and an easily readable board on the wall to keep score. Age and ability doesn't dictate the desire to participate, so it's important to make a games room inviting for all colleagues to use.

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<sup>3</sup> [https://www.cipd.co.uk/Images/age-inclusive-recruitment-guide\\_tcm18-101623.pdf](https://www.cipd.co.uk/Images/age-inclusive-recruitment-guide_tcm18-101623.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> <https://ageing-better.org.uk/sites/default/files/2021-11/boom-and-bust-report-the-last-baby-boomers.pdf>

The same goes for younger people. As your employees spend more time in the workplace, you must remember that many young people depend on a central workplace for more than just socialising or collaborating. With the rising cost of living, many young people (especially those living in metropolitan areas) don't have adequate space at home to do all their tasks. With this in mind, you could consider designing and fitting a range of zones that support focused work, including quiet zones such as libraries, agile work stations that give employees the opportunity to jump into solo work when needed, and individual booths or phone pods where they can do their work free from distraction. Meanwhile, it's a good idea to use acoustic materials that help absorb sound in these spaces.

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## Gender and sexual orientation

Gender identity and sexual orientation are sensitive issues that must be handled with care, empathy and respect. The goal should be to create workplaces that promote DE&I for all, celebrating individual differences while ensuring everyone feels safe, welcome and accepted.

The design of the workplace should consider how every part of the journey impacts different genders, from eliminating **transparent staircases** to providing easy access to the bathrooms. In an effort to create an inclusive workspace, consideration within space and budgetary allowances could include changing rooms, a milk expressing room for parents and easy access to menstrual care products. It's also vital that you provide a level of flexibility for colleagues who have family responsibilities.

Gender identity is a complex and evolving consideration. Your workplace design must be inclusive to everyone within the LGBTQ+ community, including those who identify as a different gender from the one assigned at birth. To make this happen, you should consider installing gender neutral toilet and shower or changing facilities while ensuring that no signage for wayfinding uses gendered language or symbols.

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## Faith and cultural origin

Most modern organisations comprise multi-faith workforces, so your workplace must be inclusive of many different cultures and perspectives. You need dedicated spaces where people can observe religious or cultural customs, such as multi-faith rooms, and you must ensure that the language and imagery used around the workplace is inclusive and sensitive to people's unique needs. If you want to hang posters of people on the wall, they should reflect the diversity of your teams.

Supporting social dynamics and team culture in the office should certainly be encouraged, but it's important to do this in a way that places healthy social behaviours as the focus. For example, it's a good idea to install some social spaces where drinking alcohol isn't central. Sofas or bar-style seating and circular tables in the right configuration and layout

encourage natural social behaviour, allowing people to engage with colleagues freely and comfortably.

It's crucial that those in charge of the workplace design and experience work together with HR to understand everyone's individual needs as well as the numerous religious and cultural festivals. If you have space that can be easily converted around Christmastime, you should think about using that same space for other holidays such as Eid and Rosh Hashanah.

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# DE&I in action

Now that we have a better idea of the key areas of DE&I in the workplace, it's time to put a strategy in place. This requires a detailed and multi-faceted approach with your people at the centre.



# Workstreams

At the beginning of any workplace design project, a crucial first step is to create a team that works in a dedicated workstream where they can focus solely on DE&I from conception to execution, applying learnings and changes along the way. This team should comprise DE&I specialists who can interpret people's needs and develop an action plan for the workplace.

# Team input

Talking to employees will help you clarify the important nuances of your DE&I strategy. Providing employees with the opportunity to put forward their ideas and concerns ensures that the design is rooted in evidence and far more likely to deliver a better workplace. Openness to team input also encourages self-advocacy, a vital step for historically marginalised groups central to DE&I efforts.



## Familiarisation days

Inviting people with specific needs on-site during the fit out (as soon as it's safe to do) to familiarise them with the layout and all the different nuances of the design has multiple benefits. It allows employees to test the environment and provide important feedback if they feel something isn't working as it should. This step would be particularly powerful for those with a visual impairment, allowing them to review the location of Braille markers on handrails, pillars and other locations. It also helps employees hit the ground running when the workplace opens officially, reducing the time they take to feel settled and comfortable in their new environment.





