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STEPS
An Inclusive Community

ANDE Asia Access and Opportunity Learning Lab

The Social Model of Disability and Practical Workplace Accommodations

ANDE Asia Chapters

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The Social Model of Disability and Practical Workplace Accommodations

Greater awareness of diversity and small adjustments can create significant change and benefit everyone, not just people with disability.

Max Simpson, bringing learnings on Accessibility Accommodation from his B Corp certified organization, began by setting the context of inclusion through the lens of **accommodation, a modification or adjustment to a job, the work environment, or the way things are usually done.** Inclusion itself is an environment that offers affirmation, celebration, and appreciation of different approaches, styles, perspectives, and experiences, thus allowing all individuals to bring in their whole selves (and all of their identities) and to demonstrate their strengths and capacities.

The medical model of disability sees the disabled or neurodivergent person as the problem, rather than the environment, stigma, systems, or processes. The social model sees things differently; it's not the disability itself that is the problem, but rather the way society is structured and the attitudes held by individuals that create barriers and exclusion. In other words, disability is seen as a social construct rather than an inherent personal deficiency.



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It is important to recognize that 'Society creates disability.' These barriers can include inaccessible buildings, lack of accommodation, negative stereotypes, and discriminatory practices, and they can be addressed through:

- 1) **Shifting responsibility:** Instead of placing the burden on individuals to "overcome" their disabilities, the social model places responsibility on society to eliminate the barriers that prevent full participation and inclusion.
- 2) **Universal design:** The concept of universal design, which focuses on creating environments, products, and systems that are usable by all people, aligns with the principles of the social model by minimizing barriers.

The work of Steps is more focused on the social model of disability, where society is the issue, and often, there are simple solutions to these barriers that are not thought about or budgeted for in the design of things. There's also a lack of awareness and willingness to put them in place. However, willingness can be created with awareness. It is not that people are against implementing these solutions. They generally do not know that these are things that they should be doing or could be doing, or that they often are low-cost or free. Changing perceptions around disability and inclusion also helps people see that accommodations and universal design benefit everybody. Max suggested that the organizations can incorporate these into their business strategy and allocate a budget, as they can benefit the majority, not just the minority.

Universal design and inclusive policies



When we see the individual rather than societal constraints as a limitation, we are not setting up spaces or community workplaces for success. Where we promote inclusive participation, we put universal design principles in place and follow up with equitable policies.

Max Simpson, Founder and CEO at Steps

Max observed that inclusive policies are something that they see increasingly put in place than reasonable accommodations or accessibility protocols or information, especially in Thailand and some countries in the Southeast Asia region. However, these policies are rarely followed, or people do not even know of their existence.

At Steps, they advocate for bringing these policies up for revision, translating them into local languages, and incorporating them as part of onboarding systems, so that everybody joins the organization with a shared knowledge base. Although these things take time, they are seeing a shift in people willing to do that while understanding the importance of doing so.

Accommodations benefit everyone

Workplace adjustments are important because they ensure that everyone has the opportunity to participate fully and also foster an inclusive environment. These measures help remove barriers that may hinder collaboration - whether related to building access, the use of technology, or receiving information. Adjustments can be made through increased **accessibility** or the provision of appropriate **accommodations**. So, when we have accessibility accommodation in place, we're really;

- Reducing barriers or obstacles to workplace inclusion.
- Reducing discomfort or distractions
- Enhancing comfort, focus, efficiency, and productivity.
- Employees feel valued and supported by the organization

Max cited the regional data¹ showing that even people who do not feel like they need accommodation feel more positive about working in the organization that hires them, knowing that they're available. Max stressed that the organizations do not need to make these specific to one group. Once they make them available to everybody, more people might realize that they are neurodivergent.

Steps see this happen repeatedly in the companies they work with, where employees end up disclosing that they are neurodivergent post-training sessions because they understand themselves and their needs through these topics. So, this can be another great way to signal that you are that kind of company, and then provide a safe psychological space for people to disclose if they need to.

¹ [Costs and Benefits of Accommodation](#) and [6 Employment, Insurance, and Economic Issues | From Cancer Patient to Cancer Survivor: Lost in Transition](#) | The National Academies Press



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Research results² demonstrate that 71 percent of accommodations cost \$500 or less, with 20 percent of those costing nothing. Companies often spend money on less important things. So, advocating for these cost-effective measures may not be difficult. In the Southeast Asia region, the cost tends to be significantly lower; most accommodations at Steps cost \$500 or less.

