DESIGNING FOR MENTAL HEALTH IN
THE HYBRID ERA

Workplace Strategies That Centers Emotional Well-Being, Neuroinclusion and Sustainable Performance

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If hybrid work was meant to make life *easier,* why are employees more *burned out than ever* – and what does the workplace have to do with it?

Cresa Client: PTC Boston

Once framed as a cure-all for post-pandemic recovery, hybrid work has instead become a mirror – reflecting not just how we work, but how the environments around us either support or sabotage our well-being.

As organizations refine their return-to-office strategies, many are realizing that workplace design itself can no longer remain emotionally neutral. It must play an active role in sustaining mental health.

Workplace strategy has entered a new era. We're no longer just designing for productivity or space efficiency – we're designing for emotional sustainability. For many organizations, the hybrid model was introduced as a flexible, employee-centered alternative to traditional work. But the reality has proven more complicated. Instead of lowering stress, hybrid work has amplified emotional fatigue, cognitive overload, and disconnection. This white paper explores the role of workplace design in addressing these issues – and makes the case that mental health is not a wellness perk, but a designable dimension of work itself.

A 2024 Gallup study found that 76% of U.S. workers report daily mental stress, with many citing sensory overload, blurred boundaries, and lack of autonomy as key drivers.

Mental health is now a core workplace issue, and the built environment is a key modulator of how people feel, function, and recover at work. As described in *Community Vision's 2024 Universal Design Guidebook: Designing for Belonging,* "We must design not only for access, but for comfort, clarity, safety, and dignity across mental and emotional experiences."

Hybrid work didn't invent this crisis – it exposed the fragility of environments that were never designed to support neurodiversity, trauma recovery, or cognitive variability. Most office environments still reflect outdated assumptions: that all employees are neurotypical, extraverted, and fully resourced. But today's workforce includes individuals navigating ADHD, anxiety, PTSD, sensory sensitivities, and the invisible labor of caregiving. Designing for a mythical median has left too many behind. As one inclusive design participant shared, "I don't want special treatment – I just want the space to stop yelling at me."

While hybrid work was intended to offer freedom, it has also introduced instability. The shift to partial remote work has created unpredictable schedules, blurred boundaries between rest and responsibility, and reduced the reliability of workplace rhythm. In many cases, remote work environments lack privacy, ergonomics, and recovery cues – while office environments remain overstimulating and overly standardized. This dual strain reveals a deeper problem: most workplaces were never designed for cognitive or emotional variability in the first place.

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The good news?
Mental health is designable.

Environmental cues – lighting, acoustics, layout, access to nature, texture, and tactility – have a profound influence on regulation and well-being. Yet most workplaces still prioritize visual aesthetics over cognitive clarity.

Many still rely on harsh overhead lighting, poor sound insulation, and generic furniture layouts that disregard differing energy and attention levels. In contrast, spaces that anticipate variability offer choice, reduce cognitive load, and provide room to recover.

That's why leading organizations are shifting away from reactive accommodations and toward proactive, universal design strategies. These strategies center on regulating stimulation, softening transitions, and offering choice-rich environments. Examples include quiet rooms that don't require disclosure to access, lighting systems that support circadian health, acoustically zoned collaboration areas, and signage that is perceptible to all cognitive styles. These features are not luxuries – they are the infrastructure of psychological safety.

A key insight from this shift is that time is as important as space.In a hybrid model, how employees engage is just as important as where. Organizations are beginning to explore "temporal design" – introducing structured quiet hours, reducing screen fatigue, and implementing workplace rhythms that support focus, flow, and recovery. Remote employees are often considered "out of scope" when it comes to physical design. But in reality, theymay face even greater barriers to regulation — especially if their home environments are shared, chaotic, or lack ergonomic support. That's why hybrid workplace design must extend to temporal policies as well: reducing screen fatigue, enabling quiet time, and giving employees control over how and when they engage. Time, like space, is a design tool. As the Guidebook reminds us, "Time is part of access. Rhythm is part of health."

THE SEVEN PRINCIPLES OF
UNIVERSAL DESIGN

These principles provide a powerful lens through which to evaluate mental health–supportive environments. Each principle, when applied intentionally, addresses a different facet of cognitive, emotional, and sensory inclusion:

Equitable Use means creating spaces that are accessible to all, without requiring disclosure or exception requests—such as quiet rooms available to everyone, not just those with formal accommodations.

Flexibility in Use allows environments to adapt to different energy levels, attention spans, and working styles—supporting both collaboration and solitude in the same footprint.

Simple and Intuitive Use ensures that people can navigate spaces without excessive mental effort— through clear signage, predictable layouts, and intuitive controls that reduce friction and frustration.

Perceptible Information ensures that cues and communications are understood regardless of sensory ability — such as visual contrast, acoustic clarity, and multimodal wayfinding.

Tolerance for Error means designing systems that minimize negative consequences from mistakes — such as spatial zoning that prevents cognitive collisions between high-focus and high-stimulation areas.

Low Physical and Cognitive Effort reduces fatigue by offering ergonomic furnishings, seamless AV systems, and minimal visual clutter.

Size and Space for Approach and Use addresses not just mobility clearances but also psychological "breathing room"—ensuring people have space to move, decompress, and feel at ease.

When applied strategically, these principles result in more than compliance – they create culture. The curb cut effect, often referenced in accessibility circles, applies here too: features designed for those at the margins often benefit the majority. Mental health–centered workplaces promote higher satisfaction, stronger retention, and greater belonging. And the data backs this up. McKinsey's 2023 study showed that employees who feel psychologically supported are 30% more productive, twice as likely to stay, and significantly more trusting of leadership. This is a win for all.

