



# Purple Planet

How to create high impact disability  
Employee Resource Groups/Networks  
in global organisations.



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# Foreword



**An estimate 80 percent of the world's over one billion people with disabilities are of working age. Yet, very few life experiences invoked the same mixture of pity, fear, awkwardness or feelings of inconvenience from others.**

These human reactions can make it challenging for employees and employers when setting out to create an accessible working world. They require employees to build resilience and confidence and for employers to develop a sophisticated approach to cultural change.

The International Labour Organization's Global Business and Disability Network (GBDN) aims to create a global workforce culture that is respectful and welcoming of people with disabilities by ensuring that employment policies and practices in companies of all types are inclusive of people with disabilities around the world.

We continue to make good progress as more employers come together on global and national-level employment initiatives. It isn't all about creating good policies though. Important as they are. Increasingly, our corporate members are recognising that disability Employee Resource Groups (ERGs)/Networks can make a significant contribution when it comes to changing employees' working lives and improving business performance.

No longer a 'nice to have', ERG/Networks are now a 'must have' for any organisation that wants to learn directly from its own people and provide a safe place for employees with disabilities to network and learn from each other.

The GBDN supports PurpleSpace's mission to accelerate the global growth of the disability ERG/Network movement. We believe that growing the movement will transform the experiences of employers and build the inner confidence of employees with disabilities around the world and particularly in developing countries where the concept is less established.

It is for this reason that we are delighted to partner with PurpleSpace on the publication of this resource.

**Jürgen Menze,**  
Global Business and Disability Network Manager,  
International Labour Organization



**As the International Leader of Lilly's EnAble ERG I have seen first-hand how a visible and well-constructed ERG/Network can promote awareness, provide support and remove barriers for colleagues around the world who live with a disability or long-term condition.**

Global disability inclusion is complex terrain and leading an ERG can sometimes feel daunting. Whilst ERG/Network leaders can often access generic external guidance or in house learning about how to build impactful networks, enriched learning only comes with being better connected to other global disability ERG leaders.

The new PurpleSpace strategy 2022-2025 sets out a bold ambition to supercharge the global disability ERG/Network movement. As chair of the ERG Global Forum, I know that building community and unity between disability ERG/Network leaders will help us to grow the movement by enabling us to network with, and learn directly from, each other.

It is this spirit of sharing and learning that underpins this resource and the reason why Lilly is delighted to joint sponsor the guide and support the dissemination of leadership lessons.

Global companies are establishing disability ERG/Networks, chapters and sub-groups all over the world. Between them, the organisations that contributed to this resource have created disability-focused communities in over 56 countries. We've found that global disability ERG/Networks and their leaders are creating extraordinary impact, from successfully advocating for the establishment of a global accessibility department to the simple but powerful act of connecting individuals who feel completely isolated, with a vibrant community of colleagues who share their experiences.

In sharing these learnings, we hope that we will encourage more global employers to invest in their disability ERGs/Networks. We know that those that do invest, are learning significantly more from the lived experience of their own people than those who do not.

**Darren Rowan,**  
International Leader EnAble, Eli Lilly and Company and Chair  
of PurpleSpace's ERG Global Forum

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# Introduction



**Established in 2015, PurpleSpace arrived at a time when disability ERG/Networks were starting to come into their own.**

Since then, we've supported organisations around the world to create vibrant communities where colleagues with disabilities can come together to network and learn from each other about how to manage disability and get on at work. In addition, these communities enable employers to improve their practices by learning directly from the experiences of their own people.

Our mission is to super-charge the ability of organisations and individuals to build disability confidence from the inside out - and to offer a world-class methodology to support the creation and sustainability of disability ERG/Networks.

By doing so, we enable organisations to increase the pace of change in building inclusive workplaces and workplace culture.

It's what we refer to at PurpleSpace as 'the third phase of change'.

**The first phase** starts with the passing of disability employment equality legislation (for example, the Americans with Disabilities Act in the US in 1990, the Disability Discrimination Act in the UK in 1995 or the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act in India in 2016).

**It then moves to a second stage** where enlightened employers make efforts to become more disability-confident and disability-smart organisations through the systematic use of best practice employment and business tools, often delivered by employer-led networks like Australian Network on Disability (Australia), Business Disability Forum (UK), Disability:In (US), ILO Global Business and Disability Network (Global) and The Valuable 500 (Global).

Phases one and two continue, driven in places by the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development with its focus on economic inclusion for people with disabilities.

But in many parts of the world, **we have moved into and are awakening a third phase** where employees with disabilities themselves are driving change: sharing their experiences to help themselves and their employers to routinely anticipate, expertly accommodate and positively celebrate this aspect of human difference.

This is the new modern approach to sustaining culture change and high impact disability ERGs/Networks are at the vanguard.

Given their reach and influence, global organisations have an unprecedented opportunity to accelerate the speed of change.

**Brendan Roach,**  
**Director of Strategy and Networkology, PurpleSpace**

## About this resource

This resource was created by gathering the insights and experiences of over 35 global Disability ERG/Network Leaders and DEI professionals from across the PurpleSpace community.

Made possible with the generous support of the International Labour Organisation and Eli Lilly and Company, the resource aims to articulate the impact of global disability ERGs/Networks and suggest how to accelerate their growth.

We do this by mapping the global growth of the disability ERG/Network movement and exploring the structures and leadership traits required to create high impact disability ERG/Networks in global organisations. The practical examples and lessons learnt in this guide provide insights for global ERG/Network leaders, allies and C-suite champions wherever they are on their ERG/Network journey from starting out, stepping up or thriving and innovating.

