**London Anchor Institutions’ Network (LAIN) Conference 2024**

**Hiring & Skills Working Group Break Out Session Minutes**

Topic: Disability in the workplace

**11:15 – 12:15 BST, 08 February 2024**

In person meeting at the City Hall

**Attendees:**

Janet Gardner (Waltham Forest College), Karima Khandker (Thames Water), Rachel Williamson (GLA), James Llyod (TfL) , Jackie Chapman (Capital City College Group), Michael Heanue (GLA), Shehreen Najam (GLA), Mary Vine-Morris (AoC), Nina Hemmings (NHS), Diane Lightfoot (Business Disability Forum), Ola Holloway (GLA), Janine La Rose (BHRUT), Katherine Gee (GLA).

**Discussion:**

1. **Welcome & Introduction:**

* **Karima (co-chair)** welcomed the attendees, and everyone did a quick round of introductions.
* **Janet (co-chair)** reinforced some of the key themes that the working group has focused on in previous sessions. She mentioned that the group has made good progress by focusing on key themes such as ethnicity, gender and disability.
* Going forward, the group would like to do a deeper dive into disability and improving practices and approaches to recruitment in the workforce, it would benefit everyone, and it would address other challenging areas as well. Janet mentioned that we are pleased that Diane has joined us again to conduct a session on disability. Through this session, we are hoping to see where we are collectively as a group and where we can keep focus for the year ahead.

1. **Disability in the workforce – Presentation made by Diane Lightfoot (Business Disability Forum)**

* Diane Lightfoot, CEO of Business Disability Forum (BDF), briefly introduced herself and the work done by BDF which is to work with the private and public sector to support disadvantaged and disabled employees and customers in workforce. She guided the attendees to refer to the BDF website, which contains a lot of free resources, along with useful policies which are all available on their [website](https://businessdisabilityforum.org.uk/publications/).
* Diane started the discussion with some of the things that the group has identified as priority:
* Supported internships - There is an organisation called Project Search that the BDF is doing a lot of work with. There may be support available here in regard to supported internships.
* Disability Confident – BDF conducts disability confident leader validation for members and provides support in this area.
* Diane mentioned that the main aim of BDF is to provide better support to businesses on areas around disability.
* The key points to note that Diane mentioned in this session, include (but are not limited to) the following:
* To review the existing culture in your workforce.
* Important not to get hung up on definition.
* Over 90% of disabilities are not immediately visible. Hence you probably have many more disabled colleagues in your workforce than you realised.
* To ask yourself the question that does it matter if you know how many disabled people there are in the organisation? And where people's energy is going?
* To note that people often conceal their disabilities. People are afraid of what will happen to their jobs if they share information about their disability/disabilities.
* Cultures drives the number of people who will share information about their disability.
* The whole identity around disability is very personal and complex.
* When are you asking questions about disability from your workforce and how are you putting across those questions is important.
* Diane illustrated some of the examples of data shared and how people share their disability (please see slides).
* Around 80% senior executives are comfortable to talk about disability, whilst 60% of other staff said they are comfortable to speak about it.
* 34% of those without adjustments said they didn’t make requests because they were worried about perception and consequences.
* The question to ask is if you should measure data – a report is going to be published by the BDF next month on workforce reporting. It's very important to reflect on why do you want to measure this data? Often people collect data and don’t know what to do with it. When organisations want to ask a question about disability generally, very often that doesn’t lead to any change or outcomes if the organisation does not know what to do with that data. You need to be clear on why you are asking these questions and what is the outcome you are seeking.
* When you are speaking to disabled people, the number of people in your workforce who have a disability is one thing, and the number of people who have had the experience of it, is another.
* BDF suggests employee engagement and working towards employee satisfaction.
* Important to see if Workplace adjustments are effective. Even if people are not answering on disability questions, you can look at workplace adjustments in place and get data and information from what has been put in place.
* Some of the most inclusive employers have some of the lowest number of disabilities in their workforce. In such an environment, the need for adjustments is removed. What the numbers are telling you is important, as well as what the numbers are not telling you.
* Worth noting that you need a 75% response rate to make your numbers credible.
* You can also drive the wrong employer behaviour if you’re not using correct language.
* BDF is in favour of voluntary reporting. Members say the real value in the data they collect lies in the narrative around it (i.e. looking at what are you going to do with the data, and with the result of it). This reinforces the change that is required.
* Culture comes first so it important to create an environment of trust. It's about thinking what will I see in the definition? Do I identify with it?
* The timing of conducting a disability survey in your organisation is very important. People are less likely to answer that question if they are worried about redundancy. Hence creating a culture of trust is the key answer.
* The role of senior leaders was highlighted. Creating psychological safety in the workplace is where senior leaders can play a key role. The more it becomes part of the daily conversation, the more it makes a difference. Practicing what is preached as a senior leader is also equally important.
* On language that is used around disability, people are still using ‘disclose’ to request for information, but that doesn’t sound positive as it appears as if it's something to be ashamed of. Instead, it was advised that people/organisations should use words such as ‘tell or share’. ‘Disclose’ should be avoided for the use of collecting data on disability.
* A massive barrier for not being able to collect data on disability is the fear of not saying anything. Language around disability is very important as it determines how comfortable people are to share information about their disabilities. Hence language around adjustment is something to review as well.
* ‘Getting it right’ conversations are important.
* Support provided to your senior leaders is important. Don’t let fear of ‘getting it wrong’ lead to you don’t do or say anything.
* The right intent and listening with a desire to learn can go a long way. Often people worry that they don’t have a story.
* Cultural change must be backed up with practical actions. i.e. through workplace adjustments etc.
* Keep a focus on what the barriers around disability and what you need to do to remove it.
* Important to note that most adjustments at the workplace are not costly to put in place.
* When thinking about workplace adjustments, inclusive design is very important around disability and inclusion. You should consider how something impacts everyone.
* Line managers are key players in this area of work. For example, If the line manager relationship (between the staff member and manager) is good than the support around adjustment and their experience will be good. This will result in a more trusting culture leading to an inclusive environment and the organisation being able to take steps to provide support to staff where needed.
* One thing that is important for line managers is, to understand adjustments and support is important. Having conversations (with staff members) is required and important for that reason.
* **Action =>** For setting priorities, using the disability smart framework could serve as an important tool to use to measure data around disability (please refer to slides to see the disability smart framework). This is a member resource. However just reading across this framework could be helpful. It demonstrates what actions you are required to take (i.e. It’s a good check list to go through). BDF recommends picking up a couple of actions from this rather than doing everything on this framework. However, please note that they all interlink.
* If you want to look at good recruitment practices, during the first stage of recruitment, you should ask a candidate if they need any adjustments. As some staff members develop disabilities at a later stages in their careers/or in their lives, and may have shared that they have no disability when they started their work, this should be kept in mind and accordingly organisations should have continuous dialogue with their staff members to check in on them to see if the support they require is provided for them.

