Ideas for Designing Inclusive Workplaces

Leaders in equity and inclusion share how to design better spaces that foster equitable and inclusive work experiences.

🕐 Read 15 minutes

"One size fits one" is a principle many organizations are taking to heart, especially in an era when choice and flexibility are critical to employee satisfaction, productivity, and retention. Inclusive design describes a constantly evolving process to produce solutions that empower each individual.

In our recent Work Better webinar, host Elena de Kan, Director of Applications and Design Consulting at Steelcase, and three leading voices in inclusivity explored how to design inclusive workspaces.

Panelists:

• Stephane Leblois, Director of Partnerships, The Valuable 500
• Francesco Zurlo, Dean, Politecnico di Milano School of Design
• Kamara Sudberry, Global Leader, Inclusive Design | Workplace Innovation, Steelcase

Elena de Kan: How would you define inclusivity?

Stephane Leblois: Inclusivity is a multi-step journey that involves lots of learning and opportunities to promote equality and equity. There is no final destination. When we're designing for people, we have to realize that people's preferences and accessibility needs change over time. Inclusive design is all about being able to evolve to meet what people need.

Francesco Zurlo: Inclusive design is a very multi-dimensional concept. We are all different, not only regarding physical features but also culture, gender, religion, generation, and so on. Amartya Sen's Theory of Capabilities emphasizes the importance of creating conditions that allow people to express their own capabilities. And from my point of view, enabling creativity facilitates inclusivity by engaging people, creating a sense of belonging, and harnessing everyone's unique capabilities and potential.

Kamara Sudberry: Inclusivity is an intersectional experience of being accommodated, empowered and valued in real time. It's about doing the important work to create deeply personal experiences that bring people together in transformational and powerful ways.

EK: Could you tell us how you practice inclusive design and how it's different from accessibility?

FZ: Accessibility focuses on physical access for people with disabilities, while inclusivity considers the diversity of all characteristics and capabilities. Creativity is a key driver of inclusivity within organizations because it's fed by unique perspectives, approaches, and backgrounds. Spaces influence behaviors, and the way you design places should consider how to unlock creativity for everyone. Creativity also requires risk, so you need to create a fearless organization where everyone feels safe to express ideas.

KS: Accessibility is very foundational to inclusive design. It is a human right, and everyone deserves to be seen, heard, valued, and appreciated with dignity and brought into spaces where you don't need to mask who you are. In addition to physical accommodations, inclusivity also considers wellbeing, sensory stimulation, cognitive functions, cultural differences and many other identities. When approaching inclusive design, we have to recognize who is excluded during the design and development process, and work together to understand the barriers, root causes, and challenges to creating an inclusive environment.

EK: What do you think are the biggest barriers companies or organizations face when it comes to making progress on inclusivity?

SL: Every company's journey is different, but there are some common themes. Inclusivity applies not only to products you're designing or built environments, but also to digital spaces, the way you run meetings, and all programs and procedures across the company. Inclusive design should be a uniform practice. If there's no consensus on how inclusive design and accessibility should be scaled across the company, the impact of your efforts is limited.

The fear of getting it wrong is also a barrier to inclusive design. This often stems from not knowing what to measure, not having the internal expertise to advance the work, and not having the right partnerships in the community. Organizations like the International Association for Accessibility Professionals are creating certifications for accessibility that help companies increase their internal capacity to advance inclusive design. Also, at Valuable 500 we're fortunate to be connected with inclusive design experts from around the world who help our companies advance their work. If you don't know where to look for external expertise, you often stagnate because you don't get that influx of new ideas you need to move forward.

Lastly, it's worth mentioning budget. This can be a challenge, especially when it comes to recessions or economic down times. However, accessibility or inclusive design is ultimately not a cost especially when you consider the fact that inclusivity enhances both the user and employee experience.

EK: How can you leverage culture to create an inclusive environment?

KS: I would like to leverage the words of Judith Huemann, the mother of the Americans with Disabilities Act in her memoir *Being Huemann* – "Disability culture – is really just a term for a culture that has learned to value the humanity in all people, without dismissing anyone for looking, thinking, believing, or acting differently."

When we talk about culture, it really comes down to a holistic approach to moving the needle on inclusive design with Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) work. If you aren't looking at culture – you are likely doing a lot of great work, but it may just be placing a lot of bandages on an infected wound. Inclusive environments come together when leaders, designers, and DEI practitioners work together and do the complex work – in this metaphor its cleaning out the wound, applying stiches to close the wound, finding the right medicine to cure the infection, and checking back to ensure it has healed properly. We can bring that intentionality and approach to a lot of the work we do by bringing people together and examining our current state and how can we come together to find powerful solutions.