## Terminology

The language around disability, diversity and employee networks is constantly evolving and preferences will vary between organisations, geographies and individuals.

Our aim in this resource is not to advocate for specific terminology. One of the key learnings from our community of global ERG/Network leaders is that whilst developing a shared inclusive language may be desirable, it is just as important to acknowledge and accept people's preferences and focus instead on the practical ways that we can improve colleagues' working lives.

In this spirit, we recognise that our language choices may not reflect everyone's preferences but we offer these short definitions of the terms we use in this resource by way of explanation and clarity.

### People/employees with disabilities and long-term conditions

There are lots of definitions out there. We apply the language and the spirit of the definition from the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities<sup>1</sup> which is broad enough to cover people with a range of common conditions from depression, cancer, dyslexia, arthritis, hearing and sight loss and because it emphasises that many of the barriers we face at work can be removed via effective adjustments/accommodations.

<sup>1</sup>those who have long-term physical, mental, intellectual or sensory impairments which in interaction with various barriers may hinder their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others'.



### Employee Resource Group (ERG)/Network

There are many types of employee networks. They carry out a range of functions, in many different ways. They are also called many different things from Disabled Employee Networks, Business Resource Groups, Inclusion Networks, Affinity Groups, Special Interest Groups and Employee Resource Groups.

Ultimately, they all tend to focus on building community between employees with disabilities and supporting their employers to develop more inclusive policy and practice.

### Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI)

Organisations may call this function different things; Diversity, Inclusion, Equality, Equity, Culture, Belonging and/or Accessibility. Whatever it's called, colleagues leading in this area are responsible for making their organisations a better place for everyone, including employees with disabilities. They are a key ally for any ERG/Network leader.

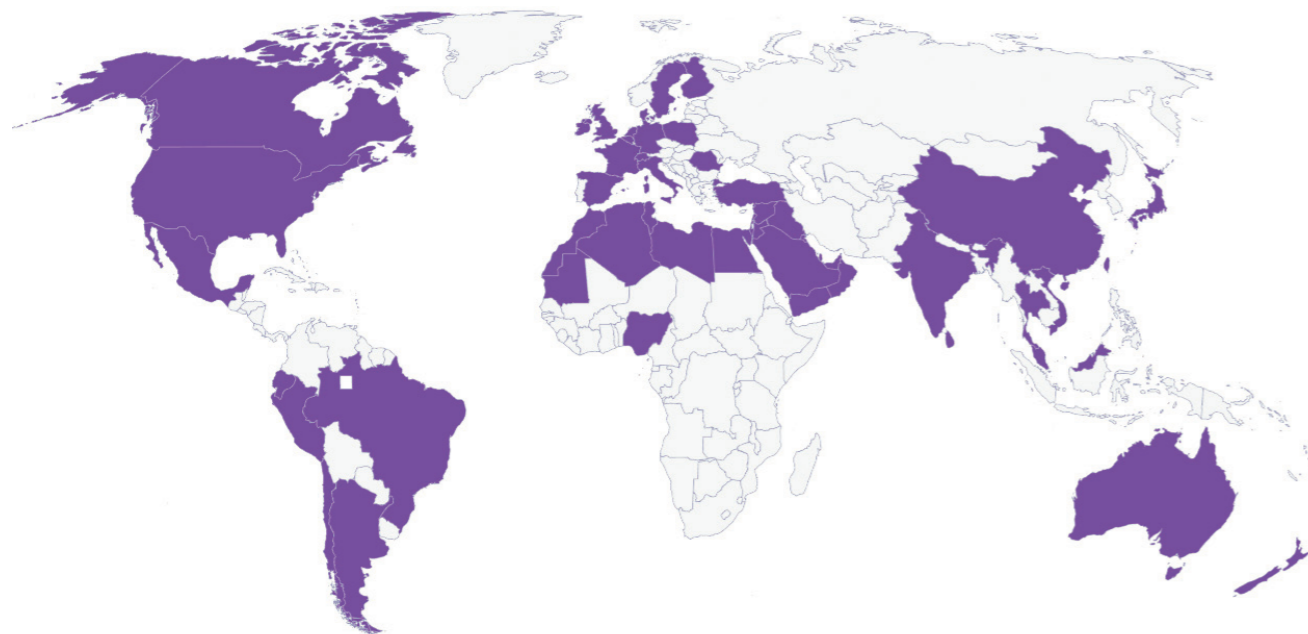
# Mapping the global growth of disability ERG/Networks



# Mapping the global growth of disability ERG/Networks

**An explosion of new disability ERG/Networks in global organisations is driving the rapid global growth of the disability ERG/Network movement.**

Mapping the prevalence of country-level networks among the global companies that contributed to this resource shows that the disability ERG/Network movement is most mature in North America, the UK, India and Australia. In addition, the PurpleSpace community now includes disability ERG/Networks from every continent and in over 56 countries ranging from Argentina, China, Denmark, Israel, Mexico, Nigeria, Hong Kong and UAE.



**Image:** Map showing prevalence of country-level networks among ERG Global Forum members.

The image displays a map of the world and the geographies where disability ERGs exist are displayed by using the colour purple. Approximately half the world is coloured purple. The actual coverage is likely to be far higher.



