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Enablingstaff@OU – Supporting Integration In The Workplace

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SDF Digest:
A Practitioner Journal for HE Staff Development

Enablingstaff@OU – Supporting Integration In The Workplace

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Introduction

EnablingStaff@OU is a new staff network at the Open University (OU) which was launched in July 2014. The remit of the new network is to improve integration of disabled staff within the institution. This will be achieved by working with all staff to improve knowledge and understanding of disability and reasonable adjustment, alongside promoting recognition of the value of every individual within the workplace.

This article aims to guide you through why and how we set up the network, and to help you consider if it is something you might do within your own institution or organisation.

Background

Like many organisations, for a number of years, the OU has had a Disabled Staff Network. This offered an opportunity for disabled staff to network and provide peer support. Although it provided some very valued support, it was very much a closed shop, as only disabled staff were included. The new EnablingStaff@OU network recognises that all stakeholders need to be involved, if true integration is going to be achieved. It also acknowledges that colleagues of disabled staff may need support in understanding a particular disability and how best they can help.

Research shows that "positive attitudes towards people with disabilities in the workplace are associated with positive beliefs about the reasonableness of accommodating people with disabilities… and positive attitudes are related to higher level of experience working with people with disabilities" (Copeland *et al.*, 2010). It is important that we engage with all staff in order to change attitudes and demonstrate the great value that those staff with disabilities have to offer. It is also important to offer colleagues and managers an opportunity to explore how they can best help individuals. When someone is faced with a particular challenge, the network offers an opportunity to ask if others have previously solved the same problem or have any creative approaches to explore.

At the OU, the number of staff disclosing a disability has increased from 4.3% in 2009 to 8.7% by 2014. It is not clear whether this is due to an increasing proportion of staff disclosing, or increasing numbers of staff having disabilities. It is likely to be a combination of both. The introduction of the Equality Act 2010 placed new legal obligations on employers with regard to disabled staff, which may have encouraged staff to disclose. It also amended the definition of disability resulting in more individuals being legally defined as disabled. Our current Vice

Chancellor, Martin Bean, took up his post in 2009 which may have also influenced more staff to disclose, as appointing an individual with a disability to such a senior role is a clear indication by the institution that having a disability does not make staff less valued.

It is thought that a significant number of staff still do not disclose disabilities so we do not have a reliable estimate. Even if the figure of 8.7% is correct, this suggests that most staff will have a disabled colleague amongst those they work closely with. However, many people may be unaware which of their colleagues are disabled and what difficulties they may face.

In a recent survey of employees across both public and private sector organisations, 60% who had not declared their disability were concerned that "if I tell my employer there may be repercussions either now, or in the future" (Kate Nash Associates, 2014). The survey also highlights that only around a quarter of people in the UK, who would be classified as disabled under the provisions of the UK Equality Act, actually describe themselves as disabled to their employer. All the indications suggest that there is likely to be a significant level of nondisclosure within most workplaces. But regardless of the number of disabled employees, this is an issue which affects 100% of the workforce as true integration will only be achieved if all staff are engaged and working together.

The OU is not alone in facing the challenge of job satisfaction being lower amongst disabled staff than the rest of the workforce. Schua *et al*. (2009) report that disabled employees consistently report lower job satisfaction across all sectors. Regardless of disability, considering all employees, increased satisfaction is linked to increased productivity (Moreland, 2013) (Bockerman and Ilmakunnas, 2012), which makes this a strategically important issue for all organisations. Improving working conditions for disabled staff is likely to improve satisfaction for both them and their immeadiate colleagues.

Seen and hidden disabilities

Under the Equality Act 2010, disability is defined as "a physical or mental impairment that has a 'substantial' and 'long-term' negative effect on

your ability to do normal daily activities". This definition covers a wide range of disabilities which an individual may have. For some individuals their particular situation, or the adjustments that they need, makes their disability very obvious. For example using a wheelchair or having a guide dog. Other disabilities are hidden, such that colleagues may not be aware or may not realise that the particular condition would be considered a disability. Examples of hidden disabilities include specific learning difficulties, such as dyslexia and dyspraxia, partial sight or hearing, mental health issues and a wide range of conditions which cause varying amounts of pain and or fatigue.

It is hoped that increasing the level of knowledge and understanding about disability, within the general workforce, will encourage more individuals to come forward. Once an individual has declared a disability they gain access to support which will help them to reach their full potential.

Why have a network?

Supporting the creation of such networks is one way an institutional business can demonstrate they are complying with legislative requirements around disability and diversity within the workplace. But there are other considerations which should also drive supporting staff in this way. There is an ethical and moral duty to treat all employees with care and respect. Providing peer support networks empowers staff to support each other and generates a culture of care.

