

A GUIDE FROM OMNISPHERE TECH · VOLUME ONE · UPDATED EDITION

Designing for everyone actually means designing for someone.

Universal design, inclusive design and equity-focused design — what each one really asks of you, where each one stops, and how to put all three to work on the next thing you build.

EDITION
2026 · UPDATED

PAGES
SEVENTEEN

READ TIME
ABOUT 25 MINUTES

WHAT IS IN HERE

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Read it in order if you can. The order is the argument — each approach exists because the one before it fell short.

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A companion volume

Volume two covers **user-centered design and assistive technology** — the four-step process, the questions to ask before you draw anything, and the technologies your users already rely on. Ask us for a copy.

START HERE

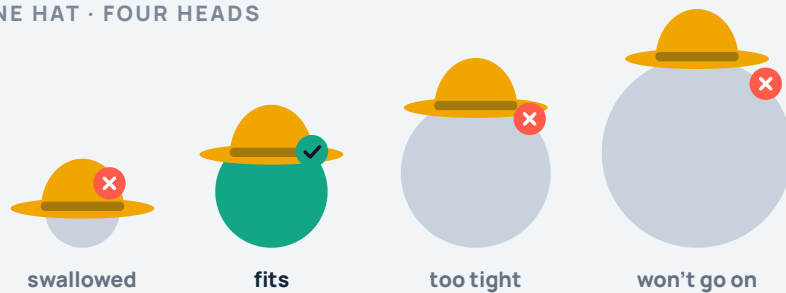
The problem with “everyone”.

Every team says it builds for everyone. Very few can name a single person their product currently fails — which is usually a sign that nobody has looked.

Over the last few decades the design industry has made three serious attempts to widen who a product serves. Each one was an improvement on the last, and each one turned out to have a limit. This guide walks through all three in order, because the order is the argument: you cannot really understand equity-focused design without first seeing why inclusive design was necessary, and you cannot see that without understanding what universal design got wrong.

None of the three is a finished answer. They are three different approaches to the same problem of under-representation, and a serious team ends up using all of them.

ONE HAT · FOUR HEADS



ONE HAT, FOUR HEADS – THE WHOLE PROBLEM IN A PICTURE

Universal design

One product, built for the widest possible range of abilities and situations.

Inclusive design

Solve deeply for one excluded group; the benefit extends to many more.

Equity-focused design

Design for the groups that have been historically underrepresented or ignored, and build with them at the centre.

How to use this guide

Each section ends with a question to ask on your own project. They are more useful than the definitions. If you take one thing from these pages, take the habit of asking, out loud and early: **who does this currently fail?**

APPROACH ONE

Universal design

The process of creating **one product** for users with the widest range of abilities, in the widest range of situations.

When designers first began considering how to include a broader range of people in their work, this is what they reached for. One solution, proposed for everybody. The intention was genuinely inclusive: rather than building a standard product and then bolting on a separate accommodation for anyone it failed, build a single thing generous enough to work for everyone at once.

It is worth being fair to the idea. Universal design was a real advance on what came before it, which was mostly nothing — products designed for an unexamined default user and adjusted afterwards, if at all. Universal design at least made the range of human ability part of the brief.

Think of it as a one-size-fits-all approach.

One solution. Every user. No exceptions — in principle.

What it gets right

- It treats accessibility as a design input rather than a compliance task.
- It avoids the “separate but equal” trap of a main product plus a lesser accessible version.
- It pushes teams to think about situations, not just abilities — bright sun, one free hand, a noisy room.

Where the trouble starts

The intention is inclusive. The mechanism is averaging. And averaging is exactly what stops a design from working well for anybody in particular — which is the subject of the next page.

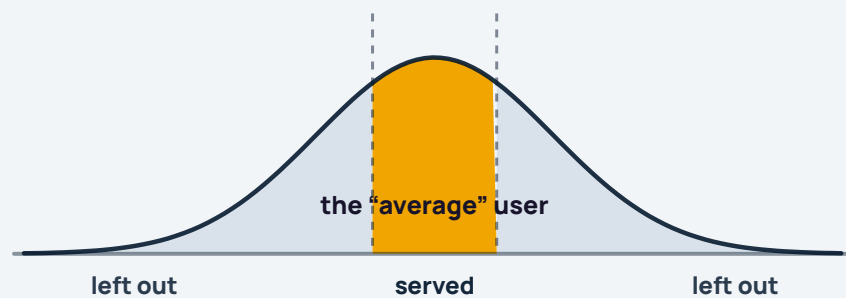
THE CATCH

Design for everyone and you design for no one.