The **PurpleSpace** community now includes disability **ERG/Networks** from every continent and in over **56 countries**

“Expanding activity into new markets is a common challenge for global ERG/Network leaders. This data is exciting. It supports planning for the 2024 Global ERG Summit being launched by PurpleSpace. It enables us to connect existing and aspiring leaders so they can support each other to build communities in a way that is relevant to the local context.”

**Kirstie Wilson, Learning, Development and Engagement Manager, PurpleSpace**

“Connecting with other disability Business Resource Group leaders from the PurpleSpace community in Australia and New Zealand enables us to exchange experiences, thoughts and ideas with colleagues who have a passion for improving disability inclusion in our countries and beyond.”

**Belinda Sheehan, Chair of the ANZ Neurodiversity Business Resourcer Group, IBM**

# Why develop a global disability ERG/Network?

The global disability ERG/Networks that contributed to this resource were established for a variety of, often interconnected, reasons. The most cited reasons include:

- The imperative to normalise disability as a universal human experience.
- The wish to support employees with disabilities to network and learn how to build inner confidence from each other (especially those who would otherwise be isolated due to their location).
- The requirement for employers to learn directly from their own employees with disabilities in order that they can influence global business, disability and diversity strategy and objectives.

Regardless of motivations, successful global disability ERG/Networks tend to have an impact in four key areas

- Improved workforce disability data as colleagues feel more confident in sharing personal information and bringing their authentic selves to work.
- Increased engagement and productivity as colleagues more readily request and receive the workplace adjustments/accommodations they need to work efficiently and to thrive.
- Improved product and service delivery as the business learns more about the experiences and preferences of people with disabilities as customers, thereby improving the overall quality of the organisations' 'brand assets'.
- A more robust way of regularly reviewing their own providers of services and key commercial partnerships (such as recruitment firms, tech providers, Employee Assist Programme providers, outsourced facilities providers).

"In the early days of developing our global disability strategy, I spoke with two colleagues with Multiple Sclerosis, one based in Singapore and the other in the US. I realized that if you don't know anyone else in your market who has a particular condition, it can feel like you're managing this completely alone. Connecting these individuals was a simple but powerful act. Our Enable network is now making connections and breaking down that isolation on a global scale."

**Manisha Mehta, Global Diversity and Inclusion Manager, Unilever**

## Triggers for global disability ERG/Networks

Global disability ERG/Networks carry out a variety of functions. These are not static and can morph over time as the organisation and the ERG/Network evolves. There are three main types of global disability ERG/Network, reflecting different purposes. There is no 'right' way to do it and most are hybrids, containing elements of all three.

### Peer to peer

Set up primarily by employees with disabilities, usually in response to a growing need for employees with disabilities around the globe to seek peer group support for themselves. They may include personal development and training components in their activities.

### Consultation

Established as a forum for employees with disabilities to offer feedback on the impact of global policies, practices and procedures.

### Steering Group

Usually set up by the organisation itself. They help the organisation become more disability confident and to identify and remove barriers across the organisation. Often comprising of employees with disabilities, global DEI leaders and heads of key global functions such as recruitment, digital and real estate.

"The Global Enablement Coalition is made up of senior leaders from the company's disability inclusion and enABLEment Employee Resource Groups (ERGs), plus representatives from teams who play an integral role in bringing to life disability inclusion, accessibility and enablement at Shell, including Shell Health, Human Resources, Real Estate, and IT."

**Cherelle Williams, Global Accessibility Lead (Disability), Shell**

"The GSK Global Disability Confidence Network (DCN) is an employee-led community with members in 29 countries. We support employees with disabilities and work with the business to achieve strategic objectives through disability inclusion initiatives and practice. Crucially, both DCN co-leads have a seat on GSK's Global Disability Council to help drive the global disability strategy."

**Andy Garrett, Co-lead GSK Global Disability Confidence Network**





### Works councils: When is an employee coalition not an ERG/Network?

Some European countries encourage collaboration between workers via works councils. Functions differ between countries but broadly, works councils are voluntary employee-led groups that complement the work of unions and represent the interests of employees in relation to things like employment law, discrimination and consultation on workplace policy and practice.

Sometimes the existence of work councils can present challenges for disability ERG/Network leaders. For example:

- They might raise concerns about elements of an ERG's activity. For example, in relation to data/privacy concerns over disability-related communications.
- Colleagues may question the need for an ERG/Network in countries where works councils exist.

### Lessons learnt:

**Whatever an organisations' 'trigger' for setting up, or better investing in, its disability ERG/Network, the employers who contributed to this guide all share the same type of advice and messages:**

- Be clear about your purpose when setting up an ERG/Network – be prepared to review and modify them over time.
- Create activities that will support the delivery of different primary goals.
- Be clear about the specific and different purposes of a disability ERG/Network and works council (if you have one).
- Consider the needs of different stakeholders and different 'business functions': seek to collaborate on areas of shared interest.

# Starting Out



# Starting Out

Multinational organisations are complex beasts. Building community or developing consistency of approach in a global setting is challenging on any topic, let alone one as diverse and wide-ranging as disability inclusion.

Global disability ERG/Networks tend to evolve in a number of different ways. There is no correct way to start a global network as the most appropriate approach will depend on a number of factors such as the size and nature of your organisation and the maturity of your overall approach to ERGs/Networks.

## Building global governance over a number of existing disability ERG/Networks

Country level disability ERG/Networks within an organisation often grow organically with little or no formal collaboration. Sometimes they have the same name, sometimes they don't. Sometimes they share common aims and objectives, other times they are focused on entirely different things.

