



MELBOURNE ICON'S ACCESSIBILITY JOURNEY

Facilities managers come up against numerous challenges every day in the quest to create the best possible experience for staff, visitors and the public.

One of these key challenges is accessibility. That is, ensuring there is equal access for diverse groups within the community to services and facilities within a space.

People with disability should be a key consideration when it comes to accessibility. While it may be impossible to cater for every single disability or challenge experienced by those who access your facility, there are simple things you can do to enhance the experience for everyone involved.

Manager of Government Relations and Advocacy at Vision Australia, Chris Edwards, consults widely about accessibility

and delivering services that support the blindness and low vision community.

He says that great accessibility is one that is seamless.

'It's where the experience I have as a blind person, in practical terms, is no different than somebody who's sighted,' Edwards says.

'Whether that's accessing some information, whether it's accessing the built environment or accessing education and employment, accessibility is creating that level playing field.'

One venue working hard to create a more level playing field is iconic Melbourne venue Federation Square.

Precinct Operations Manager Colin McEvoy admits they have faced many

accessibility challenges due to the initial design, construction and location of the property.

'There's not one flat bit of land at Federation Square, with a surface that is made from cobblestones and a design that flows upwards.

'So in that way, heading around Federation Square can be difficult for people with disability.'

Such accessibility challenges have inspired the venue to think creatively about ways it can improve the experience and better cater to diverse groups, including people with disability. One of these solutions has been the development of new, innovative bathrooms.



Image © Liam Neal

What started out as a set of male and female toilets and standard accessible bathrooms on either side of the site has now transformed into progressive bathrooms catering for a range of diverse groups in the community.

'Both myself and my manager at the time were looking at this, thinking, "We need to improve this... how do we go about doing it?"' McEvoy says.

'The toilet itself is functional, but the door kept breaking down, so we'd have to close that off and the person would have to go to the other corner of Federation Square to use another accessible toilet.

'Fortunately for us, there was a space next to these toilets that was a vacant tenancy space, so we put a business case forward to our executive and our board to take over that space.

'We were able to pretty much double our floor area for amenities, and that has allowed us to install a baby change room facility, as well as a changing places facility.'

The changing places facility can be accessed with a special MLAK key, so people requiring that particular type of bathroom no longer have to compete with the mainstream public to use it.

The remaining bathrooms have been transformed to a combination of women's and non-gender bathrooms.

Edwards from Vision Australia commended Federation Square for having accessibility in its common thinking.

'The original architects would have by law had to design it consistent with whatever the standard is,' Edwards says.

'I think that the really important thing is that if you just go with the standards, it's not enough to support what is quality accessibility.

'So, creating accessibility as a norm within buildings to say, "Ok, is there a level of choice and a level of redundancy there?" is what Federation Square has done well.'

In considering accessibility in facilities and workplaces like Federation Square, Edwards says it begins with a plan.

'I think it starts with a policy or some sort of document that articulates the diversity and inclusion goals for a workplace, and have that signed off at the highest level in the organisation – with the CEO or the board,' Edwards says.

Federation Square has just that: a concrete Disability Action Plan (DAP) that came about in the mid 2000s.

McEvoy says the overall objective of the Federation Square DAP is to improve equity of access for people with disability.

'The DAP includes activities that create a more inclusive community in which people with disability have enhanced opportunities to participate,' McEvoy says.

'Fed Square has committed significantly in many areas to ensure disability access is incorporated at all levels, and keeping with this approach [we] have developed the DAP to be in line with the Universal Design Principles.

'The purpose of doing so is to ensure that Fed Square is not only meeting the minimum requirements, or in other words "what is obliged of them", but to strive towards the higher requirements of the Universal Design Principles, where accessibility is not providing the basics – it's considered to be part of the DNA of Fed Square.'

One day of the year that accessibility and inclusiveness comes into sharp focus is International Day of People with Disability.

Held on 3 December each year, the day aims to celebrate the contributions, achievements and talents of people with disability.

It is also an opportunity for the entire community to make positive changes to the lives of 4.4 million Australians with disability.

McEvoy recognises the importance of having an international day to help get the message out and ensure people with disability are heard.

'International Day of People with Disability is an opportunity to create greater awareness, and for people to stop and think "Ok, they're living with disability, but they're just like you and I",' McEvoy says.

Edwards also agrees that it is an important day in the calendar.

'It's a day to consider that with the right attitude and with the right support, people with disability can make a great contribution to the workplace and the community,' Edwards says.

You can join countless Australians on 3 December to celebrate International Day of People with Disability by holding an event or joining the conversation online.

It's also an opportunity for us all to take action to break down barriers for people with disability, and help create a more accessible, inclusive and equitable society. 🏡

For more information, visit www.idpwd.com.au.