

A BUILDING EQUALITY GUIDE TO

Setting up your LGBT+ employee network



buildingequality
Building an inclusive construction industry

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About Building Equality

Building Equality is an alliance of over 30 construction consultants, engineers, developers, contractors, and institutions who are passionate about working together and harnessing our collective power to drive LGBT+ inclusion in the construction industry. Our vision is to have a construction industry that is wholly welcoming, inclusive and supportive of LGBT+ professionals across the UK.

This guide was created by our member companies using their experiences of having set up successful LGBT+ employee networks.

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Where to begin

There is no 'single' or 'best' way to form a network, it very much depends on the organisation, its culture, size and appetite for inclusion and diversity activities. The key starting point is raising the idea to create one.

Being a lone voice can be daunting, seeking support from colleagues, a manager, HR team, senior management or office manager depending on the structure of the organisation will be beneficial. This guide provides useful information on how you can establish a network. Using some of these ideas, create a short proposal to share with others when seeking support.

Recruiting a team

Whilst the idea to form a network can come from any part of your organisation, ultimately it will need to be sustainable and will require a core organising committee to drive it forward. Therefore, if the idea originally came from a person with a management/HR function, they will want to recruit LGBT+ staff and allies at an early stage. This group of people will almost certainly exist somewhere in your organisation and they will be delighted to be offered the chance to participate. But finding them can be tricky since it is not necessarily easy to identify who these people might be.

Consider what means of communication are available within your organisation. Are there channels you could access which would enable you to gain a greater reach when looking for members for the network? Is there a means of cascading your idea to gauge an appetite? Are there already 'informal' networks or social groups who could be approached? Before launching the network officially, you may want to make enquiries to gauge the level of interest by discussing the topic on intranet forums or by starting a conversation on a social platform such as a Yammer. If staff respond positively, welcoming the proposal to create a network, you may already have begun to

form a core team of interested employees who can support the creation of the network.

Gaining support from fellow co-workers can help a subsequent business case for the need to create a network. If the organisation can see the level of employee engagement the idea has generated, it may realise the value of the network more easily.

Senior sponsorship

Research suggests that harnessing the support of senior colleagues is critical to ensuring the long-term success of an LGBT+ network. Identify someone in senior management to approach for support. Depending on the size of the organisation, it may not be possible to identify an 'executive sponsor' such as a board member for example to help champion the network, but someone with an HR or diversity remit could be helpful or perhaps an office manager.

Having visible support by a senior champion deters cynicism, possible LGBT+ phobic behaviour and managerial reluctance to allow employees to participate in the network. It helps add credibility to the networks' aims and objectives, ultimately boosting its profile. If the network will apply to obtain funding from your company, it is always helpful to be represented by a senior voice in the boardroom, and if you hope that your network will help to shape company policies in the future you are very likely to require the assistance of a senior sponsor.

Maximising sponsorship

Should you find executive level support is readily available and they are keen to actively support your aims, consider the Stonewall Senior Leadership Programme or Role Model training to help encourage others within the organisation to foster an inclusive environment. If budgets do not permit, utilise networks such as Building Equality to connect with other senior leaders within the industry to help share best practice and experience.

First steps

Communication is key

The first few steps in the life of your network can be daunting. It is likely that after forming some sort of organising committee and on-boarding senior leaders and business support functions, the existence of your fledgling network is known only to a small number of people.

If your organisation has a communications manager, they and their advice will be extremely useful in helping you to raise awareness of the existence of the network. If your organisation does not have a dedicated communications team, office managers are likely to have the greatest understanding of how to communicate with the rest of your company.

Communicating the existence of the network externally is also a positive approach for your organisation, as it supports your brand as an inclusive employer to potential future employees.

At this stage, you are likely to find it more effective to take small, incremental steps rather than trying to sprint too quickly. If your organisation uses Yammer or has an intranet forum, this can be a useful platform for hosting early discussion and gauging interest. However, many people do not use Yammer and, even those who do are unlikely to be aware of the existence of the network unless it is signposted.

If your organisation maintains an intranet you may want to announce the formation of the network there, although again you may have colleagues who pay little attention to the intranet and the best way of reaching these individuals is probably by putting up posters, by email and/or by word of mouth. If timing permits, it is often a good idea to associate these communications with one of the many dates in the LGBT+ calendar as an interest hook (for example by announcing the formation of the network during LGBT+ Pride or LGBT+ History Month).