## Neighbourhoods

An effective way of building a DE&I-friendly office is through the creation of neighbourhoods. A neighbourhood system allows you to designate spaces for your employees' specific needs, preferences, or activities, even as they change during the working day. A popular neighbourhood for organisations is a designated space for people who need quiet time to concentrate. Alternatively, there are neighbourhoods for either formal or informal team activities. These might include spaces with equipment to help colleagues share ideas and think creatively, such as digital whiteboards, or areas with comfortable furniture that encourage people to sit down and socialise.

What's more, this strategy ensures that the design fully supports DE&I efforts. Situating a prayer room next to a games room or social space is inappropriate. But it does

make sense for a prayer room to be located near the medical needs room, where privacy and quiet are essential. At the same time, the neighbourhood system allows neurodivergent workers to choose a space suitable to their needs.

Choice and flexibility are fundamental to DE&I at work. When Morgan Lovell surveyed staff on how the organisation could improve DE&I in their office, nearly half (48%) chose 'providing more flexible spaces to work in', making it the most popular answer.

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## Futureproofing

When it comes to futureproofing for DE&I, you need to be ready for many eventualities.

→ Many people struggle with their gender identity in silence. When a team member finally builds up the confidence to come out or transition, you need to ensure that your workplace is ready to support them on their journey. One possible step is to designate some toilet facilities as gender neutral by changing symbols/ icons, removing traditional gender signifiers such as blue and pink colours, and ensuring these bathrooms feature facilities and receptacles that cater to everyone's needs. Using gender-inclusive language such as "welcome everyone" instead of "ladies" and "gentlemen" (or "boys" and "girls") in your signage and communications throughout the employee or visitor journey ensures everyone feels included. You may also want to provide people with the

opportunity to share their preferred pronouns by using pin badges or stickers on lockers/desks. Most importantly, you must explain these changes to your teams so that they understand their colleagues' needs.

→ As people get older, the likelihood of developing degenerative diseases increases. You need to ensure that your medical room has suitable facilities or can be adapted to support people with Parkinson's or other disorders. The overall design of your office must also consider those with fine motor and mobility issues. Key actions include creating rooms and passages that eliminate tight turns or bottle-neck situations, ensuring that lighting illuminates potential hazards and introducing focal points, such as paintings or posters, for people to orientate themselves in the space more effectively.

→ Accidents can change a person's living experience without warning, so building adaptability into the workplace to accommodate mobility aids and disability access is important. Installing anti-slip materials underfoot is a great first step while hard surfaces or sharp edges can be replaced with soft alternatives where appropriate. You also need to consider those who develop sight or hearing difficulties. Installing Braille in different stages of the workplace journey, such as the entrance to a meeting room or neighbourhood, will make a visually impaired person's life much easier. Similarly, an audio-visual alarm may save the life of an employee with hearing problems in an emergency.

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# Case studies



Morgan Lovell



# Three UK

Three UK wants every single employee to feel valued. This ethos was the driving force behind the office design and fit out for the organisation's headquarters in Green Park, Reading. The goal was to create a workplace that recognised and accommodated diverse needs, including design features for visually impaired staff and gender-neutral washroom facilities.

From the outset, Morgan Lovell became integrated into Three's workstreams covering each area of the project from the design and development phase through to the handover. Morgan Lovell acted as a key contact for the leaders of each workstream to address any

requirements or questions along the way. In the DE&I workstream, for example, a team of subject matter experts considered every employee's needs and interpreted those into the final design. With new office space providing a clean slate, it was the perfect opportunity to ensure DE&I remained at the heart of the project.

The team developed a custom smart app to help all staff and visitors navigate the space. This gave all users, regardless of individual requirements, the ability to immediately customise their experience and journey through the workplace.

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.gartner.com/smarterwithgartner/diversity-and-inclusion-build-high-performance-teams>





## Support for visually impaired employees

All wayfinding text throughout the office feature a Braille option. When the site was nearing completion – and safe enough to visit – Morgan Lovell held familiarisation days with visually impaired employees to help them get to know the space better. They met on-site to walk the floors ahead of opening day, a potentially challenging time for partially sighted individuals. This step gave the employees a chance to ask questions and have the space described to them in a way they could absorb. It also provided an ideal opportunity for the Morgan Lovell team to engage with these staff and refine the locations and positioning of wayfinding Braille elements within the space before installation.

Morgan Lovell installed Braille signage for wayfinding on stairs and on different floors. Handrails convey all levels, and a Braille directory is available as employees enter each floor. Every meeting room has Braille panels and removable tags to signify a room booking. What's more, all 10 tea points are Disability Discrimination Act compliant and incorporate 3-D icons to help disabled and partially sighted individuals identify the location of amenities.