The move to a more cohesive approach might be driven by global DEI's desire for consistency or by ERG/Network leaders who want to network and learn from each other.

Country level ERG/Networks may formalise their alliance by nominating global co-leads and creating a steering committee of regional ERG/Network chairs, DEI leads and exec sponsors.

### Benefits:

- Strong foundations for addressing the experiences of people with disabilities in different locations.
- Opportunity for existing ERG/Network leaders to network and learn from each other.
- Opportunity for the organisation to gather insights from employees with disabilities from around the globe.

### Challenges:

- Identifying shared priorities and agreeing consistency of approach.

"We collaborated with the Global DE&I team to bring together leads from our 12 disability networks in locations ranging from Italy, UK, India, Brazil, Denmark and the US. Our aim was to explore our shared purpose and priorities and how we might organise ourselves as a global forum."

**John Walmsley, VP and Global Disability Network Leader, Capgemini**

"We held a summit for leaders of our six existing EMEA country-chapters and that resulted in four of us self-organising and forming a regional steering group. We were clear from the outset that to have a positive impact, we needed to become a force to be reckoned with and that meant growing the network. We started by posting 20% volunteer roles on our internal job platform and tapping into our professional networks to source new chapter leads at every site."

**Elaine Carroll, Regional Lead & Chair for the Disability Alliance EMEA, Google**

## Building out from a well-established country-based ERG/Network

The most common examples relate to existing networks in the US or UK. Often these networks will start to attract engagement from colleagues outside of the original location. Sometimes the network will expand to enable digital access to colleagues from other locations. Other times, they will support the establishment of new country-level networks based on the structure of the original network.

### Benefits:

- Scaling a tried and tested model.
- Established ERG/Network leaders can mentor new leaders.

### Challenges:

- Ensuring that ERG/Network priorities and activity reflect the needs of employees with disabilities at a local level.

## Global (and digital) by default

This is more common when no disability ERG/Networks exist anywhere in an organisation. Global by default ERG/Networks have no specific-country base and aim to reach as many colleagues as possible.

Engagement is always digital, usually by enabling access to open communication channels (such as MS Teams, Slack or Yammer) and taking into account time zone challenges by repeating key meetings and events at different times.

As some global/digital networks evolve, they might allocate a country lead or create new networks based around location or specific conditions according to the priorities and appetite of new members and stakeholders.

As a result of the Covid-19 pandemic, some country-based disability ERG/Networks have morphed into this model due to the challenge and opportunity presented by the need to engage digitally. This is likely to remain in place with either fixed or hybrid models of working practice.

### Benefits:

- Easier to build the critical mass of colleagues needed to set up an ERG/Network.
- Can reach and connect employees in locations where disability is not a visible topic and where no disability ERG/Network exists.
- Easier and simpler for employees to become connected without the effort required to attend face-to-face events.
- Can be easier to align to global business and DEI strategy.

### Challenges:

- Can't really address local challenges and persistent barriers.
- The need for a common language (usually English) limits opportunity to engage for those who do not speak English.

"Enable was established as a peer support network. It started with five or six colleagues with disabilities from markets like Singapore, UK, Egypt and Turkey on a Skype call with allies from the global D&I team, discussing our experiences and learning from each other.

Soon after, we were sharing our stories with the Global Diversity Board (which is chaired by the CEO) and then with the wider organisation via a global storytelling campaign. It was a pivotal moment and Enable now has 450+ members across 36 markets and 18 functions."

**Nakul Gaur, Global Co-lead of Enable, Unilever**

### Lessons learnt:

#### New global disability ERG/Networks tend to make progress when:

- They use a model that is appropriate to their organisational context.
- They are clear about purpose.
- Leaders connect with, and learn from, other ERG/Network leaders from both inside and outside of their organisation.
- They foster networking and collaboration between colleagues with disabilities, existing country-level disability ERG/Network leaders and global DEI from the outset.

**Networkology:** The art and science of running a high impact disability ERG/Network



# Networkology: The art and science of running a high impact disability ERG/Network

Since PurpleSpace invented the term, 'Networkology' has become known as the discipline of the art and science of running a high impact disability ERG/Network. It has had a powerful worldwide impact on driving the next phase of cultural change within organisations.

**The Art** refers to human skills (sometimes referred to as soft skills) and leadership performance. This is about how you make things happen in a voluntary role that takes you outside of your usual circle of influence and on a topic that isn't always a priority for well-intentioned but busy colleagues. It includes skills such as 'selling' a concept, engaging positively with people, negotiating and sharing difficult information to those who are resistant to changing how they view human potential and fairness.

**The Science** refers to the mechanics of running an ERG/Network. For example, governance, strategy, identifying and working with stakeholders.

There are many models in the public domain that focus on how to establish and grow an ERG/Network. Most are generic and tend to focus solely on the science elements. Very little exists to help disability ERG/Network leaders create sustainable change by building their leadership capacity and developing their understanding of the political, economic, cultural and social psychological aspects of living with disability.

## The science

### Core leadership team

The PurpleSpace community of disability ERG/Network leaders include some of the most imaginative change agents operating in business today. They guide their ERG/Network, shape and uphold its values and ensure that its activities are delivered.

They can come from any part of the organisation in terms of geography and business function. They can also vary in terms of seniority and leadership experience.

