

# Rocky Mountain Conference on Aging Aging in the Workplace

## Universal Design and Productive Aging

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Universal Design is a broader approach to the design than accessibility because it applies to all products and environments. The goal is to make these products and environments as usable as possible for as many people as possible regardless of age, ability or situation. (Ron Mace) The concept of universal design only indirectly applies to the workplace. Accessibility is often confused with universal design. This concept is directly related to the individual with a disability.

There are seven universal design principles:

- 1. Equitable use:** This means the items designed are useful and marketable to people with diverse abilities. These items are “equal opportunity” products such as vegetable peelers with thick handles.
- 2. Flexibility in use:** This applies to products and room design. Individuals have choices in the way they use the objects, doors that open to the right or left and light switches which can be operated in a variety of ways.
- 3. Simple /Intuitive Use:** These are items which are easy to understand regardless of the user’s experience, knowledge, language skills or current concentration level, such as a flashlight with manually generated power sources
- 4. Perceptible Information:** Contributes necessary information to the user, regardless of ambient conditions or user’s sensory abilities. These are things such as signs on doors with figures indicating this is a men’s or women’s restroom. They usually have images and can have Braille lettering. Some street crossings have visual and auditory cues for pedestrians. Lights can provide information in similar ways.
- 5. Tolerance for Error:** These items minimize hazards and the adverse consequences of accidental or unintended actions. These can be the ramps on some public buses for wheelchair users and individuals who are not able to climb up bus boarding stairs. Certain helmets can reduce hazards in adverse conditions.
- 6. Low Physical Effort:** These are items such as file cabinets with low or tilted drawers and handles on faucets which have one handle that can be moved to adjust the temperature of the water.
- 7. Size/Space for Approach/Use:** Approach size and space is provided for approach, reach, manipulation and use regardless of the user’s body size, posture or mobility. For example, entrances to homes and offices which are wide enough to accommodate a wheelchair.

Submitted by: Katharine Humphreys, University of Northern Colorado, October 28, 2007