FZ: I think that it's a matter of creating a design culture where the focus is taking care of users and their varied needs. This is a goal of design thinking, and it's often not so easy because it needs to start from leadership. Leaders must acknowledge and actively support design culture for it to permeate the organization. You must have an analytic approach to improving empathy and identifying the problems when you are designing something new and proposing new solutions.

Plus, customers are increasingly interested in values in today's purpose economy. Inclusivity is a key value we need to consider, and it's an ethical imperative for designers.

SL: You can leverage culture by leading with empathy and really understanding what people need. The gold standard is creating a culture internally where people can come to you with any ask at all and feel like they belong. Once you have that, people are raising their voices, trying new things, pursuing entrepreneurship, and initiating change movements. All of these activities support the company. Ultimately, internally you want a culture of inclusion, and externally you want to be able to report on what that looks like and how to measure it.

EK: Are there any springboards, advice, or examples to help people go in the right direction when it comes to fostering inclusivity?

KS: It's all about relationships. The barrier can be part of the solution – bringing people who have experienced exclusion into the design process unlocks possibilities. When you seek out diversity of perspectives, be sure to assemble your team early and continue expanding your networks and building relationships. Create a safe space for creativity, discussion, and disagreements. We hesitate to show one single space as the pinnacle of inclusive design, because context really does matter. The best strategy is to take a local, personal approach with the understanding that there will likely be several iterations and an evolution over time.

SL: Commitment at the leadership level needs to be shared across multiple functions. When we talk about complex systems and multinational companies, the responsibility doesn't just rest with the Chief Accessibility Officer or the DEI team or HR. It really spans across entire organizations. Accountability and buy-in need to be achieved at the leadership levels across all business functions. Otherwise, the idea of inclusion will only go so far.

The second piece is to amplify the voices of any people in your organization who have lived experience and internally create avenues for them to achieve leadership roles. One program right now at Valuable 500 is our Generation Valuable Program, which is a leadership development course designed to help the next generation of disabled leaders break the glass ceiling that so many encounter when they move up the ladder.

FZ: It's important to engage leaders as well as the business side of the organization if you want to improve the culture of inclusivity. For designers, it's important to learn how to interact with leaders and understand their cultural framework. An example is a research project we did in the city of Milan about improving workability for elderly people. We held a lot of workshops and co-designing sessions with the users. Inclusivity is a result of working directly with the customers.

When we start something new, we are all full of biases. We need to first recognize our own thought patterns and unlearn these biases, and then reconnect the dots to design new, inclusive solutions. Professor Antonio Grillo at the Politecnico di Milano School of Design brought up an important point: "Inclusive design starts before you even think about the design solution. It starts with you."

EK: What is one takeaway for our audience?

FZ: The idea of inclusivity is related to the idea of taking care of and connecting with others. The future of design is about putting relationships at the center of the design process. It's a new paradigm in which we no longer start with the user, but with the relationship. We are all interdependent and have a lot to learn from each other.

SL: First, it's incredibly important to lead with empathy both internally and externally and prioritize what people need. We have to understand what stakeholders ask of us, not only as a company but as citizens. A second, more controversial thing to consider is: can we as companies in this society afford to be exclusive anymore? The future generations of workers look at employers not only for benefits packages but how companies are creating a sense of belonging. If you want the best talent, you have to pursue inclusivity.

KS: Designing *with* – not just *for* – is our short phrase for inclusive design. The inclusive design process requires us to engage in learning and development on all the "isms" and biases that create exclusion like classism, racism, ableism, sexism, sizeism, homophobia, politics of beauty, etc. Don't allow assumptions or biases to hinder opportunities to learn and innovate together. Strive to work alongside people who experience the world differently than you do.

EK: Inclusive design is one of those topics that can feel overwhelming; the closer you get, the bigger it becomes. It doesn't matter what role or background you come from, it's everyone's job to ensure that the spaces we create empower everyone, and it's worth it for all of us, both individually and collectively.

AUDIENCE POLL RESULTS:

Tell us what best identifies your role/field of work.

58% – Architect & designer

16% – Other

13% – Real estate and facilities management

9% – Corporate strategy and leadership

3% – Human resources

1% – Information technology

Do you know how to create spaces where everybody feels included?

61% – No

39% – Yes

My organization has a strategy to address inclusion.

40% – Agree

27% – Undecided

16% – Disagree

14% – Strongly agree

3% – Strongly Disagree

How important is inclusive design to employee satisfaction?

63% – Very important

23% – Fairly important

11% – Important

2% – Slightly important

0% – Not important at all