

Talking purple

Purple networkology Sarah Simcoe

Change is ubiquitous. I've learned during my career that the best kind of change occurs when we can organise people around a common goal and have a shared understanding of what we are trying to achieve and why we are trying to achieve it. It's known as the 'and' game and the 'end' game. This can be said of any kind of change, whether at an individual, organisational, or cultural level.

One of the most powerful ways an employer can engage with their employees to enable those with disabilities, health conditions, mental health conditions or long-term injuries to feel included, enabled and respected in their workplace, is to establish a disabled employee network (DEN). The DEN is a direct line in engaging disabled employees and accessing the voice of the lived experience. In my workplace, Fujitsu's DEN has given us the opportunity to really connect with our employees, to understand and use that experience when it comes to building and driving our disability-confident agenda, forming a strategy underpinned by goals and objectives that will deliver real sustainable change. Other large corporations such as KPMG, Barclays, the Civil Service and Shell all have similarly well established networks.

However, I'm often asked, why? Why would we set up a DEN and what real value can that add to the business? From first-hand experience, I know that a network can help an organisation move into the space of driving real sustainable change for its employees, with the following benefits:

It enhances communication channels –

A network provides a mechanism for disabled employees to share their thoughts on the types of systemic adjustments that the organisation needs to make. It helps to create a shared understanding about key priorities for change and provide a forum for discussion that enables employees to feel valued and heard.

It provides peer-group support and networking – A network can provide informal support for those acquiring an impairment

during their working life or for those whose existing health conditions have worsened. It may also help people to consider their own personal strategies for overcoming barriers to getting reasonable changes to the working environment or to getting promotion. The personal story and learning from those who have experienced similar journeys can be powerful.

It encourages career progression – There is a vast pool of purple talent out there and networks help to create an environment that encourages disabled employees to develop their skills, pursue career opportunities and provide role models and mentors.

It promotes diversity – The active support of a DEN is a direct demonstration of an employer's level of commitment to disabled employees. It signals a real drive to build a diverse workforce, assists the organisation to demonstrate how it values its employees and might well help to attract and retain talented disabled employees. This is evident in Fujitsu and it has helped to increase the number of disabled employees recruited, retained and who are now comfortable in sharing their disability or condition.

It encourages compliance with employment law – This is important and not all organisations understand the consequence. The Disability Discrimination Acts of 1995 and 2005 make it unlawful to discriminate against disabled people at work. Between 2004 and 2007, over 15,000 cases went to employment tribunal. A DEN can be one of the best ways an employer has of demonstrating their strategic intent to address discrimination against disabled people in the workplace.

It broadens consultation channels – A DEN can be a valuable route for consultation on policies, practices and procedures. It can be a good source of information about the challenges in the workplace and a helpful reference point for personnel, training providers, diversity officers, procurement advisors and facilities managers.

Furthermore, an employer which publicly recognises the value of its disabled employees

is likely to reap the rewards of increased interest from disabled customers and clients. Organisations that are involved in delivering a service to the public can use the DEN to help build a better picture of the needs and expectations of disabled customers, to improve its products and services. It will become increasingly important for organisations to anticipate the aspirations and requirements of disabled customers, and what better way than by tapping into the knowledge of a DEN?

The benefits of a DEN are clear, but creating successful networks requires skill, hard work and innovation. It is more than 'a nice to have' and is about creating a real vehicle to supporting cultural change in an organisation. It takes a good understanding of where you want to get to and how you will engage and excite others along the way.

You have to know what you are talking about and network leaders (including myself) need to talk to disabled employees, who can help to answer key questions: what is going well? What is not going well? What needs to be improved? How can the network support change? Where should we prioritise our efforts? To assist with your DEN journey, there are some excellent resources available, and in my role leading the network, I regularly check and balance our approach with two PurpleSpace publications, *In the Chair* and *Purple Stories*. To find out more, you can visit the PurpleSpace website below.



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