

# Stonewall



**Setting up an LGBTQ+  
employee network group**

## ABOUT THIS RESOURCE

**This resource is produced by Stonewall. Our vision is of a world where everyone, everywhere has equal rights. We will work until every person who is lesbian, gay, bi, trans, queer + is living free from discrimination, prejudice and inequality, making our shared future safer, fairer and more prosperous.**

Stonewall was founded in 1989. It was envisaged with courage, unity and hope, established as an advocacy organisation that would complement the work of other movements campaigning for equal rights.

We deliver campaigns, programmes, and policy work that is focussed on achieving deep, sustainable change, through convening, collaboration, and conversation.

We support parliamentarians and lawmakers; design policies and campaigns and deliver programmes and services which focus on achieving equal rights for LGBTQ+ people.

Globally, we face increasing opposition to the belief that everyone deserves equal rights. It is more important than ever that we stand firm and advocate for what we know to be true: Everyone, everywhere, deserves equal rights

To learn more about our work, visit us at [www.stonewall.org.uk](http://www.stonewall.org.uk)

Registered Charity No 1101255 (England and Wales) and SC039681 (Scotland)

*Stonewall is proud to provide information, support and guidance on LGBTQ+ inclusion; working towards a world where every LGBTQ+ person has equal rights. This does not constitute legal advice, and is not intended to be a substitute for legal counsel on any subject matter*

# Why network groups matter

Work is often where people spend most of their days. It's a place to contribute, meet peers, grow and learn. Everyone should feel safe, supported and comfortable at work, but this is unfortunately not guaranteed.

For lesbian, gay, bi and trans (LGBTQ+) people, work can be a safe haven, perhaps even the place where they first come out. However, it can also be a place of fear, where they feel unable to be themselves without experiencing discrimination or harassment.

LGBTQ+ people who feel able to bring their whole selves to work have increased energy, better performance and stronger relationships with their peers. The more you are forced to be somebody else or hide who you are, the more your happiness and performance at work will be affected. When you spend more time thinking about how to describe your weekend without outing yourself than on that looming deadline, you and your work suffers. Simply put, people perform better when they can be themselves.

## SPEAK TO US ABOUT BECOMING A DIVERSITY CHAMPION

Diversity Champions is the UK's leading programme for ensuring all LGBTQ+ people are accepted without exception in the workplace. As part of your organisation's membership, Stonewall would support you in setting up and running your network group, and give you access to discounted tickets to all of our events and conferences, including our Network Group Masterclass.

We'll also review your organisation's policies, give you access to networking with more than 750 organisations, and support you every step of the way. For more information, visit:

[www.stonewall.org.uk/dc](http://www.stonewall.org.uk/dc)

**LGBTQ+ employee network groups can transform the experiences of LGBTQ+ people at work. They do this in three main ways:**

## PEER-TO-PEER SUPPORT

– providing a space for LGBTQ+ employees to support each other, express concerns they may have, and spend time around people who understand their experiences. This can radically improve their day-to-day experience at work by helping them feel less alone, access the support they need and grow in confidence.

## AWARENESS RAISING

– promoting a better understanding of LGBTQ+ inclusion and making LGBTQ+ experiences more visible in the wider organisation. This can empower all employees to step up as allies and improve the workplace culture for everyone within your organisation.

## ACCOUNTABILITY

– scrutinising your organisation's policies and processes, feeding back concerns, and suggesting how these can be improved. This gives LGBTQ+ employees a critical voice and helps ensure that LGBTQ+ inclusion is embedded across your organisation.

This guide will help you take the first steps to forming a network, going through how to get support from your organisation, how to build your membership base, and more. For more guidance on how to run a successful and diverse network group, visit our '[Finding your collective voice](#)' resource, available exclusively for Diversity Champions.

# Laying down the foundations

## CONSULTING OTHER LGBTQ+ EMPLOYEES

Before making key decisions about the structure or objectives of your network, you should consult other LGBTQ+ employees within your organisation. This will help you at a later stage when you request formal support for your network group – you'll be able to demonstrate that there's interest from across the organisation.

This is particularly important if you work in a large organisation with employees in multiple locations or with vastly different day-to-day roles. Taking the time to understand the needs of someone who works part-time, or whose job is more client facing than yours, allows you to create a network that supports all LGBTQ+ employees. You should also always actively consult, listen to and support LGBTQ+ colleagues whose identities are different from yours.

Anonymous surveys and focus groups are both effective ways to consult other employees. They give you the opportunity to ask key questions about how the network group should be run, while allowing your colleagues to raise new ideas or issues you may not have considered.

