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National Association of Disabled Staff Networks (NADSN) – “Our Stories: Experiences from our Disabled Staff Networks across the UK”

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Abstract

The National Association of Disabled Staff Networks (NADSN) held a panel session at the National Association of Disability Practitioners (NADP) 2015 annual conference to share experiences from Disabled Staff Networks across the UK. Interestingly, it was the only workshop at the event exploring disabled staff experiences and best practice, whilst all the others focused on services to and support for students (NADP, 2015). This article summarises and expands on the discussion, but is not intended to be a comprehensive guide to disabled staff networks.

A Need for Disabled Staff Networks

The Equality Act 2010 places a duty on HEIs to monitor and publish information about their equality behaviour. It also places a responsibility on employers to support integration of disabled staff within the workplace. Whilst much of this responsibility is carried out through individual adjustments and agreements, the ethos of the Act was also to engender cultural and attitudinal change throughout workplaces in order to ensure that disabled employees are both enabled and more importantly, they are valued.

One of the mechanisms by which HEIs ensure that their policies and procedures are effectively meeting people's needs, promoting equality and valuing diversity is through the establishment of staff networks. It is certain that direct engagement with staff can help to shape and improve an organisation's policy and practice (Department for Work and Pensions Office for Disability Issues, 2014).

Staff networks facilitate peer support, sharing of experiences and development of best practice within organisations. Sharing of personal experiences motivates staff, who see other individuals having made progress and raises awareness of possibilities for overcoming challenges. Staff networks help individuals find others who face similar challenges and allow group creativity to be employed in seeking new responses to particular challenges.

Networks are likely to be better placed to address organisational culture issues than individuals. Robert and Harlan (2006) highlight workplace discrimination being manifest in three ways; marginalisation, fictionalisation and harassment, all of which may operate at local and organisation wide levels. Having a staff network allows identification of issues across the organisation so facilitating identification of systemic issues, and a safe forum for individuals to raise concerns, which can then be collectively addressed.

There is evidence to suggest that in the general working population, staff satisfaction amongst disabled staff is lower than reported across all staff. It is also apparent that the satisfaction gap widens as general staff satisfaction falls (Schur, et al., 2009). The Higher Education sector is currently facing financial cuts, leading to increased pressure on staff and an associated reduction in staff satisfaction across the board (Bishop, 2014). Consequently, it is likely that disabled staff in the HE sector will be suffering from reduced morale and would benefit from the support of a peer network. However, there needs to be greater senior management buy-in within HEIs to promote greater network engagement.

Network names and ethos

Not exclusive to the Higher Education Sector, there are broadly two options for the ethos and naming of a staff network:

- A support group for disabled staff, simply called Disabled/Disability Staff Network or Forum. Usually membership is drawn exclusively from disabled staff who provide peer support and raise awareness.
- A group with wider membership to support inclusion and integration of disabled staff in the workplace, usually having a variation of Able or Enable in its title.

These groups encourage more engagement of non-disabled staff in the network in recognition that colleagues and managers may need support in addition to those with the disability.

These descriptions are the two extremes of a continuum, in reality, most networks address both support and inclusion issues but their position on the continuum is linked to their focus and strategy. The two approaches are different, rather than either one being better.

The Equality Act 2010 defines disability as “A physical or mental impairment [which] has a substantial and long-term adverse effect on his or her ability to carry out normal day to day activities”. (Equality Act 2010 section 6)

Some individuals may come under the legal definition of disability but not identify as disabled, and vice versa. A network that is exclusively for disabled staff, may exclude these two groups of individuals. Whilst there is no legal requirement to have consideration for those not included in the above definition, there is a moral and ethical imperative. Some of these individuals may also need support around defining their situation, which may be improved, through access to support, through establishing disability identity.

Those who fall within the legal definition but choose not to identify as disabled may also be excluded from a network exclusively for disabled staff, as membership requires accepting a label that they do not identify with. This can be particularly challenging for individuals with hidden disabilities, including specific learning difficulties and mental health conditions, who may fear stigmatisation if they reveal their condition to colleagues. Those with seen disabilities may also fear stigmatisation, but do not have the opportunity to hide their difference. A network which is open to all interested staff removes the assumption that members have a disability.

However, this is not the only reason for having a support network open to all staff. Effective integration of disabled staff in the workforce requires all colleagues to have knowledge and understanding of disability issues. Many line managers need help in supporting disabled staff. They may not understand the challenges or how to overcome them, and often find it difficult to raise issues with individuals due to feeling uncomfortable talking about disability and have a fear of offending (Robert & Harlan, 2006). A staff network may be able to offer support to managers who need advice on the best practice in managing disabled colleagues as well as to ensure their teams can work together in harmony.

Funding and resource

In common with other staff networks (BME, LGBT, Gender etc.) there is very little, if any, funding and resource available for disabled staff networks.