The small changes people could make in any office

Steps does a lot of accommodation and accessibility audits for organizations specific to neurodiversity. They zone spaces by activity, so it's clear what happens in each zone of the working environment. They have arranged workflows where things work from left to right, so people always know what stage of the process they're in based on the flow of the work coming through.

Everything is organized and labeled all the time. This might sound simple, but it's often forgotten in many offices because people think it does not look nice, or they do not think to do it. Visual instructions are everywhere all the time. These benefits non-local language speakers. If you're working in a bilingual environment, you may consider displaying information visually rather than through written language.

Steps has learned a lot after working with a diverse range of people over the past 15 years. Some of these are simple things, like staplers come in all different shapes and sizes; some work better for some people. Max encouraged the cohort to think about these small things to show people that they are willing to think about different ways of doing things.

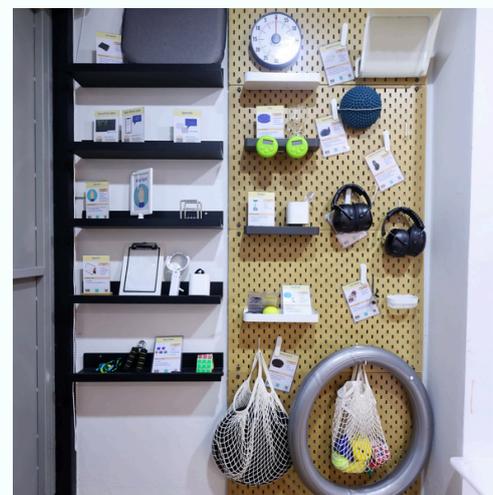
Steps has task lists for almost everything, everywhere, all the time. These are both physical ones that are on clipboards and digital ones. There are videos set up on iPads as well. All these things are designed to help somebody be independent and take away this perceived cost that people who are neurodivergent always need support in the workplace.

² Overlooked and underutilized: People with disabilities are an untapped human resource, p.264

One thing that Steps often works with companies on is the idea of job sharing. It is common that a job description is not designed to be easily accessible for somebody who is neurodivergent because they will feel that if they cannot do everything on that job list, then they do not qualify for the job. Steps promotes the idea of job sharing, where a task is broken down into five smaller steps and given to different people based on their skill sets. So, they will often have somebody good at communication and dealing with people, and interacting with clients. They might have somebody who is not literate working on digitization that does not require them to be able to read, and somebody deep into detail can focus on doing actual computer-based work, where they can do Geo mapping or other technical tasks.

People perform well in different environments, so at Steps, they have about 18 different chair types and then different ranges of desks, standing, movable, and fixed. All these different things, including lighting options, can be hard if you're in an office environment where there are limitations, but lamps and desk lamps can really help to allow people to control the environment. Steps see a lot of people change throughout the day as the natural light shifts, so they might need more light in the afternoon, when they start to feel their focus drift.

At Steps, they came up with the idea of accommodation stations, which can be in classrooms or in offices. They have the station in their cafes serving two important purposes: 1) To showcase to everybody that there are tools that they all can use every day to boost their happiness, productivity, and sensory regulation at work, and 2) the station gives everyone access to these things in a way that is destigmatized. So, the more the neurotypical people use, the more it destigmatizes use by neurodivergent individuals.



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Max finished his presentation by sharing five tips in creating an accessible workspace that came out of the partnership between Steps and IKEA, and are in line with universal design principles, which are defined by the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, United Nations. These tips include:

1. **Zone spaces by activity:** Zoning spaces in your office by activity helps to make the responsibilities within that area clearer for everyone. We often create zones without realizing it, such as areas for recycling and making copies, eating, and meeting in groups.



Zone Spaces by Activity



Arrange for the workflow

2. **Provide individual lighting options:** People perform better with different types of lighting. Employees may prefer different lighting at various times throughout the day, depending on their mood, the amount of natural light, or energy levels. You might not be able to change the overhead lighting in your space, but you can use smart lighting that allows you to use dimmable bulbs or a range of lamps that offer uplighting and downlighting. Allowing employees to pick lamps empowers them to control their environment as needed without impacting others.