When universal design and mental health principles become everyday experience, organizations can create workplaces where everyone thrives.
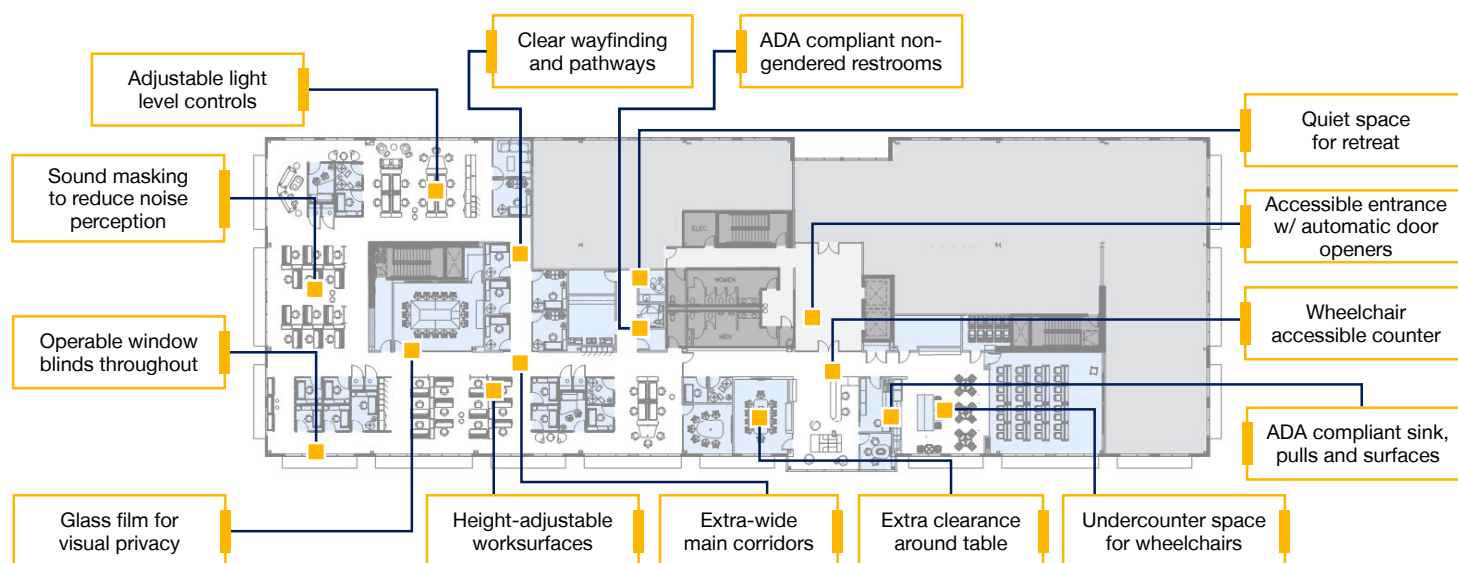
This philosophy was put into practice in a recent workplace transformation led by Cresa for United Cerebral Palsy of Oregon (UCP). Their initiative – titled Future Forward: Embracing Change Together – sought to reimagine the organization's headquarters to align with hybrid work models and the needs of a largely remote and mission-driven workforce.

UCP Oregon, a nonprofit organization that provides critical services and advocacy for individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities, emphasized emotional well-being, equity, and adaptability as core values in its workplace strategy. Many of their 80-100 employees split time between home offices, community-based fieldwork, and in-office collaboration, reflecting the organization's hybrid and highly mobile operating model. The challenge was not just to reduce square footage – it was to design a resilient environment that regulated stress and reinforced a people-first culture.

Cresa facilitated a series of employee surveys, stakeholder interviews, executive visioning sessions, and spatial audits

to understand the organization's needs from every angle. The results led to a concept that prioritized emotionally neutral zones, lowstimulation design elements, and hybrid scheduling cues embedded into the physical layout. Rather than relying on isolated meditation rooms or prescriptive wellness perks, UCP emphasized environmental clarity, access to retreat without stigma, and technology enabled transitions between solo and group work. They also introduced spaces to support temporal strategies – such as structured quiet hours, defined collaboration zones, and light cues that signal work mode shifts – acknowledging that workplace mental health is governed by both space and time. The outcome was a future-ready plan aligned with both strategic goals and the values of inclusion, accessibility, and emotional safety. This case exemplifies what's possible when principles of universal design are applied with intention – reinforcing that workplace mental health is both a strategic goal and a designable reality.

Diagram of Universal Design Principals Applied to UCP's HQ

Adjustable light level controls

Clear wayfinding and pathways

ADA compliant non-gendered restrooms

Quiet space for retreat

Sound masking to reduce noise perception

Accessible entrance w/ automatic door openers

Operable window blinds throughout

Wheelchair accessible counter

ADA compliant sink, pulls and surfaces

Glass film for visual privacy

Height-adjustable worksurfaces

Extra-wide main corridors

Extra clearance around table

Undercounter space for wheelchairs

CONCLUSIONS

We must continue to illustrate this larger truth in our workplaces: mental health is designable. And when you design for the edges – those with the greatest need – you improve the experience for everyone.

This is the curb cut effect in action. The principles of Universal Design, originally developed to promote physical accessibility, are increasingly being applied to emotional and cognitive inclusion. Features like equitable access to space, flexible use of furniture and tools, perceptible information, and low cognitive load form the new standard for thoughtful hybrid workplace design. Together, these choices build not just functionality, but dignity into the everyday experience. By honoring how people work and recover, our workplaces can build a culture of care.

If we want a culture of care, we must first create conditions for self-care. That begins with space – and continues with time, autonomy, and respect for variability. Mental health is not a side issue nor an add-on – it's a strategic imperative. Let us treat it like we would any other critical infrastructure – planned, budgeted, and built in from the beginning.

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