Within NADSN, where resource is provided, there is a range of different models of support received by individual networks from their HEI. Resource and funding is needed for the setting up, operation and ongoing costs associated with disabled staff networks.

Some examples of practice within NADSN include:

- Manchester Metropolitan University provides the network with Terms of Reference and Co-chairs a workload allocation of approx. 20 hours per term along with an Administrator from the Equality & Diversity team to service each meeting. Their Vice Chancellor endorses this.

- The University of the West of England provides employees up to 15 hours per year to attend meetings, funding for activities and events and actively encourage engagement and participation in their staff networks (UWE, 2015).
- The University of Manchester provides financial support to the network for refreshments and a palantypist to provide live speech to text reporting (University of Manchester, 2015).
- The Open University provides paid time for network coordinators to work on network activities, the use of computing facilities, equipment and other resources, the use of training and meeting rooms as required and funding for start-up costs, programmes, publicity and events (Open University, 2015)
- The University of Edinburgh provides refreshments and the free use of meeting rooms for quarterly meetings (University of Edinburgh, 2015).
- Many HEIs promote their staff networks on websites (either internally or externally) and as part of new staff induction.

Although a number of institutions allocate time for individuals with particular posts to carry out network duties, we did not have any examples of individuals feeling that they were actually released from their substantive roles to carry out these duties.

Nominally allocated time for DSN leaders to carry out disabled network business is mainly for organising and attending network meetings. In some cases this extends to attending Equality and Diversity Committee meetings in order to represent their members. We did not have any examples of individuals being officially released to carry out roles associated with network organisation more widely, or to represent their network at national events.

Some NADSN members attending and presenting at the NADP conference had used annual leave and their own personal financial resources to attend. Only one member had secured funding for conference attendance in their role as Chair of the DSN. Where there was a professional interest in the conference workshop sessions focussed on students, funding has been secured from employers for attendance but this was not in support of the activities of the disabled staff networks.

The time commitment involved in DSN's relies, in the main, on the personal time of network members. All the networks represented at the panel discussion reported difficulty in achieving engagement because staff do not have time to be involved. Individuals with workplace adjustments to their working hours or patterns may feel unable to take time out of an already adjusted working day, especially if non-disabled colleagues see their adjustment as a "perk" (Schur, et al., 2009). There were reports of direct comments from managers who question the amount of time staff take, even in cases when meetings are arranged during staff lunch breaks. The workplace culture can have a significant positive or negative impact on how comfortable staff feel in attending network events. Practical resources can also have an impact as it may be difficult to book accessible adequately resourced spaces for meetings.

Although some HEIs offer career and personal development programmes specifically targeted at disabled staff, we are not aware of any funding allocated to the training of staff with formal DSN roles and responsibilities. In 2014 Disability Rights launched the Leadership Academy Programme (Disability Rights UK, 2015) providing career development training run by and for people with lived experience of disability and/or long term health conditions. Similarly Kate Nash Associates provide training and opportunities for staff involved in network development to learn from each other and share cross sector experience in demonstrating the values of disabled staff networks to their organisations. Programmes such as these offer opportunities for disabled staff to develop leadership skills to bring back to the workplace for the benefit of the organisation.

Individuals who volunteer to take on specific roles within DSNs are already showing leadership tendencies, and so should be supported to develop these skills both to support the network and also to promote the individuals career and professional development. It is likely that in addition to network benefit of such training, the institution more widely would benefit from investing in staff in this situation who can subsequently take on formal leadership roles and act as role models for other disabled staff. Enabling access to these requires both time and financial resource commitment from employers. More commonly support in setting up networks and learning tends to take place informally through peer networking, particularly through the invaluable sharing of experience. There are many examples of shared learning and mutual support provided to developing networks by the more experienced network leaders. Kate Nash highlights that the active support of networks is a 'direct demonstration of an employer's level of commitment to disabled employees' (Nash, 2009, p. 18). NADSN shares Kate's hope that employers will continue to recognise the benefits of networks to their organisations in supporting employees and provide the resources to enable disabled staff networks to flourish.

Reasonable adjustments

The provision of reasonable adjustments is to create a 'level playing field'; to alleviate the impact of disability so there are many instances when individuals with different disabilities can assist each other in identifying useful adjustments. However, within any discussion of disabled staff needs, the question of what is reasonable is always contentious. Whilst some adjustments are easily agreed to be "reasonable", there is often disagreement between employers and employees regarding what workplace adjustments should be put in place; sometimes even when a medical practitioner will have recommended these adjustments. One frustration reported by the disabled staff networks was that our institutions make fantastic provision for students but frequently staff are not able to access the same level of service. Universities invest extensive resource and employ specialist staff to support a wide range of student adjustments but frequently this expertise or level of support is not made available to staff. In one instance a member of staff had been advised to register as a student in order to access better support for their disability.