New global ERG/Network leaders can have a variety of development needs. For example, their day job or previous ERG/Network leadership experience might mean they need to access learning on how to develop and deliver global strategy and manage an international team.

## The importance of having a co-chair (or two)

In any ERG/Network, a co-chair structure enables leaders to spread accountabilities and ensure the right mix of skills and experience. The leaders who contributed to this resource found that a team of two or three global co-chairs can help ensure that:

- Leaders represent and manage different regions.
- The ERG/Network serves the interests of colleagues beyond the country of origin.
- Succession processes are effective. For example, by pairing new leaders with an existing co-chair for a minimum period e.g. one year.

"Working as global co-leads has been a game changer for our network. Aside from moral support and spreading accountabilities, having leaders from the UK and US helps ensure the network serves the interests of colleagues around the world."

**Tracy Mitchelson, Co-Lead GSK Global Disability Confidence Network.**

## Global committees

Global disability ERG/Networks operate with a range of different committee structures and can include committee roles such as:

- Communications
- Events
- Regional leads
- Lead liaison with global DEI
- External Partnerships
- Innovation
- Global growth
- Finance
- Allyship

**Whilst there is no right type of committee structure, global ERG/Network leaders stress the importance of:**

- Fostering a culture of honesty and openness between the core team and creating the conditions where constructive challenge can happen.
- Identifying any additional training or development needs committee members might have.
- Enabling key stakeholders to have the opportunity to understand the 'politics' of disability and the disability rights agenda and history in different places across the world.

## Lessons learnt:

### Global disability ERG/Networks that establish strong foundations for success tend to:

- Address the development needs of new global ERG/Network leads in the same way you would for anyone stepping into a global leadership role for the first time.
- Ensure that a co-lead structure supports the delivery and sustainability of the ERG/Network.
- Identify and establish the roles that will help run the Global ERG/Network and develop clear accountabilities.
- Find ways to connect with other disability ERG/Network leaders to build a shared agenda to global change when building a better, more accessible, working world.

## Working with Global Diversity, Equity & Inclusion and Senior Champions

The relationship between the global ERG/Network leader, the global DEI/HR team and global executive Sponsor or Champion is the cornerstone of any disability ERG/Network stakeholder relationship. We call this the 'Magic Trio'. In some organisations, the Magic Trio form part of an organisation's global disability steering committee or equivalent, in others, the relationship is less formal.

Either way, a productive relationship between these stakeholders creates the conditions for a disability ERG/Network to have a global impact.

## Global DEI

The global DEI team are often the glue that holds the Magic Trio together and act as the bridge between what the business wants to achieve in its disability strategy and what people with disabilities need, in order to have the best lived experience they can.

The best global ERG/Network leaders work seamlessly with the organisation's global DEI experts, underpinning and enhancing the business strategy for inclusion.

Global disability ERG/Network leaders have worked with global DEI and other departments to improve practice in relation to a range of global business functions from the built environment, corporate travel, customer service and digital technology. In some cases, ERG/Networks have successfully advocated for full time roles to be created in these areas to embed a disability inclusive approach.

"The Office of Accessibility wouldn't be here without Abilityforce. An Equality Group working with the business to drive the creation of something that's here to stay and help the community long-term is the most powerful example of ERG impact I've seen in my career."

**Tom Frantz, Senior Manager of Accessibility Partnerships and PR, Salesforce**

Because of the critical nature of the ERG/Network and DEI relationship, the ease of establishing or developing new networks can be impacted by the maturity of the DEI function in a particular country. It can be hard for ERG/Networks to flourish where there is no DEI function to guide and resource their work.

It's increasingly common for global DEI teams to have one (or more) full-time ERG/Network managers who are responsible for ensuring that new and existing ERG/Networks are successful and working to support the organisation's objectives.

"Disability network leaders have often had to burn the midnight oil to run their networks because they've got their day job to do, often on top of managing a disability. Our Global Employee Network leaders are volunteers and I'm the paid support to ensure they have everything they need to grow, connect and thrive."

**Richard Thompson, Global Employee Network Lead (DE&I), Capgemini**

"Finding your tribe through a global disability ERG can be incredibly powerful but it can also bring to light disparities in experiences between colleagues with disability in different locations. This is actually an opportunity for us to go stronger with a global ERG supporting a wider organisational strategy to improve the lived experiences of all employees with disabilities."

**Preeti D'mello, Global Head, Diversity, Equity and Inclusion, Tata Consultancy Services**

## Lessons learnt:

### When global ERG/Networks are in alignment with global DEI, they tend to:

- Ensure regular communication between ERG/Network and DEI leads at global, regional and local level.
- Share ERG/Network and DEI plans with a view to mutually informing and supporting the implementation of both.
- Work in a collaborative and challenging way to review impact.
- Ensure that the global ERG/Network's leadership and activities are adequately resourced, recognised and rewarded.

## Global Executive Sponsor/Champions

Global Sponsor/Champions use their role and influence to create an inclusive workplace culture. Impactful champions, support global disability ERG/Network leaders through their words and stories, their behaviour and by example.

“As a senior leader with a passion for disability inclusion, my role is to support our co-chairs with guidance, help with strategy and to engage my senior colleagues. Anytime we can get another leader involved, they will go on to carry the torch.”

**Amy Thawer, Vice-President, Global Compliance & Integrity and Executive Sponsor of EnableIn, LinkedIn**

“Our senior sponsor, David, was the catalyst for rapidly expanding the reach of the Disability Alliance ERG across EMEA, from 6 to 22 country chapters. We built a collaborative and mutually supportive relationship with David and he helped us identify a senior sponsor for every site”.