The OU's mission statement includes being "open to people" so there is a clear commitment to respecting and supporting those with disabilities. An exceptionally high level of support is provided to students with disabilities, however unfortunately that expertise is not always shared within the organisation in order to support its staff. Opening up the network to all staff means that experts in supporting students now have a mechanism for getting involved with supporting their colleagues across the institution. In return those experts are able to develop their knowledge of particular disabilities which informs their work with students.

Whilst ticking boxes to demonstrate legal compliance is one potential driver to setting up a

network, the bigger benefits will be dependent on how effectively the network actually functions. It needs to have buy-in from individuals across the organisation and at all levels, in addition to having genuine management support. Any network is only as effective as its members are active. Wenger *et al.* (2002) discuss the difficulties of cultivating communities of practice. Whilst they cannot be artificially created, providing the right environment and encouragement can help their natural formation. Provision of the framework for a staff network facilitates interconnections of interested individuals and community formation.

Features of a network

When setting up such a network it is important to be clear about the boundaries. The network facilitates peer support, provides a collective voice for consultation, and provides a facility for raising collective issues. We have been very clear that it is not a place for airing personal grievances, which should be taken to managers and the Human Resources department, and/or union representatives.

The network provides a two-way communication channel, both to distribute information and be a focal point for collecting issues and instigating improvements, in addition to facilitating peer to peer connections. It will also work to increase knowledge and awareness of disability and its impact in the workplace through running events and encouraging the inclusion of equality and diversity issues within training and development provision. We are looking to build a workforce that truly values diversity and embraces the benefits different people bring to the organisation.

Evidence suggests that workplace culture is the biggest driver of satisfaction for disabled staff (Schua *et al.*, 2009), hence why it is important to involve all staff in initiatives to address this problem. Creation of a support network will help improve workplace satisfaction by demonstrating to individuals that they are valued. But to be effective, the network needs to be properly supported and resourced. Our network is very pleased to have the OU's Chief Information Officer, David Matthewman, as executive sponsor. Management commitment is also demonstrated through the allocation of time for the group's

coordinator, so they can be released from their substantive job role in order to support the network. Active involvement of senior managers within the network helps to show that the commitment is genuine. Senior managers from both IT and Estates are on the network steering committee and actively promote the network, as well as joining the conversation both as individuals and as representatives of their departments.

So what is the EnablingStaff@OU network actually offering?

Nash (2009) describes three different types of disabled employee networks: leadership or champion groups; peer groups; and consultation forums. This network aims to fulfil all three roles. As a champion group it will seek to distribute information to increase organisational awareness of disability. As a peer network it will connect individuals and groups in order to share knowledge and experience. And finally as a consultation forum it hopes to influence university policy and input in to university projects and developments.

An interim steering group was put in place to launch and advertise the network. A very successful launch event was held in July which was be followed by the network's first formal meeting in September, at which a new steering group was elected. The steering group will take on the role of champion group by distributing awareness raising information, primarily through promoting external events such as national awareness raising days, weeks and months. In this role they will also work to improve awareness of internal policies and procedures relating to disability.

The peer network is focused on a set of online forums hosted on the EnablingStaff@OU intranet site. All OU staff have both read and write access to these forums. Users are advised not to post any personal or confidential information in the forums, however, they can use the forums to find other people and then continue their discussions in private if necessary. These forums have been advertised through the launch event, through the Intranet news page and posters displayed on campus and in regional offices. The steering group is active in the forums so it is able to identify

when issues raised could be addressed collectively.

The role of consultation forum may be the most challenging to achieve. Ideally all university projects, from infrastructure to systems development, would consider disability issues as a standard step in their project methodology. The steering group will actively advertise availability to be consulted but there will be some reliance on members of project teams to recognise that they may have a disability issue which they would benefit from consulting on. A close link to the Equality and Diversity Office will increase the likelihood of policy documents being brought to the network before they are finalised and implemented. However, for many projects there is no obvious mechanism to ensure that disability issues are considered or the EnablingStaff@OU network is consulted. Until the network is fully established and well known, we may have to rely on active network members highlighting the existence of new projects and identifying project teams to be approached. Where we are invited to consult on either policy or project plans we will use the network forums or pull together a small consultative group for a specific project as appropriate to the particular situation.

Whatever our hopes and aspirations, what develops depends very much on the will and enthusiasm of those members who choose to be more involved. Beyond the time allocation allowed for the network coordinator, participation is on a voluntary basis so potential achievements of the network will necessarily be limited by the amount of time individuals are willing to give. However, there is much for individuals to gain from being involved, from addressing a personal issue to improving infrastructure or policy to the benefit of many, as well as an opportunity to network will colleagues across the university.

The Author

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Linda has been a Lecturer and Staff Tutor at The Open University for over 10 years. She has extensive experience in supporting academic development of Associate Lecturers who work from home supporting distance learning students.

She also has a keen interest in Equality and Diversity relating to both students and staff.

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