



FACTSHEET

STEPS TO START AND RUN AN EMPLOYEE NETWORK

Introduction

The importance of employee networks and staff feeling supported at work cannot be overstated. The [McGregor-Smith Review: Race in the workplace](#) highlighted that tackling the racial disparities in the workplace and labour market is worth a potential annual boost to the UK economy of £24bn. Engaging the Black Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) employees within your organisation can help you to identify and tackle and disparities that may exist. The Race at Work Charter [has five principle calls for action](#). These actions help employers to focus on key areas for action. This guide provides advice and insight that can support the establishment of an Employee Network that focuses on race and ethnicity and other protected characteristics within the Equality Act. Issues beyond the act are also a focus, for example for social mobility, or for employees with caring responsibilities for young children and older relatives.

Employee Networks, also known as Employee Resources Groups (ERGs), play a key role in encouraging and supporting all employees to bring their whole self to work. networks greatly contribute to creating inclusive environments and building a sense of community. Networks help to facilitate employee engagement and meaningful dialogue about diversity and inclusion at work.

Benefits

- Network groups are uniquely able to increase understanding of equality issues amongst employees, share information and enable employees to support each other. They provide a voice for employees from under-represented groups.
- Networks play a key part in the planning and implementation of diversity and inclusion initiatives.
- Crucially, networks introduce role models, who can powerfully share their journey and their experiences navigating the work environment. Network participants can discuss how they managed their career, and how they avoided their visible characteristics (gender, race, disability etc.), becoming a barrier to progression.
- Employee Networks improve the external reputation of their organisation, and networks that support BAME employees can help employers identify and connect with diverse communities. These communities are often considered hard to reach by policy makers and experience negative disparities and outcomes. The governments [Ethnicity Facts and Figures](#) website is a great source of data and insight into some of the racial disparities that exist within communities in the UK.





- Network staff are in a unique position to create awareness about the needs and aspirations of the employee groups they represent. Furthermore, they can advise on business opportunities, marketing, programme and product development and generally on how to improve the reach to clients and service users from diverse communities.
- Networks improve the workplace and can provide a safe space for employees to discuss sensitive issues. Networks can also provide advice and information on any resources that exist within the workplace.

Setting up and running a network takes passion, time and effort. It requires committed individuals but also organisations that value and support them. The best employee network outcomes are achieved when the network, Human Resources (HR), People Engagement teams, Diversity and Inclusion (D&I) leads and senior executive sponsor within the organisation work collaboratively together to provide guidance, support and resource where required.

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The following top tips are taken from practices and experiences from BITC member organisations and their highly effective employee networks. They are designed to support networks, however early-on in their development. The tips also guide organisations on how to get the best value from their employee networks.



Top Tips for gaining commitment and support to start a network

Value networks

Networks are more successful when their organisation recognises their importance and value. Establish a supportive relationship between the Network and Diversity and Inclusion and/or Human Resources teams who can and should facilitate access to senior leadership teams, executive sponsors and other stakeholders in the organisation.

Create capacity

One common challenge for networks is the workload involved for the volunteer chairs and committee members, who are juggling their day job and their role in the network. Much can be done to help the network's volunteers succeed. For example, organisations can offer a certain amount of volunteer hours during working time:

- Organisations can ensure line managers appreciate the importance of the work of the network and allow time away from the day job when possible;
- Network achievements can be recognised as part of the appraisal process, objectives and KPIs.

Sustainability

To promote continuity and avoid loss of momentum and expertise, networks should consider succession planning for network chairs as a key responsibility, as well as responsibility for the continuity of network participants.



Align with organisational goals

Networks are more effective when their aims fit well with organisational objectives.

- Organisations should be open and transparent about their Diversity targets and the diversity [management information they monitor](#).
- Networks should consider how their objectives find alignment with organisational D&I and People strategies.

Plan

The network's business case should be established at the start, including the needs the network is addressing.

It is also helpful to define what is outside the employee networks scope, this can help to keep the network focussed. It will also ensure the roll of the network is clearly defined and separate to that where engagement with HR is more appropriate. The business case should include how the network is contributing to the organisation and ensure plans are realistic and achievable.

Favour a long-term view - it is better to accomplish smaller sustained steps than to pursue an ambitious plan that may not come to fruition. This may result in a loss of confidence and engagement.