A hat labelled “one size fits all” still will not fit most heads. Universal design had the same problem: good intentions, and it still left a lot of people out.

Go into a shop that sells a hat in one size. Some heads are swallowed by it, others cannot get it on at all. The label is not lying, exactly — it is just describing an intention rather than an outcome.

The mechanism is worth naming, because it repeats in software constantly. When you focus on creating a single solution for everyone, the design loses its effectiveness. It becomes difficult to achieve *any* goal well when the intended user is everybody — so the product quietly optimises for whoever sits closest to the middle, and the further a person sits from that middle, the worse it serves them.



AIM AT THE AVERAGE AND YOU SERVE THE MIDDLE, NOT THE RANGE

The people in those tails are not rare in aggregate. They are simply rare *individually*, in different directions — which is why they are so easy to lose in a summary and so obvious the moment you watch one of them use the thing.

Ask on your project

Which single “typical user” is our current design quietly built around — and who sits far enough from that person that the product stops working for them?

APPROACH TWO

Inclusive design

Making design choices that take into account personal identifiers like ability, race, economic status, language, age and gender.

As designers realised that universal design was not meeting the needs of every user, the approach changed. Instead of one solution stretched thin across everybody, inclusive design looks for solutions that meet **different** needs — and, just as importantly, it changes who is in the room while those solutions are being found.

If universal design is “one size fits all”, inclusive design is “solve for one, extend to many”.

Solve properly for one type of user, and the benefit of that solution reaches many other types of users along with them.



ONE SOLVED CASE AT THE CENTRE; THE BENEFIT RADIATES OUTWARD

Why solving for one works

A constraint met properly tends to produce a better general design, because it forces clarity. Captions were built for deaf and hard-of-hearing viewers and are now on in every noisy room in the world. Larger text and shorter chunks of content were argued for by people with disabilities for years — and when sites finally adopted them, everybody found the web easier to read. The pattern repeats often enough to be a design strategy rather than a happy accident.

Ask on your project

Which one excluded group could we solve for so thoroughly that the fix changes the product for everyone — and what would we have to learn to do that honestly?

IN PRACTICE

There is no “normal” user.

No average person. No default target audience to design for. That sounds like a slogan; in practice it inverts the usual order of attention.

When designing, you focus on the needs of people who are blind and deaf *even more* than on the needs of those who rely on sight and hearing to communicate. Then, as further versions are built, you design for additional excluded groups — people with physical or cognitive disabilities among them. The default is not abandoned; it stops being the starting point.

Who is in the room

Inclusive design includes researchers and designers from traditionally excluded populations, so their perspectives are present during **all** phases of the process — not gathered once, late, as validation of a design that is already built. This is the part teams most often skip, and the part that most reliably changes the outcome.

Consulted at the end

You learn what is wrong when changing it is expensive. Feedback becomes a list of defects, and most of the list gets deferred.

Present from the start

You learn what matters while the design is still cheap to move. Feedback becomes direction rather than repair.

The identifiers to hold in mind

Ability. Race. Economic status. Language. Age. Gender. Not as boxes to tick, but as the dimensions along which a design can silently assume one answer and fail everyone who gives a different one.

Ask on your project

Who has been in the room for this design so far, and at which phase did they arrive — the brief, or the review?

TWO WORDS OFTEN CONFUSED

Accessibility is part of it — not all of it.

Accessibility is the design of products, devices, services or environments for people with disabilities. It sits inside inclusive design; it is not a synonym for it.

The distinction is practical. Accessibility asks how to make a product usable by people with different abilities. Inclusive design asks a wider question: what can we learn from difference — from people whose experience of the world is not ours — and how do we apply that insight in a way that benefits everyone, disabled or not?

A PRACTITIONER'S VIEW

“There is value in difference. Difference helps us think creatively and helps us see the gaps in our products.”

Look into those gaps, and the insight gained from people who experience the world differently tends to produce products that are more adaptable, longer-lasting and more innovative. That is the business case, and it happens to be the same as the moral one.