Provide a range of lighting options

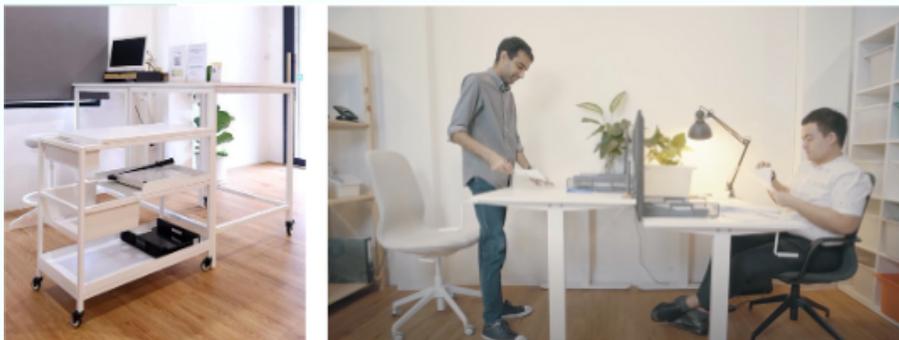
3. Provide a wide variety of seating options: Use a wide range of seating options to allow your employees to have a choice. For example, static chairs, chairs with wheels, stools, chairs with and without armrests, chairs with high backs and low backs, all have benefits for different people. By presenting employees with choices in their environmental setup, employers demonstrate that they care about individual preference and employee well-being.



Provide a variety of seating options

4. Offer desk options: The pandemic saw standing desks in the limelight, and rightfully so, as they are fantastic! Some people need movement breaks as their bodies have higher levels of energy and/or sensory needs. Interchanging between a seated and standing position is a simple method for increasing productivity and comfort.

Try having different zones of seating (standing/seated) or, even better, make all your desks adjustable so employees can regulate (control their emotions/bodies) independently without disturbing others.



Provide different desk options



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5. Keep spaces organized: Different minds work in different ways, and by having organized and clear environments, it helps make them accessible for everyone. When accessibility is thoughtful, you have good systems and processes that increase the independence of your employees and, in turn, lead to higher productivity.



Max Simpson's work at Steps demonstrates that the shift from the medical to social model of disability isn't just philosophical—it's profoundly practical. His five-point framework for accessible workspaces, developed in partnership with IKEA, proves that universal design principles translate into concrete business benefits. The accommodation stations in Steps' cafes serve as both functional tools and powerful symbols, normalizing accessibility while removing stigma. When neurotypical employees regularly use sensory regulation tools, they create an environment where neurodivergent colleagues can access support without feeling singled out.

Most importantly, Steps' 15 years of experience reveals that awareness creates willingness. Organizations aren't typically opposed to inclusive practices—they simply don't know what's possible or necessary. By demonstrating that 71% of accommodations cost under \$500, with many costing nothing, Max dismantles the primary barrier preventing widespread adoption. His approach of job-sharing and skill-based task allocation doesn't just accommodate different abilities—it optimizes human potential across the organization.

About

Asia Access & Opportunity Learning Lab

Asia Access & Opportunity Learning Lab is designed to facilitate active learning, experimentation, collaboration, and problem-solving, allowing participants to gain practical skills and knowledge through real-world scenarios with a primary focus on implementing disability and gender inclusion measures in an organization.

The sessions will be designed with participation in mind through a need assessment to understand the knowledge and capacity gaps in the ecosystem concerning disability and gender inclusion. Each session will build upon learnings from the previous one, with insights gleaned from post-session feedback surveys.

Max Simpson, Founder and CEO at Steps

Max has been working with the neurodivergent community for over 15 years, and the longer he works alongside this community, the more evidence he has that they are value-adding employees to any business. Max has demonstrated a proven track record in the inclusion space from establishing 3 vocational training centers, modelling 11 inclusive and sustainable social businesses, and delivering essential consultancy services to organisations seeking enhanced inclusivity. In 2023, Max inaugurated a research centre dedicated to advancing knowledge in this domain. A fervent advocate for the business case for disability and neuroinclusion, Max extends an invitation to potential partners to collaborate on a shared mission of fostering an inclusive society.

In 2024, Max was recognised by MB100 leaders combining profit and purpose to tackle complex social issues. Steps was honoured with the International Provision of the Year Award by the prestigious National Association for Special Educational Needs (UK). Max also sits on the board of the Special Education Network and Inclusion Association, and the Diversity Equity and Inclusion committees for both the American and British Chambers of Commerce in Thailand. There is a global need for a change in employment outcomes, and Max founded Steps in 2016 to meet that need.