1. **Question & Answers**

* **Question – we struggle with people with disability who develop it later. How do we make it more open for people to talk about it. We need to get better at getting people to speak about it**

Answer: BDF recommends routinely asking staff members about adjustments through one-to-one sessions. The solution to this is knowing your people (staff members). You can’t make people tell you anything. Hence building honest and open relationships and having conversations are important.

* **Question - 83% of staff acquire disability after they join work. How do we address getting up to date information.**

Answer: Adjustments reviews and surveys should be conducted. Publicising ways of working differently is important and making it a regular part of conversations with line managers and staff is key.

* **Question – In regard to the advice by BDF that 75% response rate is required for numbers to be credible on data collection around disability in the workforce, are there sectors or employers leading the way on this.**

Answer: There are some organisations who voluntarily report data around disability. BBC, and network rail voluntarily report data. Whether you need the numbers to drive the culture and/or vice versa, is a chicken and egg debate. A useful tip is to focus on the culture, before doing the numbers.

Janet contributed to this answer by advising the group to do the numbers anyway (i.e. data collection/fact finding). The Waltham Forest College (WFC) published their disability data and as a starting point, for them, this proved to be a useful exercise as an organisation, as it helped them understand what they know and what they don’t know which leads them to inform them towards making choices on bringing about change. In their experience, culture comes at the heart of it all, but data can inform on making better choices/strategies going forward.

Janine supported the point that what gets measured gets done. She pointed out that annual surveys are useful.

Rachel added that there are four member organisations who are publishing disability data: TfL, the GLA, WFC and London Borough of Barking & Dagenham.

1. **Wrap up and next steps**

**Discussion highlighted three key areas for focus**

1. **Better understanding disability in our existing workforce**
2. **Focus on culture, including amongst leaders and hiring managers**
3. **Future recruitment from underrepresented groups, including neurodivergent people and use of supported internships**

* It appears that the understanding on who our existing workforce is very important.
* It is worth looking at how we can continue to drive the change not just in existing workforce, but in providing reasonable adjustments, and to get this embedded in the workforce culture.
* We need to look at areas of future recruitment to widen the talent pool, by focusing on people with neuro diverse disabilities and challenges and assessing how can we broaden the talent pipeline and how do we extend the supported internships in this respect.
* Attendees were interested to learn more about intersectionality. BDF is about to publish a report on this and will share it with the group members when its launched.
* What we can do collectively as a group going forward is to keep a focus on:
* Supported internships;
* Senior leadership – we may have things in place within the recruitment processes to aid disabled colleagues, or adjustments passports in place, but we also need the senior leaders to buy into it to drive change in the workplace;
* Disability confident group/network – we are interested to learn more about it. Change needs to come from the top. Leadership drives that culture and adopting the right language and knowledge.
* Budget for workplace adjustments - One practical thing is to look at workplace adjustment and assessing your budget for it. Senior leadership conversations on setting aside the required budget is important in this aspect.