## Flexibility and choice

Diversity was key to the design in every aspect, leading to a broad spectrum of areas to meet everyone's needs. To ensure maximum inclusivity, Morgan Lovell designed a wellbeing suite and studio with a disabled access bathroom. The core W.C. facilities on this floor were also reconfigured with a gender-neutral toilet and shower.

The rest of the office splits into neighbourhoods for different needs and activities. A 'living quarter' includes a sanctuary, a chill room and a yoga studio. The 'play quarter' has neon lighting, games and an overall design that transmits high energy. A 'social quarter' has been designed for collaboration and ad-hoc encounters over food and drinks. There is a library, phone pods and booths for quiet working. Finally, the space features a variety of meeting rooms for every occasion.





# Morgan Lovell

Morgan Lovell decided to refit its office in Bracknell, Berkshire, with the lessons it had learned about how people work from the Covid-19 pandemic. Following the homeworking period, the company wanted to minimise the stress employees would feel in the return to the office. There was a significant focus on wellbeing in the design aesthetic – specifically, how the space would make people feel. This approach also ensured that DE&I played a significant role in many of the design choices and outcomes.

Step one was to ask Morgan Lovell employees what they wanted. The feedback was clear: a variety of spaces that support different needs and workstyles. As a result, choice and adaptability are the cornerstones of the new office. Quiet, mid and high energy zones with sit-stand desks feature throughout the

space. There are private areas for focused work and a mix of single and multiple user booths. Meeting rooms are different sizes and flex up or down according to the user's needs. Adjustable seating and lighting in certain areas also give users control over their environments.



## DE&I in mind

Familiarisation tours gave the team opportunities to ask questions and understand the different ways the space supports comfort and inclusivity for those with specific needs such as hearing or seeing difficulties, or those with mobility requirements.

The space was designed so wheelchair users can easily navigate the office, use meeting rooms instead of booths, sit-stand desks that adjust by height, and walkways with a generous amount of space.

The tours enabled employees to familiarise themselves with the changes before needing to use the office unassisted as part of a daily routine.

There's now a one-to-one room that serves as a versatile and flexible space for different uses. When privacy is needed, a frosting treatment can be applied over the glazing and the specially selected furniture can be easily moved to become a place for staff health checks or replaced when the room is required for different purposes.



# The art of the possible

Many of Morgan Lovell's clients visit the office when considering redesigning their own workspace, so the company was keen to use the redesign as an opportunity to demonstrate what's possible.

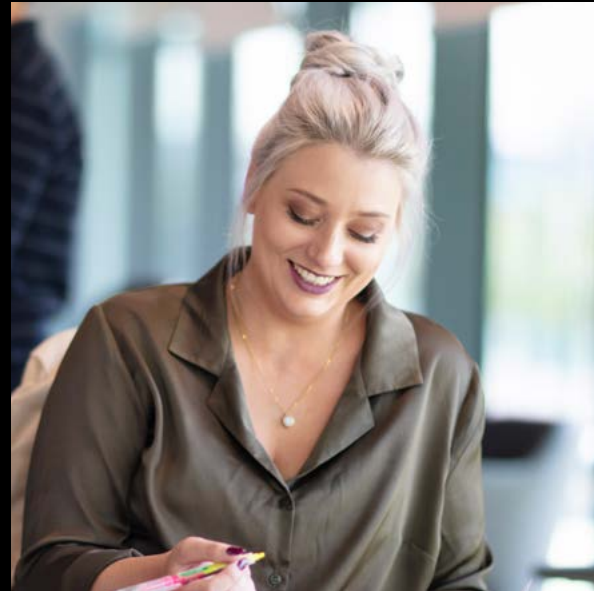
The result is a space that serves as an excellent demo space and showroom. Inside there are signposts everywhere explaining why zones have been designed a specific way and the materials used. Some of the more important text is also in 3-D to ensure that everyone has an opportunity to find this information.

Finally, technology plays a crucial role in the employee experience. Online, remote booking systems allow people to book their favourite space in advance, while air quality and energy usage are continuously tracked to ensure the environment is as healthy as possible.

To find out more about designing workplaces for DE&I, visit [morganlovell.co.uk](https://morganlovell.co.uk)



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