

# considering the disability discrimination act & employee welfare when designing your office



## Summary

This article will cover the definition and scope of the Disability Discrimination Act (DDA), and what effect this has on both employers and employees with disabilities. It will also discuss how you can make your workplace inclusive, and the most welcoming and productive place for any employee to work; regardless of disability or illness. The layout of an office environment is now understood to be an important factor in both staff well-being and the ability of employees to work to their full potential, and if this is combined with the guidelines laid out in the DDA, your workplace can be at its most productive all of the time.

## What is the DDA?

The DDA is an Act of Parliament that was passed in 1995 to ensure that people are not discriminated against for having a disability. A disability is defined within the DDA as “a physical or mental impairment, a specific learning difficulty or health condition that has a substantial and long-term adverse effect on a person’s ability to carry out normal day-to-day activities”. DDA is especially important in the workplace, and employers should ensure that their working environment and practices are suitable for disabled employees’ needs. Once arrangements have been put in place, disabled employees are still expected to perform to the best of their ability and fulfil their contract.

The DDA also covers Employee Welfare, which is an important topic in its own right. Employee Welfare encompasses the rights that employees have to services and extra help that enable them to live comfortably and manage their work with as little trouble as possible. This can include the provision of suitable holiday hours, the payment of travel expenses, or the ability to take maternity or sick leave.

## Designing an Inclusive Workplace

When designing the interior of your office or workplace, it is a legal requirement under the DDA to make it accessible to people with disabilities, in order to facilitate staff well-being. It is good practice to have an accessible workplace, as even if you do not have any employees with physical disabilities, you may have visitors or clients that do. The DDA requires “reasonable adjustments” to be made for employees, such as offering a different workspace if it is more appropriate, or allowing time off for doctors’ appointments or treatment. However, there are also physical adjustments that should be made, such as walkways wide enough for wheelchair users and ramps or lifts where there is also stair access. Disabled toilets should also be provided for those with mobility issues, including an alarm system and the necessary supports and space. There should also be adjustments made for employees with sight or hearing impairments; they may need a hearing loop installed on the premises, or instruction manuals for equipment copied in braille

or large print. The regulations for all of these adjustments and what is needed can be found within the DDA and from all local governments.

## The Need for Awareness of Health, Wellbeing and Welfare in the Office

Both the physical well-being and the emotional welfare of your employees should be of equal importance. Increased morale in the workplace is proven to enhance staff productivity. The Maslow theory on personality and motivation is a very popular and well-known theory the needs of employees. Maslow identified the basic needs that everyone has, and stated that people will work more effectively if they have had these needs fulfilled. These needs include:

- safety (job security, fire alarm procedures, security of personal information etc.)
- social needs (the relationships with team members and colleagues)
- self-actualisation, (which is feeling that you have a purpose within your workplace, and are needed and appreciated by the other members of your team).
- physiological welfare, (which includes salary, benefits, and working conditions).

Physiological welfare is strongly linked to the ergonomics within an office, and how the design of a workplace can either encourage or discourage high morale and productivity.

## Ergonomic Factors in an Office Interior

Ergonomics is a branch of science within the business sector that concerns how staff well-being is affected by the work carried out, as well as how to ensure that the working environment is most suited to employees’ needs and enables everybody to work safely. Ergonomics takes into account the individual employee’s physical capabilities, and any problems such as chronic pain or back problems, as well as outside environmental factors.

The environmental factors to consider when we discuss staff well-being are equipment size and controls, training techniques, and the physical environment in which people are working. For example, what temperature is your workplace? If employees are undertaking strenuous manual labour, then a lower temperature may be more suitable. Ergonomics is an important factor to consider in any workplace, but especially when catering for employees with disabilities. There are companies that design furniture to enable people with back problems and other physical disabilities to work more comfortably, such as office chairs that are designed to give the most support to people sitting at a desk for a long period.

Another aspect to consider is the interior decoration and layout of your workplace. For example, light coloured walls and open plan areas make offices seem larger and more welcoming, and natural light is more likely to promote productivity than lots of overhead fluorescent lighting. You can easily increase the productivity of your workforce by adapting your office décor.

### **Conclusion**

To make the workplace the most effective it can be in promoting productivity in your employees and staff well-being, there are many areas that you should consider and concentrate on. The layout and colour scheme of a working environment can play a large part in how employees feel in that environment, and effect productivity and the quality of work produced. There are, as we have previously established, more specific design needs to consider in relation to employees with disabilities. A welcoming and inclusive environment is important, and it is key that the regulations outlined within the DDA in regards to accessibility are adhered to. This will lead to happy and comfortable employees, who work to the best of their ability.

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