The honest limit of inclusive design

Here is the part that usually goes unsaid. “Solve for one, extend to many” only benefits the group the design was created for, plus the users who already had access. Many groups are still left out — specifically, the groups that were never considered in the first place, in this product or any product like it.

Inclusive design fixes exclusion that is happening *now*. It has no particular mechanism for exclusion that happened *before*, and which shaped who your existing users are in the first place. That gap is what the third approach exists to close.

Ask on your project

If we solve for the excluded group we can most easily reach, who is still outside the circle afterwards — and why were they never in it?

A DISTINCTION WORTH GETTING RIGHT

Equality is not equity.

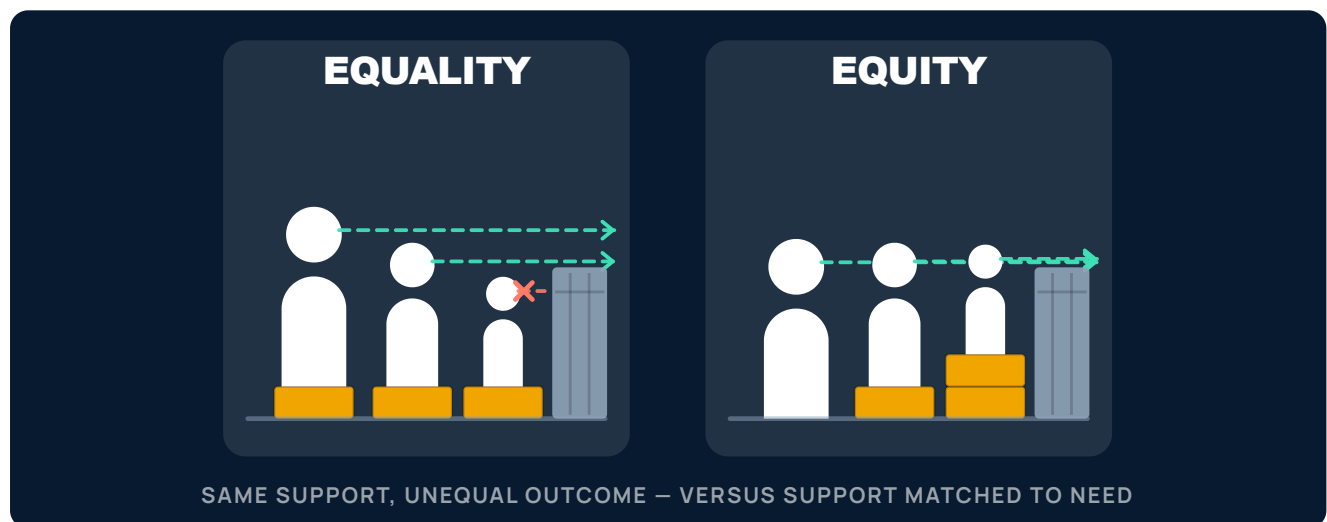
The two words sound similar. They describe two different things, and the difference decides what your product actually does.

Equality

Providing the same amount of opportunity and support to all segments of society. Everyone gets the same thing.

Equity

Providing different levels of opportunity and support for each person, in order to achieve fair outcomes.



On the left, every person is given the same box to stand on. Because each person is a different height, the tallest ends up with the best view and the shortest still cannot see over the fence. On the right, each person is given what they need: the shortest gets the tallest stack, the tallest gets none. The support is unequal. The outcome is fair.

Equality is about the input. Equity is about the outcome.

A product can distribute its features perfectly equally and still deliver profoundly unequal results.

Ask on your project

Where are we treating “the same for everyone” as though it were the same as fair — and who is standing on a box that is too short for them?

APPROACH THREE

Equity-focused design

Designing for groups that have been **historically** underrepresented or ignored when products were built — with the explicit goal of uplifting them.

Over time, designers found that inclusive design was not always enough, and that is where the industry finds itself today. Equity-focused design takes inclusive design one step further. Where inclusive design builds for groups being excluded *now*, equity-focused design builds for individuals and groups who were excluded *in the past* — and who are therefore missing from your user base, your research pool and your intuitions about what users want.



NOT AN EDGE CASE AT THE MARGIN — THE CENTRE OF THE BRIEF

What it covers

Much of the discussion focuses on race and gender, because those are where the historical exclusions are best documented and the design consequences most visible. But the same reasoning extends to ability, age and socioeconomic status — anywhere a group has been consistently left out of who products were built for.