Early messaging

As the network is still in a nascent form, it is unlikely at this time that you will have made firm decisions as to your aims (these are normally set out in a terms of reference document). However, if you can it is advisable to set out the broad objectives of your network in these initial communications, as some of your colleagues may not understand what the network is about.

It is often unavoidable to use some acronyms such as “LGBT+” in your communications, but when doing so you should explain what these terms mean. It is good practice for a network to be as inclusive as possible, by including a “+” in the name, and by ensuring your communications are clear that the network represents lesbian, gay bisexual, transgender and other minorities.

As the network grows and in order to influence your organisation effectively, the involvement of non-LGBT+ allies will become essential. For this reason, it is advisable that you make clear at the outset that the network is not an exclusive club and that non-LGBT+ allies are encouraged to join.

In order to keep in contact with individuals who confirm their interest it is advisable to setup an email account for the network together with mailing lists. There are likely to be LGBT+ individuals

in the company who are not out of the closet, but whom would like to keep in touch with the network yet do not want to come out at work. It is common practice to create two types of list: one of which is open where all recipients can see the email addresses of all other recipients, and a second closed list where recipients are blind carbon copied (BCC). This means the email addresses of recipients are not visible.

For obvious reasons, if you do agree to maintain a closed mailing list, this will need to be managed very carefully to avoid accidental leaks which could be very distressing to the individuals concerned. One way to reduce the risk of any privacy issues is to assign responsibility for the mailing list to a single organising committee member with this issue kept at the forefront of their minds.

Terms of reference

It is advisable to draft and publish terms of reference at an early stage in your journey. At a high level this is a document which sets out the objectives of your network. People are more likely to want to participate in the network if they understand what it plans to achieve, and having effective terms will also deter cynicism. Importantly, the prospects of obtaining funding will improve if you can refer to a formal document which justifies the existence of the network.

Objectives

Key components of a terms of reference document are your high-level objectives, a description of the activities you will undertake to achieve those objectives, and an explanation of the benefits the network will generate for its employees, the company and its clients. You may wish to consult beyond your organising committee when putting this together. In particular, if you have secured senior sponsorship, you will need to on-board them when drafting the

terms and they may have their own interesting insights to share. They are well-positioned to advise what the organisation would like to see the network do. Staff network activities vary from company to company but at their core they are about supporting the interests of and raising awareness of the LGBT+ community in the workplace.

Benefits

The benefits section is probably the trickiest part. Your terms need to both attract LGBT+ colleagues and allies to the network whilst also justifying the investment for your company. There is a vast amount of information available online about the advantages of diversity and inclusion and the benefits which employee networks bring to their organisations.

At a high level, these are increased productivity and improved recruitment, engagement and retention of staff (both LGBT+ and others, who will recognise the existence of a staff network as an indicator of an employer's inclusive culture). In an industry where demand for talent is fierce, this is an important message to share with your organisation. This message is likely to be more effective in recruiting the support of more cynical members of your organisation who may otherwise not recognise the need for an LGBT+ network.

That said, there is also a personal angle to this and if your terms of reference focus solely on the impact of a network on your organisation's bottom line, they are unlikely to be an effective recruiting sergeant for the company's LGBT+ community and its allies.

Another useful purpose for terms of reference is they enable you to monitor the progress of your network and demonstrate success. Many companies do not collect the datasets necessary to determine if LGBT+ recruitment, engagement and retention is improved following the creation of a staff network. However, if your organisation buys into

the terms of reference of your network and you are able to achieve the agreed aims, this will help to demonstrate success although the value may remain intangible.

Organisational strategy

Wherever possible it is advisable to link the purpose and activities of your network to your organisation's broader strategy. This will demonstrate that the network is helping the organisation achieve its goals which will help to justify investment.

If the network moves together with the rest of the organisation and aligns itself with a broader strategy, both the network and organisation are more likely to achieve a positive result. As an example, many construction and engineering companies are suffering from a skills gap, and therefore they may be actively seeking to recruit from a more diverse array of talent. Not only will this help to fill posts, it is also likely to lead to greater efficiency through staff retention, better engagement and more innovation.