**Elaine Carroll, Regional Lead & Chair for the Disability Alliance EMEA, Google.**

### Lessons learnt:

**Global disability ERG/Network leaders build collaborative and mutually beneficial relationship with their executive sponsors. Impactful senior champions tend to exhibit a number of key traits, including a:**

- Passion for disability inclusion and an openness about their own experiences. Sponsors aren't always (or usually) disabled themselves but many have family, friends or colleagues who have a disability and they are keen to play their part as an ally.
- Broad understanding of (or a desire to learn about) the global disability landscape.
- Desire to support the personal/professional development of global ERG/Network leaders.
- Willingness to use their position, experience, and sometimes influence to access budget, to help build a global network of other leaders that want to support the process of culture change across the business.

## Working with country-level networks

Good communication between global, regional and country ERG/Network leaders is essential to ensure effective collaboration. For example, monthly check-ins between global and local ERG/Network leaders (with meetings repeated to ensure they are inclusive of different time zones).

“IBM's first disability focused employee network groups began in the early 1990s and today, we have more than 30 national and regional Business Resource Groups (BRG). I bring our disability and neurodiversity BRG leaders together monthly to share what colleagues are doing and identify opportunities for collaboration.”

**Diane Delaney, Global DEI Leader, People With Diverse Abilities & Neurodivergent Community, IBM**

“The global Ability ERG consists of a loose federation of networks from 20 markets. Three global co-chairs cover a region each providing guidance either by connecting one-on-one or via bi-monthly calls with chapter leads. While advice is provided, a formal structure is not dictated to account for variation in local need and activity.”

**Alia Cooper, Global co-chair of the Ability ERG, HSBC**

### Lessons learnt:

**Establishing good lines of communication with country leads enables global ERG/Network leaders to:**

- Ensure a two-way exchange of knowledge.
- Promote messages from the global ERG/Network and/or DEI team to country chairs.
- Gather insights from employees with disabilities around the world on global policy, procedure and initiatives.
- Facilitate networking and knowledge sharing between local ERG/Networks.



## Setting up new country-level ERG/Networks

Supporting the establishment of new networks is a priority for many global ERG/Network leaders who want to grow the reach and impact of the network. In addition to coaching and connecting existing and new chapter leads, global ERG/Network and DEI leaders have created a number of tools and resources to support the growth of local chapters. For example:

- Checklists of minimum requirements to start a network (e.g. co-chairs, a senior sponsor, a minimum of 20 members etc.).
- Handbooks on setting up a new network.
- Guidance on inclusive language.

In addition to supporting start up activity, some organisations have developed tools and frameworks to help measure, compare and improve the maturity of country level chapters against an agreed set of criteria such as governance, structure, activities and impact.

“At the chapter level, many of the issues are the same from running support groups to designing compelling activities to draw in more people. To support new chapters, we developed the ‘Disability Alliance Chapter Playbook’. It contains information about our history and how to establish a new chapter by assessing interest, getting started and marketing the ERG.”

**Sara Basson, Former President, Disability Alliance ERG, Google.**



# The art

Global ERG/Network leadership requires a good deal of artistry..

It's about developing an understanding of the political, economic, cultural and social psychological aspects of living with disability and using the soft skills of leadership to make things happen at the same time as managing a busy day job.

Global ERG/Network leads have to lean on, or develop, a number of (often interconnected) leadership traits to lead their networks including resilience, persistence, courage, organisation, authenticity and creativity.

Here are some of the most commonly cited traits by the leaders that contributed to this resource:

## Global mindset

Beyond the practicalities of working with a global team (e.g. ensuring meetings work for all time zones or that you know when your co-chair's national holidays fall), Global ERG/Network leaders need to understand disability as a global business issue and develop the ability to step outside their own culture.

Differences on topics like language, culture, access to diagnosis and legislation means leaders tend to be guided by the principle that there is no one universal 'right' way of doing things and that progress will represent different things in different places.

"People with disabilities face so many challenges globally. I want to make things better but I don't have all of the answers. I want to facilitate a conversation that enables our colleagues with disabilities to find solutions that suit their context."

**James Easter, Adapt Network Co-Chair, Atos**

"My top tip for growing a global taskforce is to make sure you have representation from all parts of the world. You have to understand local business needs and the strategies that are in place and listen to the voices of people with disabilities in those countries."

**Laura Antal, Co-lead for Global Disability Voice, Sodexo**

## Lessons learnt:

**Globally minded disability ERG/Network leaders tend to:**

- Seek out learning and development opportunities to help them manage global teams as effectively as possible.
- Build a deep understanding of the varied lived experiences of their colleagues with disabilities around the world.
- Support country/regional disability ERG/Network leads to make progress on the issues that matter locally.

## Strategic thinking

Global ERG/Network leaders are interested in the biggest of bigger pictures and want to influence and align to global business, sustainability, DEI and disability strategy.

Leaders tend to source the views and experiences of members and ERG/Network leaders from around the world to create high level, and often light touch strategies that provide regional/country leaders with a flexible framework.

For example, given the varying levels of maturity between locations (from starting out to thriving and innovating) and hiring quotas in some countries, the global ERG/Network strategy might set out an intention to positively influence hiring outcomes but give plenty of room for manoeuvre in terms of how.