## CREATING AN OPERATIONAL STRUCTURE

LGBTQ+ employee network groups can operate in many ways and often look completely different from organisation to organisation. Your organisation might be centralised in one office, or have a dispersed workforce based across the country or the world. This will affect your network group structure.

Some networks operate online, while others choose to have monthly in-person meetings. Some network groups simply have one person in charge

of chairing meetings and handling administrative tasks, while others have a large elected committee. Those elected committees can include various operational roles and representatives for members whose identities are sometimes excluded from LGBTQ+ communities. This can include bi and trans members, or members who are women, disabled or black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME).

Understanding the specific circumstances of your network group and the needs of your members will help you create an operational structure that's appropriate for the scope of activity your network will carry out.

For more suggestions and guidance on activities and initiatives you can run as a network group to create a more LGBTQ+ inclusive workplace environment, refer to Stonewall's '[Finding your collective voice](#)' resource available exclusively for Diversity Champions.

## CLARIFYING YOUR AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

Aims and objectives are specific targets and goals for the network to achieve within the next year. Setting clear aims and objectives right from the start will help you build an effective network that achieves its goals.

Your aims and objectives can relate to anything from organising a fundraising event, to changing a particular piece of policy, or simply how many network group meetings should be held in the next year.

They should be tangible and measurable. Depending on the size or structure of your network, these objectives may be broken down into roles and tasks assigned to specific network members.



# Securing organisational support

## HOW YOUR ORGANISATION CAN SUPPORT YOU

LGBTQ+ employee network groups are most successful when they have the backing of their organisation. Working out what support you'll need, and what support your organisations can provide, are essential first steps when setting up your group. Support could include:

**SPACE** – this is often the first and most essential form of support network groups need from their organisation. Most network groups operate through regular members' meetings, requiring a regular venue. Ideally, this should be a private, rather than an open, space. This means discussions can remain confidential and members who aren't yet out at work can safely attend meetings.

**TIME** – organisations should make it as easy as possible for employees to attend network group meetings. They may be able to put clear policies in place that ensure managers allow employees time to attend network group meetings and events. This is essential for the network group to run smoothly and for employees to get the most out of it. It also signals to members and the wider organisation that the network group is taken seriously by senior leaders.

**EXPOSURE** – one of the least resource-intensive ways for your organisation to support your network is by increasing its internal exposure. Regularly reminding employees of the existence of the LGBTQ+ employee network group, and what it's up to, will help raise awareness and grow membership. It can also be a great way to find allies who can support your work. Internal newsletters,

communications from senior leaders and posters in your offices are some of the simple ways your organisation can do this.

**FUNDING** – having a set budget funded by your organisation can be a great asset for your network group. For example, it could allow your network group to run socials to help members get to know each other and feel included, invite external speakers and organise larger events to raise awareness of LGBTQ+ inclusion internally and externally.

**FORMALISING YOUR VOICE** – this is the most effective way to achieve your goals and create positive change in your workplace. Network groups should have a designated senior sponsor from the senior leadership team who acts as a point of contact for feedback. You may also create a formal process for the network group to review organisational policy and make sure it's LGBTQ+ inclusive. For more information on senior champions for LGBTQ+ equality, what they can do, and how to recruit them, read our resource 'Securing senior buy-in'.

**RECOGNITION** – running an LGBTQ+ employee network group can be time consuming and is often voluntary work carried out on top of members' day-to-day roles. Organisations should recognise and celebrate the work that network group members put into supporting their LGBTQ+ colleagues and creating a more inclusive environment. Including network group activity in employee appraisals shows your organisation values the work and time of the network group. Contribution to a network group should be recognised as additional responsibility and be valued as such.

## PUTTING FORWARD A BUSINESS CASE

Putting forward a strong business case that demonstrates what a great asset your LGBTQ+ employee network group can become is the best way to secure the support you need.

Think about who you need support from. This might be a senior leader or your human resources department, particularly if there's a designated members of staff working on diversity and inclusion.

Tailor your business case to your workplace – there are several different angles that show how an LGBTQ+ employee network group can benefit your organisation. Keep in mind who you are presenting to and the kind of arguments they are likely to be receptive to.

The following examples can be used as templates to build your own business case.

## THE WELLBEING CASE

Stonewall's LGBTQ+ in Britain – Work Report (2018) found that almost one in five LGBTQ+ employees (18 per cent) have been the target of negative comments or conduct from work colleagues in the last year because they are LGBTQ+. This includes being the target of derogatory remarks, experiencing bullying and abuse, and being outed without consent. This rises to a third of trans people (33 per cent) and one in four LGBTQ+ disabled people (26 per cent).