Delegates raised another important point: Some institutions develop good policies to support and manage disabled employees but in reality, they are not implemented effectively nor consistently which raised the matter of lack of monitoring and accountability. Therefore, it is crucial for managers to have the confidence to have those conversations and the 'know-how' to expedite adjustments.

Working with other staff networks

It appears to be common across most HE institutions for senior management to encourage the staff networks to work together. One institution reported a staff network picnic which brought together disabled, gender, BME and LGBT network members to "get to know each other" and offer mutual support. There was considerable discomfort felt around this type of event, which lacked a clear purpose and led to some awkward situations around identity: is the white able-bodied woman there because she is a woman? Or because she is from an ethnic minority, has a hidden disability, or is a lesbian or is she transgendered? She may have chosen to declare her position within one or all of the networks but might not wish to share that aspect of her identity amongst other groups. This also highlights the need for institutions to consider the impact of intersectionality and socio-economic disadvantage on staff or rather how inequalities can occur on a multi-dimensional basis.

However, there are situations where the networks can usefully work together and may face mutual challenges. By definition, being part of a minority group brings challenges of

promoting understanding of your needs and acceptance amongst the wider population. Networks can promote a general culture of inclusion within an institution and support each other through sharing communication and promoting awareness of each other issues or concerns. With awareness that all staff networks suffer from a lack of resource, it may be appropriate to share representation on university committees and divide general equality and diversity issues across the groups. Where this approach is taken, care needs to be taken to ensure that all the groups are represented, as someone from outside a particular group may not be aware of all the issues.

Looking forward

Whilst there are clearly many issues still to be overcome for disabled staff in HE institutions there should be a positive look to the future. Increasing numbers of institutions have disabled staff networks, often championed by senior managers, and there appears to be a slow culture shift towards anticipation of need and promotion of inclusion. HEIs clearly valuing their positive disabled role models and champions will help to encourage other disabled staff to challenge and thrive.

Benchmarking of institutions in relation to their support for both students and staff with disabilities is increasingly being adopted.

Launched in 1990, the Positive About Disabled People 'Two Ticks' symbol developed by the Jobcentre Plus has become a common and highly recognisable feature on job advertisements and application forms in the UK. The symbol is awarded to employers who make five positive commitments regarding the treatment of disabled people within recruitment, training and retention processes, and have sought to raise disability awareness within their organisations.

Unfortunately, Bacon and Hoque (2014), found that just 15% of organisations awarded the Two Ticks symbol adhered to all five of its commitments, with 18% of those signed up not fulfilling any of them, and most (38%), only keeping one of the promises. This belief of the symbol merely being an 'impression management' tool has been echoed by disabled staff. In 2005, the Business Disability Forum (BDF) developed the Disability Standard, which is an online tool used to measure and improve performance for disabled employees, service users and stakeholders. Unfortunately, very few HEIs have signed up to this Standard. This may be due a variety of reasons, such as the cost (cuts in university budgets), lack of clear 'incentives' (unlike other Charters), a lack of staff commitment and/or resources to complete the assessment (it's an intense and rigorous exercise) and/or maybe due to the sheer fear of their reputation by 'putting one's head above the parapet'. Thankfully, the BDF has recently launched an HE focused group which is likely to be promoting the Disability Standard benchmark specifically in HE institutions.

The Equality Challenge Unit (ECU) are expanding their considerations for the Athena SWAN Charter to include disability and race as well as gender. As Athena SWAN status is linked to research funding this is likely to have a significant impact in raising the strategic importance of institutions addressing disability issues.

A take up of disability equality initiatives or cultural change activities such as these will ensure meaningful benchmarking across the sector and will get senior staff to sit up and take action. Robust and transparent monitoring will provide an evidence-base for organisations that identifies areas for development as well as highlight strengths.

As David Ruebain, Chief Executive of the ECU stated in a recent Equality, Diversity and Human Rights Conference "Competition between institutions can be both an opportunity and a threat to equality good practice" (Liverpool John Moores University, 2015).

Accessible guidance, clear reporting structures for networks, mandatory disability action-related training (for staff and managers) as well as celebration of disability achievements are

integral to promoting systemic change. NADSN proposed the idea to develop guidance to help HEIs set up stimulating networks and support their disabled staff and their managers. It is hoped that this would be achieved in collaboration with the BDF, ECU and Kate Nash Associates who have exemplary best practice and expertise in this field. Opportunities for our diverse workforce are greater than before, but there is still a lot more to be done to transform the sector. Not only is there a moral case for the development of disabled staff networks but there are very strong business benefits for everyone too leading to a disability confident HEI/organisation with a productive and content workforce where everyone can flourish to the best of their abilities.

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