"The global Ability strategy contains five high level pillars. It's designed to be broad enough to provide a framework that country chapters can operate within and align to if they choose, but we don't dictate because it's going to be different in every market."

**Alia Cooper, Ability ERG global co-chair, HSBC**

"We always aim to connect EnAble's activities to the company's overall objectives and priorities by presenting our key messages in the context of our Team Lilly framework. It works both ways, and this collaborative approach meant we were also able to work with the business to drive the creation of a company-wide global disability strategy."

**Darren Rowan, International Leader of EnAble, Eli Lilly and Company**

Global disability ERG/Network leaders increasingly want to have a broad social impact and use external levers to push for internal progress in a way that deliberately communicates that their organisation values and celebrates the contribution of employees with disabilities. Examples include:

- Supporting progress against disability-related elements of their organisation's Sustainable Development Goals.
- Marking the UN International Day of Persons with Disabilities every 3rd of December and joining the **#PurpleLightUp** movement.
- Encouraging their organisations to sign up to the ILO's Global Business and Disability Network Charter, joining the Valuable 500 or using Business Disability Forum's Global Business Disability Framework.
- Joining the International Paralympic Committee's **#WeThe15** campaign.
- Marking Global Accessibility Awareness Day (May) and Disability Pride (July)

"The UN Sustainable Development Goals with their broad focus on areas like good health and wellbeing, quality education, and decent work provide global ERG leaders with a means to influence their business. The SDGs provide leaders with a lever to help create more efficient and fair labour markets and to encourage education and training providers to bring disabled people into mainstream services and talent pipelines."

**Susan Scott-Parker, Founder, Scott-Parker International.**

"Finding a hook as powerful and unifying as the **#PurpleLightUp** movement has enabled us to recognise that everyone's lived experiences may be different and the importance of creating the right environment for our colleagues to thrive. It has brought our offices around the world together allowing us to establish new chapters of the Enable network in different regions."

**Ashika Patel, Co-Chair of Clifford Chance Enable**

## Lessons learnt:

### Global disability ERG/Network leaders can create global impact by:

- Developing a global strategy that combines direction and flexibility for local and regional ERG/Network leaders.
- Supporting the wider business strategy in the knowledge that the business will reciprocate with support for the ERG/Network.
- Leveraging external drivers to push for internal progress.

## Collaboration

ERG/Network leaders understand that creating global impact from the side of your desk will only be achieved by working collaboratively. For example, with internal stakeholders such as DEI and the heads of global functions that impact on the working lives of colleagues with disabilities.

Disability ERG/Networks are often last to the party when it comes to the development of new global networks. In many cases, formal structures now exist (owned by global DEI) to bring ERG/Network leads together from across the organisation. Many global disability ERG/Network leaders embrace these opportunities because they know that working collaboratively with leads from more established global ERGs/Networks can help accelerate their progress.

"One of the most common examples of collaboration between global disability ERG/Networks and DEI is on improving disability workforce data. Organisations spend vast amounts of time and money on new systems and communication campaigns to encourage employees to share their disability status. Yet, most global ERG/Network leaders support their employers to improve policy and procedure based on the lived experiences of their members and the knowledge that between 10-15% of people in any business are likely to have a disability or long-term condition."

**Brendan Roach, Director of Strategy and Networkology, PurpleSpace.**

"Working together can sometimes feel like more work which is maybe why some networks avoid it. Network leaders have much to learn from each other though and employees shouldn't have to pick just one network to identify with. Intersectionality and encouraging collaboration is critical."

**Adrian Hyrylainen-Trett, Inclusion & Diversity Advisor, Anglo American**

“Abilityforce collaborates with global business functions to advocate for disability inclusive approaches. For example, we’ve supported improvements to the Universal Design strategy that’s now the playbook for all global real estate and the corporate travel and security policy for disabled employees who, like me, travel internationally for our ‘day jobs.’”

**Carden Wyckoff, Global President of Abilityforce, Salesforce**

### Lessons learnt:

#### Global ERG/Network leaders that benefit from collaboration tend to:

- Build structures that create the opportunity for collaboration (e.g. regular communication, planning sessions and workshops).
- Develop good relationships with internal stakeholders from DEI and key global functions.
- Network and learn from other ERG/Network leaders in their company.
- Not let a lack of disability workforce data prevent action on known issues.

## Communication

Impactful ERG/Network leaders know that good communication is essential to engaging a global audience. Practically, this means setting up good communication channels, for example via quarterly calls, a global newsletter or a dedicated intranet site.

It’s also about looking for opportunities to promote the ERG/Network across the global organisation. For example, at country level DEI forums or by working with the global communications team to ensure the CEO mentions the disability ERG/Network at the next global ‘all-hands’ call.

The art of good communication is often more about diplomacy and understanding the nuances and challenges around the language of disability.

Global disability ERG/Network leaders must be confident in delivering and receiving difficult messages. They tend to be driven by a desire to make progress in difficult areas and are unlikely to accept ‘we tried that there and it didn’t work’ or ‘it can’t be done in that country’.

Occasionally global ERG/Networks will run in to concerns about privacy and data when seeking to widen the reach of their activities. Some leaders have addressed this by explicitly stipulating that membership or participation in ERG/Network activity does not identify you as a person with a disability. Others have developed guidelines around communication to ensure confidentiality. For example, ensuring that information circulated to members via email is always by the BCC function.