The Building Equality group has resources such as sample terms of reference which may be helpful references when preparing your own terms.

Securing a budget

If your organisation has resources which it is able to allocate to staff networks, you are likely to have to follow a formal process to secure funding. Wherever possible, you should seek to align your application for funding with the company's budget cycle, as it can be tricky to secure funding once a financial year has begun and the company's available cash already accounted for.

The format of a business case will differ between companies but the following principles should always be of assistance:

- Remember that the budget approver may not know what LGBT+ means, so you will need to explain this at the outset.
- If the network has the support of a senior sponsor, HR etc you should mention this.
- It is advisable to enclose your terms of reference to demonstrate that the network takes its purpose seriously. The approver may not review the entirety of your terms of reference so you should summarise the objectives and planned activities of the network in your business case.
- The approver will be concerned to see what benefits the network can bring in order to assess whether it is cost-effective to allocate funds. It is widely acknowledged that staff networks can have a number of positive impacts including:
 - helping your organisation to win work by demonstrating its commitment to diversity and inclusion: this is particularly important if your employer has clients in the public sector;
 - improving the reputation of your organisation within the industry as a good employer which has not been left behind by its competitors;
 - improving staff morale and productivity because staff are more likely to focus on doing their jobs than hiding their gender or sexual identity; and
 - helping the organisation to recruit from a broader range of talent, increasing staff engagement and retention thereby reducing recruitment costs.

There are many publications on available on the internet which discuss these benefits in some detail, which you may want to reference in your business case.

- Obviously, you will need to specify how much cash you are applying for and how this will be spent. There are a number of spending models, for example you may want to pre-agree

the big-tickets items in your business case, agree a mechanism for spending to be approved by someone outside the network or describe the kinds of activity you would like to participate in whilst leaving ultimate discretion on spending to the organising committee.

- Companies favour consistency, and documents written on company templates tend to be looked upon favourably. Ensure your proposal looks like a company document. It sounds simple, but the impact of taking the time to do this shows a level of professionalism that is appreciated.
- Ensure you align your activities to the company's manifesto or values. Mentioning that the event you are asking funding for helps realise a goal or promote a company value goes a long way in helping attain budget approval. Weaving in references to your corporate strategy is key.

Your first event

Holding a successful launch event is key to galvanising support for and engagement with your network: until the members have had an opportunity to meet each other they are unlikely to feel a strong connection to the network.

It can be tricky to choose a location for a launch event if your organisation is geographically widely spread, and you will want to host the launch event at a location where there is enough critical mass of local employees so as to make the launch worthwhile. As the network grows you will want to engage your members across the country, but during the early stages it is advisable to focus your energies on the easier wins.

To maximise attendance figures, you should work with your communications adviser to utilise the media available to you which may include email, intranet articles, yammer posts, physical posters, mentions during group conference calls and the like. You should contact your

senior sponsor directly to secure their attendance.

The format of the event will be guided by the purpose of your network and the resources available to you. Keys to success include clearly conveying a message regarding the purpose of the network, and giving attendees the opportunity to network amongst themselves. For many, this could be the first time they have met other openly LGBT+ colleagues, so ideally the launch will take place in person rather than over Skype.

The timing of the event should be informed by its format: but in any case, you should be mindful of the commitments that your colleagues may have which mean they cannot remain at an evening event for long.

It is recommended that one or more members of the organising committee introduces the network, its purpose, the benefits you expect to accrue and the activities you will undertake. You should also give your senior sponsor a chance to speak. The launch is an important opportunity for a sponsor to convey their support and show that the organisation is committed to the network.

If you can, you may want to invite an external speaker to the launch and to peg the event to a milestone in the LGBT+ calendar, for example Pride or LGBT History Month as these will give additional purpose to the launch.

Sustainability

Driving engagement with your network over an extended period of time is a challenge all networks face. It is important to plan what your short, mid and long-term goals or your network and know what resources you need to achieve them. Having an active plan will ensure your network is engaged and responsive.

It is important to decide the basis of your network, will it be a social network, supporting network or career development network? Each type has its benefits and will help in planning for your sustainability. You may want to update

your terms of reference periodically to keep them up to date with the evolution of your network.