Inclusive design asks

Who is our product excluding today, and how do we solve for them?

Equity-focused design asks

Who has this kind of product never been built for, and what would it look like if it had been?

It does not solve everything

Equity-focused design does not solve all problems — and neither do inclusive design or universal design. These are three different approaches to the same issue, and designing a more equitable future usually takes all three.

HOW TO ACTUALLY DO IT

Three steps, and what changes.

1

Identify the product you want to build

In ordinary language, without the feature list. "A savings app for market traders." "A booking site for a clinic."

2

Name the groups this *type* of product has never served

Not the groups your version excludes — the groups the whole category has historically passed over. This is a research question, and it usually has an uncomfortable answer.

3

Build with those groups front and centre

Keep them in the brief, in the research sessions, in the review. Front and centre means they are the ones the design has to work for, not the ones it should also happen to work for.

What changes when you do this

- Your research recruitment changes first. If the participant list looks like the team, nothing else will change.
- The definition of "done" changes. A flow that works for the group you named is the bar, not a nice-to-have.
- Trade-offs get made in a different direction. When two designs are close, the tie breaks toward the group with less.
- The language changes. "Edge case" stops being a way of describing a person.

Schools and companies often treat accessibility, inclusive design and equity-focused design as methods to consider — not as requirements.

Every designer should know the basics of accessibility, and why building for people who are under-represented and excluded is a must rather than a preference. These issues are massive, but vitally important.

IN THE REAL WORLD

The questions you should not ask.

Job applications and census forms need particular attention, because they usually involve collecting sensitive data from users.

Gender-neutral pronouns are a starting point, not the finish line. The first question to ask is whether a given question needs to be on the form at all. Why are you collecting this information? Do you genuinely need it? A job application probably does not need to ask about gender identity. A census collecting population data does — and then the wording carries the weight.

Two forms, same question

Form A

Male · Female · Other

"Other" tells a respondent they are a remainder. It also produces a category you cannot analyse.

Form B

Male · Female · Gender non-conforming · Non-binary · a blank field for a written answer

More people feel included, and it will probably do a better job of gathering accurate data.

Notice that the inclusive version is also the more *useful* version. Inclusion and data quality are not in tension here; they point the same way. A form that makes people pick a box that is not true of them does not just insult them — it returns worse numbers to whoever commissioned it.

Where a question does need to be there, check the wording for bias toward what is considered the culturally accepted norm. The default option, the order of the list and the examples you give all carry a message about who the form expects.

Two definitions

Gender non-conforming — having a gender identity that does not conform to a society's gender norms. **Non-binary** — having a gender identity that is neither entirely male nor entirely female.

IN THE REAL WORLD

Who a product hears, and who it pictures.

Voice assistants that only heard some of us

When voice assistants were first introduced at Google, they were trained primarily with male, native-English-speaking voices. The result was predictable in hindsight: the assistants understood and responded to male voices easily, but struggled with the higher pitch of many female voices, and with strong accents.

When the product launched, users were extremely frustrated that it could not understand them. Nothing about this required malice — it required only a training set that matched the team rather than the world. Testing with a genuinely diverse set of users would have caught it before launch, and the example is now a standard illustration of how a data decision becomes an equity decision.

Default avatars that look like the designer

Imagine you are designing an app and you need an illustration for the mock profile photo shown before a user uploads their own. What does that illustration look like? Would you automatically draw someone who looks like you, or would you be more inclusive in your representation?

Representing diverse people through icons, illustrations and photographs requires viewing everything you design through a critical lens. Avatars in account profiles should consider age, race and gender among other things. Sometimes designers deliberately choose an avatar that challenges the mainstream image of who uses the product — which is how a default stops being an assumption.

A default is an argument about who is expected.

Every placeholder name, stock photograph and illustrated user in your product tells a visitor whether it was built with them in mind.

WHAT GETS SAID IN THE MEETING

Objections, answered.

None of this survives contact with a deadline unless you can answer the four things people actually say.

“It is a tiny percentage of our users.”

It is a tiny percentage *of your current users* — which is a measurement of who your product already works for, not who wants it. More than a billion people worldwide live with a disability. And impairment is not only permanent: it is also temporary and situational, which means the group is everyone, some of the time.

“We will do accessibility in the next phase.”