“A colleague once referred to me as being a ‘subversive networker’. I took it as a compliment. Being creative, shining a light on controversial issues without alienating people and finding ways to circumnavigate roadblocks are essential skills when trying to create change on a global scale.”

**Darren Rowan, International Leader of EnAble, Eli Lilly and Company**

“The voluntary nature of ERG work requires a gentle approach when it comes to getting things done. I use regular communication, recognition of people’s work and plenty of humour to build bonds and ensure that everyone feels like they have a stake in this.”

**Rae Hinton, EnableIn ERG Global Co-Chair, LinkedIn**

“Concerns about data and privacy legislation can be a barrier to recruiting new members or even communicating about the Network’s activities in some countries. You have to work with colleagues to understand the challenges in the knowledge that there’s usually a way to convey helpful and useful information without falling foul of local regulations.”

**Nasir Ahmed Co-Chair of the Adapt Network, Atos**

### Lessons learnt:

#### Skilled global disability ERG/Network leaders tend to:

- Partner with the global communications team to maximise opportunities to promote the ERG/Network.
- Work creatively and collaboratively to overcome objections relating to data and privacy.
- Deploy regular and life-affirming communications to motivate the core ERG/Network leadership team.

## Language

Disability ERG/Network leaders around the world are using terms as varied as disabled people, people with disabilities, differently-abled, diverse-abilities, handicap and people of determination. Global ERG/Network leaders know that given the variances between locations in how disability is experienced and understood, any of these terms can be empowering to some and offensive to others.

“As global ERG leaders, we promote wherever possible a common inclusive and positive language around disability, whilst still acknowledging and respecting that people use their preferred language. While we recognise the importance of language in supporting inclusion, our focus is on identifying and removing organisational and personal barriers and continuing to improve disability confidence and inclusion at GSK.”

**Andy Garrett & Tracy Mitchelson - co-leads, GSK Global Disability Confidence Network - ERG**

“Enable provides a platform to connect and support colleagues through the sharing of stories that raise awareness to support disability inclusion, mental health and neurodiversity. We’re proud of our award-winning storytelling campaign, Enable: My Lived Experience and the positive impact it has had.”

**Louise Zabbar, Co-Chair of Clifford Chance Enable**

### Lessons learnt:

**Those global ERG/Network leader that make progress tend to:**

- Adopt a broad global definition to convey the message that the ERG/Network is here for anyone with a disability or long-term condition (regardless of whether it is recognised as such in any particular location).
- Focus on building a realistic, positive and life-affirming narrative around disability and work that centres around employees’ stories rather than their preferences around terminology.
- Recognise that whilst language matters, on a topic as diverse as global disability inclusion, it has the potential to distract and derail.
- Build consensus around practical steps that can be taken to build a better working world for employees with disabilities.

## Ego and personal experience

As author Ryan Holiday reminds us, ‘ego is the enemy’.

Global disability ERG/Network leaders don’t always get the recognition they deserve (although this is changing) so a drive based on purpose and impact is often key to job satisfaction. They also know that handing over their role to those that come behind them is important and that robust succession planning helps to build stability and continuity for the ERG/Network.

Global ERG/Network leaders are experienced in receiving a range of views and reactions from others that aren’t always aligned to their own. It’s easy to dismiss colleagues or even cultures that are playing catch up on disability as ‘regressive’ or ‘ableist’.

“As a volunteer, there aren’t the big deliverables you might be used to in your day job. That’s ok, because the flip side is that you start to understand what you can achieve as an influencer who is able to traverse the whole organisation in a way that would never be possible in your core role.”

**Alia Cooper, Ability ERG global co-chair, HSBC**

“A colleague once suggested that it’s a form of arrogance to complain when others’ don’t understand disability inclusion. It’s not about internalising other people’s ableism or putting up with discriminatory practice but as a leader, if you start to frame other people’s perceptions as your problem and not theirs, you immediately switch into problem solving mode. The question becomes, ‘what can I learn and how can I influence in a way that moves things forward?’”

**Darren Rowan, International Leader of EnAble, Eli Lilly and Company**

### Lessons learnt:

**Successful global ERG/Network leaders tend to:**

- Understand that the universe is unfolding as it should and that it is their role to find ways of meeting people where they’re at and engaging with them in a way that enables them to make progress in a way that suits their context.
- Enjoy the freedom that comes with a voluntary role as an influencer and advisor.
- Ensure robust succession planning means the ERG/Network will benefit from new talent and continue to thrive without them.

# With thanks to...

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# PurpleSpace

PurpleSpace is a unique leadership development membership hub for disability employee resource [ERG] group / Network leaders, champions, and allies around the world.

Our 2000+ members across 200+ employer brands employ over 1 million employees with disability between them. Members join to increase the effectiveness of their disability ERGs / Networks, develop their leadership skills, and learn how to help their organisations to become disability confident from the inside out.

We call it Networkology and it is having a powerful worldwide impact on driving the next phase of cultural change within many different types of organisations.

The introduction of rights-based legislation is what we call the first phase of change. In some parts of the world that is still on the move.

The second phase is the process where employers tap into the enabling products and services that help them to create better policy, practice, and procedure. That phase continues.

Meanwhile, the third phase of change has begun. Where employees with disability build inner confidence, lean into their careers, and create meaningful conversation about how to get ahead at work. High performing disability ERGs and Networks are at the vanguard of this change. This is the new modern approach to sustaining culture change.

It's what we do.


Find the space to think Networkology.



Find the space to help your people develop their career for personal and business success.

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