How to Create Community Through Inclusive Design

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"As a mother of someone with a disability, I've always advocated on behalf of my daughter Claudia," says Jen VanSkiver, chief officer of strategic growth for Special Olympics Michigan (SOMI). "But when she was invited into the conversation during our inclusive design session for our new Inclusion Center, she shared needs and ideas I had never considered. I realized I'd been doing her a disservice by trying to speak for her."

Inclusive design considers the full range of human diversity, including people's abilities, language, culture, gender and age. At its core is the belief that people with different lived experiences should be included in the design process — to design with them and not just for them. This helps everyone feel valued, empowered and psychologically safe.

Community-Based Design, the Steelcase approach to creating vibrant workplaces embraces the same core belief. Including people in the design process leads to a stronger sense of belonging, trust and engagement, which results in greater productivity. Inclusive design brings together a wide range of people with varied lived experiences to inform Community-Based Design — creating workplaces where everyone can thrive.

Design with and for community

Some design practices focus on the averages within an employee population, with others articulating people's needs. At best, that results in an average workplace experience. Considering the full range of people's needs and encouraging them to express their perspectives creates a win-win experience. For example, automatic doors create a more accessible room for people who use a wheelchair but also make entry more manageable for everyone, whether they have a temporary disability or are simply carrying a stack of books.

"The ability for people to articulate their feelings can be a barrier. So we tend to do a lot of interpreting for them," says VanSkiver. "But when we invite people who are traditionally excluded into an environment to feel it and live in it – they communicate in a way we haven't seen before."

"Designing to create an inclusive community brings the power of design alongside diversity – the full spectrum of human beings, conditions and experiences," says Kamara Sudberry, global inclusive design leader at Steelcase. "By bringing people who will use the space into the process, you can co-create with them, not just design for them."

Inclusive design is a continuous loop, recognizing and inviting people with a diversity of perspectives into the process informed by sensory, spatial, emotional, physical, cognitive and socio-cultural factors. Together, the community and designers define needs, co-create solutions, validate and iterate as those needs evolve.

Great communities are inclusive by design

Community-Based Design allows workplaces to adapt as people's and organizations' needs change. Similarly, the continuous loop of inclusive design is a journey where designers and people with a broad range of perspectives continue to learn from one another, recognizing that perspectives can be influenced by race, socio-economic status, disability, size, sexual orientation, age, parental status, language, and many other identities.

Consider how the employee population continues to change.

People live longer — **one in six worldwide** will be 60+ by 2030 (World Health Organization).

27% of EU citizens over 16 have a disability (Eurostat).

46% of Europeans report having had a mental health problem in the last 12 months (Eurobarometer survey).

Several European and North American studies show that 60 to 70 people out of 10,000 have an autism spectrum disorder (i.e., about 1 person out of 150).

A growing understanding of these experiences allows designers to create spaces in tune with people who need more control over their environment.

A traditional design approach addresses the needs of the average employee, whereas when you design with traditionally excluded perspectives, you can address everyone's needs.

Key tenets of Community-Based Design build on the practice of inclusive design to give all employees more choice and control so they can do their best work.

Community engagement

The "Understand" phase of Community-Based Design starts with engaging a diverse group of employees and leaders to deeply understand how people work.

Social infrastructure

Just as cities need physical infrastructure for transportation or utilities, they also need social infrastructure – places that shape how people interact – to build community.

Resilient design

Flexible workplaces ensure organizations can respond to new needs and allow people to thrive as work changes.

Mixed-use spaces

Create areas or "districts" that focus on a primary mode of work, such as collaboration or socialization, and support diverse ways of working nearby. For example, a "City Center" designed for social activities also supports focus and collaboration.

Holistic measurement

Creating a way to receive ongoing feedback from the people living and working in the space supports a resilient community that adapts over time.

"The benefit of embedding an inclusive design practice into Community-Based Design is that it creates a natural feedback loop to ensure the workplace will evolve as people and their work do."

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KAMARA SUDBERRY | Steelcase Global Inclusive Design Leader