Retrofitting costs more than building it in, because it usually means revisiting structure rather than styling. The team that discovers late that its prototype cannot be operated without a mouse does not add a feature; it goes back a phase.

“It will make the product worse for everyone else.”

The historical record says the opposite. Captions, larger text, shorter content blocks, high contrast and voice input were all built for specific groups and were all adopted by everyone. Constraints met properly tend to produce clearer designs.

“We do not have anyone from that group to ask.”

That is the finding, not the obstacle. It tells you your research recruitment, hiring and network all currently reflect the same narrow slice — and that every judgement the team makes about those users is a guess. Widening the network is the work.

One useful reframe

Designing for accessibility is not an obstacle to getting the product out. It is how the product reaches as many users as possible — which is the thing everyone in the room already agreed they wanted.

BEFORE THE DESIGN REVIEW

A working checklist.

Run this at the start of a project, not the end of one. If you cannot tick a line, that line is your next piece of research.

Who we are designing for

- ✓ We can name, specifically, who this product currently fails.
- ✓ We have named the groups this *type* of product has historically never served.
- ✓ Someone from an excluded group has been involved from the first phase — not brought in to validate a finished design.
- ✓ Our research participants do not all resemble the team.

How we are designing

- ✓ We solved deeply for at least one under-served case rather than shallowly for an imagined average.
- ✓ Accessibility was a requirement in the brief, not a ticket in the backlog.
- ✓ The product works on a mid-range phone, on a weak connection, with data that costs money.
- ✓ Where two designs were close, we can say which way the tie broke and why.

What we are asking and showing

- ✓ Every form field has survived the question “do we actually need to collect this?”
- ✓ Options offered to users reflect the real range, and there is a way to answer outside the list.
- ✓ Question wording has been checked for bias toward the culturally assumed norm.
- ✓ Default avatars, illustrations and photography represent more than the team that made them.
- ✓ Test participants span the pitches, accents, languages and devices our real users have.

Who does this currently fail?

If the room cannot answer that question, the answer is not “nobody”. It is “we have not looked”.

THE TERMS, IN ONE PLACE

Glossary.

Universal design

Creating one product for users with the widest range of abilities and in the widest range of situations.

Equity-focused design

Designing for groups that have been historically underrepresented or ignored when products were built.

Equality

Providing the same amount of opportunity and support to all segments of society.

Solve for one, extend to many

Solving deeply for one type of user so the benefit reaches many other types of users.

Non-binary

Having a gender identity that is neither entirely male nor entirely female.

Inclusive design

Making design choices that take into account personal identifiers like ability, race, economic status, language, age and gender.

Accessibility

The design of products, devices, services or environments for people with disabilities.

Equity

Providing different levels of opportunity and support for each person, in order to achieve fair outcomes.

Gender non-conforming

Having a gender identity that does not conform to a society's gender norms.

Assistive technology (AT)

Any product, equipment or system that enhances learning, working and daily living for people with disabilities. Covered in volume two.

Where to read further

Google Accessibility

A YouTube playlist covering assistive technologies and how to use accessibility features across Chrome and Chromebooks.

Device accessibility help

Android, Windows, macOS and iPhone each publish their own guides. Features change often — the Help on the device in your hand is the current source.

Material accessibility guidance

Design principles that keep accessibility front and centre, written for practitioners.

Volume two of this guide

User-centered design and assistive technology — the process, the questions, and the technologies your users already use.

One habit worth building

Diversify your own network. Get to know people whose experience of technology is not yours, and ask what using it is actually like. Those conversations are where the design opportunities in your product are hiding.

WHO MADE THIS

We design and build the whole surface of a company.

Omnisphere Tech is a digital studio in Abuja. We build the website that wins the enquiry, the app that carries the work, the visualisation that sells the building, and the identity that holds it together.

Website design

Brand-led sites that load fast on a Nigerian network and turn attention into enquiries.

Mobile & web apps

Product engineering from first prototype to a release your team can maintain.

Architectural 3D

Photoreal stills, interiors and walkthroughs that sell a building before it exists.

Graphic design

Identity, reports and print artwork built as a system, not a one-off.

Who does your product currently fail?

If you cannot answer that, it is the most valuable question on your project. Tell us what you are building and we will come back with a scope, a fixed price and a date — with accessibility written into the brief rather than the backlog.

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Written and designed by Omnisphere Tech for educational use. Updated edition, 2026.