Committee structure

It may or may not be necessary to allocate formal roles to each member of the organising committee of your network, however it is useful to have a chair to oversee the activities of the members.

Whilst you may not have a formal committee structure, you should endeavour to maintain as diverse a balance of committee members as you are able to ensure representation from across the spectrum of gender and sexual orientation. If your committee is formed exclusively of gay men, you may struggle to represent and generate engagement from the rest of the LGBT+ community.

If you do allocate roles to members of your committee, you should consider doing so on the basis of existing experience and expertise: individuals with business management experience are likely to be the most capable treasurers, whilst those in more senior positions may be more effective communicators with your organisation's senior leadership.

However, this does not mean junior staff should in any way be excluded from participating in the organisation of your network. Employee networks are a great opportunity for junior employees to engage with senior leaders with whom they may otherwise have no contact, with obvious benefits for their profile in the workplace and career development.

Likewise, it is advisable to seek representation that is geographically diverse. For many organisations this can be a challenge, as it is often the case that there is a concentration of employees in London and the South East, with fewer employees in the rest of the UK. You may therefore want to actively look for members in the regions who can organise local events in their location and ensure equal representation on your committee.

That said, if there are few or no active members of your network in a particular

location, there is little value in concentrating your efforts trying to galvanise colleagues into action as this is unlikely to result in sustainable change: the resources of your network are better spent elsewhere. If there are people in areas with few network members, it may be more effective to engage with them by collaborating with your organisation's peers and clients, as well as the other employee resources groups at your organisation, to deliver joint activities in those areas.

It is also advisable to ensure that your network uses technology such as webinars and conference calls to engage with its members where face to face meetings are impractical. Email circulars, Yammer and intranet sites are also effective ways of keeping in touch with your members regardless of location.

Planning

In addition to your terms of reference you may also find it useful to draw up a programme of activity (perhaps in the form of a one-year plan). This will help you to allocate resources appropriately and plan the activities of your network in good time. There is value in sharing this with the person responsible for communicating your network's activities to ensure the comms are circulated in good time.

When deciding which activities to deliver, a scattergun approach is inadvisable and is unlikely to influence real change in your organisation: for example it is more effective to choose a small number of themes and concentrate your efforts on these, than to organise a random selection of unrelated activities with no real lasting impact.

Ensuring where possible a link to the 'business' is also a key part of maintaining a sustainable network. Working in conjunction and supporting business leaders on their inclusion and diversity strategies will help maintain relevant and sustainable objectives for the network.

Allies

Another effective way of making an impact is to recruit non-LGBT+ allies into your network. The voices of non-LGBT+ people are an important tool to help give credibility to your network and ensure its message is heard.

Unfortunately, the construction industry, in particular senior management level, is not particularly diverse despite progress in recent years. Educated and pro-active allies will help to foster a culture of LGBT+ inclusivity by being vocal advocates of the community who are able to effectively challenge negative behaviours.

Stonewall has several resources that are worth reading:

- [Becoming an ally](#)
- [Becoming an active LGBT ally](#)

- [Five ways to be an ally](#)
- [Global allies guide](#)

Sources of support

Once you have set up your network, it is important to continue to drive engagement from your network. This can be a daunting task, however there are places you can go.

Stonewall, the UK's leading LGBT+ charity, has a number of resources available online that are free to access such as:

- [Maintaining Network Group Momentum: Supporting Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual Employees](#)
- [Global LGBT+ Employee Network Groups](#)

Stonewall isn't the only place to go however, a big source of support can be fellow networks. The members of the Building Equality group are always more than welcome to have a conversation and answer any questions you might have.

Once you do set up your networks, your chair(s) should contact [The Network of Networks](#) (TNON), a conglomeration of LGBT+ networks around the country, where you can meet people from different industries and share your experiences.

[InterEngineering](#) is a great source of support for those in the engineering industry. Its aim is to connect, inform and empower LGBT+ engineers and their allies and it has representation in a number of parts of the UK.

InterEngineering is a great networking tool and with events in different parts of the country it offers the opportunity for members of your network across the UK to participate in events. This is particularly important if the distribution of employees at your organisation is uneven and there may be parts of the UK that are home to a small number of network members, who rarely have the chance to attend physical meetings due to geographical separation.

Building Equality contacts

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