

Make your business accessible for people with disabilities

One of the greatest barriers to the employment of people with disabilities is physical – the business premises are simply not accessible not only to people in wheelchairs, but also to people with visual impairments.

However, says Dr Jerry Gule, Chairman of South African Employers for Disability (SAE4D), making your business premises accessible need not be difficult, or particularly expensive, especially if you are renovating your offices or building a new structure.

SAE4D is an employer organisation that is committed to addressing issues confronting the integration of people with disabilities in the workplace.

Dr Gule points out that in terms of the National Building Regulations and Building Standards Act as amended and published by the Department of Trade and Industry in May 2008, businesses may be obliged to ensure that their businesses are accessible to people with disabilities.

“The building regulations are lenient on buildings built before the regulations were implemented in 2008; but if you make any alterations to a building, you may be required to make the building compliant with the new accessibility requirements,” he says.

The regulations relate to all aspects of accessibility and covers such aspects as doors and doorways, ramps, stairways, handrails, lifts, toilet facilities, auditoriums and halls, obstructions in the path of travel, parking and indication of facilities.

“The problem, however, is that many well-meaning organisations go ahead and install access facilities which turn out to be totally unsuitable. For example, they may make ramps too steep or doorways too narrow for wheelchairs. These then have to be broken down and redone, at considerable expense,” he adds.

“It is therefore extremely important that before commencing on any building project, a business consult with an architect, builder or organisation that has specialist knowledge of the requirements for disability access.”

According to building and construction writers Janek Szymanowski and Penny Swift, the essential requirements regarding accessibility for people with disabilities include:

1. People with disabilities should be able to safely enter the building and be able to safely use all the facilities within it – specifically toilets.
2. There must be a means of access that is suitable for people with disabilities to use. In addition, access must be available from various approaches of the building via the main entrance and any secondary entrances.
3. There must be a means of egress (a point of departure) that is suitable for people with disabilities to use in the event of any emergency. This relates to any sort of emergency, but in addition, a further clause states that departure routes (or egress) must also be designed in accordance with the Fire Protection regulations.
4. Lifts in buildings must be able to serve the needs of people with disabilities. This includes ensuring that any commonly used “path of travel” MUST be free of any sort of obstacles that would limit, restrict or endanger people with disabilities who use that route.
5. There must also be absolutely no obstacles that will prevent people with disabilities from accessing facilities within the building. The regulations refer specifically to people with impaired vision, but they also relate to people using wheelchairs, or people who use other assistive devices for walking.
5. Buildings that incorporate halls or auditoriums for public use are obliged to ensure that a reasonable percentage of space is available for people using wheelchairs or other assistive devices.

In addition to these clauses, the National Building Regulations state that where there is parking available for more than 50 motor vehicles, there must be parking facilities that accommodate people with disabilities. There is also an obligation to ensure that persons with disabilities are provided with a suitable means of access from the parking area to the ground floor of the building.

Ends

About SAE4D

South African Employers for Disability (SAE4D) is a body constituted by employers who are committed to addressing issues confronting the integration of people with

disabilities in the workplace. The organisation was set up to share experience, develop best practices, confront and tackle prejudices that act as barriers to the integration of people with disabilities in the workplace, and form a common understanding of the challenges and solutions required to fully develop the potential of people with disabilities to contribute meaningfully to society and business.

SAE4D members are South African companies who are signatories to the Constitution of the SAE4D, its principles and values.

Current SAE4D members include: ABB; Absa; Anglo American; Barloworld; Bowman Gilfillan; Edcon; Ernst & Young; Eskom; Glenrand; KPMG; Lorimar; Nedbank; PPC; SAB and Total.

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