Frequent Network Activities

As Networks develop plans, they should consider how they can support employees, keep their activities business focussed and deliver business benefits

Common activities for members and peers

Common activities for organisation and workforce

Support Role Modelling

Promoting diversity, education and dialogue

Attraction & Recruitment

Raising external profile and organisational reputation, being involved in recruitment outreach and selection panels

Employee engagement

Advising on policy and programs under development, help to promote the value of capturing ethnicity data and other protected characteristics.

Professional Development & Career progression

Consulting on business, products & services and reaching out to diverse costumers





Networking

Providing internal resources





Activities for networks in early stages

Step 1: Gearing Up

- Draw up a **business case** showing what value the Network will provide to the employer as well as to members.
- Set up a **strategic direction** and long-term vision: consult with colleagues to identify the main priorities of the Network. What needs is the Network designed to address?
- Work closely with the D&I / HR / People Engagement teams to **align** network objectives with those of the organisation. The five principle calls for action in the [Race at Work Charter](#) provides a simple framework for action that highlights some key areas for action for employers that the network can support the employer with.
- Establish clear **terms of reference**, develop formal guidelines and a regular meeting schedule. Consider best ways for the network to operate, define roles and areas of responsibility.
- Carry out a review of current **capacity**, make plans to address any issues (for example recruiting more committee members, setting up working streams, clarifying job roles and expectations etc...)
- Develop a strategy and **action plan**, answering the questions:
 - What do we want to achieve within the next 3 / 5 years)?
 - What are the objectives for this year? (What action will we take? Who is responsible for each? How can we measure our success? What timelines are associated to these activities? What resources are needed?)
- Identify what **resources** are needed and ways to secure them

- Develop a **brand**. This includes a name suitable to communicate the objectives of the Network to key audiences: members, peers and the workforce at large. This can include a logo.
- Bring HR and Diversity teams **up to speed** with your progress.
 - Communicate clearly the network's request for support from them, and have a good understanding of how the network intends to collaborate moving forward (areas of collaborative effort, areas where the network will work independently, lines of communication etc.)

Stage 2: Getting Going

- Plan a **launch** event if starting a new network or re-launching an existing network. Try to attract as much attention as possible. Invite senior leaders. Invite the Chief Executive, or equivalent, to speak at the event to demonstrate support. Top down, visible commitment from the CEO and ExCo is key in setting up the network for success. Secure an executive sponsor for the network who will commit to listen to the network and support them and represent views and issues highlighted at the top table. This is important for sustained effectiveness of the network beyond the excitement of the launch. Our [Top Tips factsheet for Executive Sponsors](#) provides some ideas of how they can support the organisation and networks as a part of that.
- Develop **communication channels** and tools to create awareness about the network, its activities and to foster membership.
- Work on **strategies to engage** peers.
- Carry out **consultation with network members** and peers. This helps to:





- Boost the engagement of peers
- Develop the awareness of committee members and their understanding of issues faced by peers. This can be valuable, particularly when hearing about challenges faced by employees in business units, seniority levels or geographical locations that are not well represented amongst the Network committee.
- Plan programs and initiatives most likely to offer value.
- Feed back to the Organisation and Senior Champion, increasing awareness of main issues
- Carry out **social and informational events**, promoting cultural awareness and dialogue.
- Plan events to **celebrate** landmark dates or cultural events (for example religious or cultural festival, Black History Month, International Women Day, Pride etc)
- Plan events to amplify **awareness** about selected issues. This can include inviting external speakers, showcasing recent research, brown bag meetings or town hall style event with senior leaders.
- **Champion a charity:** Contributing to the networks overall objectives. For example, a BAME Network whose objective is to promote

diverse representation within the workforce, and for example, may support a charity that works with BAME unemployed / job seeking youth.

Support available from [BITC](#)

BITC Diversity Advisers can support networks in the following ways:

- ✓ Provide the network with relevant research to help understand key diversity issues;
- ✓ Arrange for informal opportunities for committee and network members to meet people from other organisations and other sectors, to share challenges and solutions;
- ✓ Support the creation or revision of a strategic vision and guiding goals for the network. This will ensure strong links with the Organisation's business strategy to support the value of the network.
- ✓ Facilitate the review of the network's structure and strategy. For example, exploring the shared vision for the network; its purpose (the reasons why it came into existence); how it integrates with other networks in the organisation; the engagement opportunities that exist and so on.
- ✓ Support a governance and structure review to promote capacity building.
- ✓ Support events by providing content / presentations, for example, help to connect to guest speakers, promote events etc.

Please get in touch with us to learn how you can access additional support and connect with other established Employee Networks in your sector – www.bitc.org.uk/race