Nearly one in five lesbian, gay and bi people (18 per cent) aren't open with anyone at work about their sexual orientation. Almost two in five bi people (38 per cent) aren't out to anyone at work about their sexual orientation. This includes half of bi men (49 per cent), followed by a third of bi women (34 per cent), compared to seven per cent of gay men and four per cent of lesbians. One in four trans people (26 per cent) aren't open with anyone at work about being trans. This number increases to almost two in five non-binary people (37 per cent) who aren't out at work.

More than a third of LGBTQ+ people (35 per cent) have hidden or disguised that they are LGBTQ+ at work in the last year because they were afraid of discrimination. This rises to half of trans people (51

per cent). It's also higher among younger workers aged 18 to 24 (58 per cent), LGBTQ+ disabled people (43 per cent), and black, Asian and minority ethnic LGBTQ+ people (42 per cent).

These statistics demonstrate that many LGBTQ+ people still feel unable to be themselves at work. Editing their lives with colleagues can be exhausting and leads to values being compromised and relationships being undermined.

**Specific examples of your LGBTQ+ employees' experiences are particularly powerful to include here – LGBTQ+ focus groups can be helpful for collecting anonymous testimonies.**

LGBTQ+ employee network groups provide a key space for LGBTQ+ employees to feel less isolated, and authentically express themselves at work. They can find colleagues who understand the challenges they face and role models to show them that it's possible and okay to be out at work. LGBTQ+ employee network groups can often provide a safe and confidential point of contact for employees facing homophobia, biphobia or transphobia at work and may not feel comfortable raising this with a manager.

When LGBTQ+ people feel able to be themselves, they have increased energy, better performance and better relationships.

As a Diversity Champion, Stonewall can provide you with specific statistics from employees in your sector here. For more information about joining the programme, visit:

[www.stonewall.org.uk/dc](http://www.stonewall.org.uk/dc)

## THE PRODUCTIVITY AND INNOVATION CASE

People perform better when they can be themselves. In Stonewall's Employee Feedback Questionnaire 2017, LGBTQ+ respondents who agreed they could be themselves in the workplace were more than twice as likely to be satisfied with their sense of achievement compared to those who disagreed (84 per cent compared to 38 per cent). Open for Business (2015) supports this link between LGBTQ+ inclusion and individual performance. It found that employees in LGBTQ+-inclusive environments have greater job commitment, higher levels of satisfaction and improved workplace relationships. All of this has an overall impact on the productivity of an organisation.



Open for Business (2015) also found that LGBTQ+ diversity and inclusion leads to greater innovation and collaboration. Employees from different backgrounds bring varying perspectives to business problems and solutions, resulting in greater creativity and better decisions. Collaboration is improved because of greater trust, communication, understanding and awareness.

Diversity and inclusion work is always more effective when employees who are directly affected are able to provide input. Taking the time to consult LGBTQ+ employees, understand the challenges they face and find the best solutions for them will help you create a truly inclusive work environment. Network groups can act as an ongoing focus group and help you gain feedback from a diverse range of LGBTQ+ employees within your organisation.

LGBTQ+ employee network groups can also help foster an LGBTQ+-inclusive environment across the organisation. Network group activity will raise awareness and understanding of LGBTQ+ inclusion in different teams, and help create positive change internally. The creation of an LGBTQ+ employee network group can encourage discussions around LGBTQ+ inclusion at work, and any network initiatives will contribute to creating a more inclusive environment.

## THE RECRUITMENT AND BRANDING CASE

LGBTQ+ employee network groups can help recruit the best talent for your organisation.

LGBTQ+ people and their allies often look for an LGBTQ+ employee network group when considering jobs. Having an active LGBTQ+ employee network group signals your organisation is committed to creating an LGBTQ+ inclusive environment, which makes you a more attractive employer. Your network group may also organise or attend externally facing events related to LGBTQ+ inclusion, which can help raise your profile as an organisation and attract talented job candidates who care about LGBTQ+ equality. This can also help improve your brand image with potential customers and service users.



# THE PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT AND EMPLOYEE RETENTION CASE

Having an LGBTQ+ employee network group can help you retain your best employees. It ensures that your employees can bring their whole self to work and promotes healthy work-life integration. Open for Business (2015) found that job-seekers increasingly value work-life integration in a job, and associate LGBTQ+ inclusion with good work-life integration.

Network groups can also provide professional development opportunities for employees. Giving your employees more ways to build new skills by running network group initiatives or being elected

onto its committee makes you a more attractive employer and can improve employee retention. For LGBTQ+ employees, these opportunities are particularly important considering they can face barriers that prevent or restrict their career development. These barriers can include discriminatory attitudes from managers, reluctance to leave a job that feels safe and secure for one that's more unknown, and, in informal networking environments that can aid progression, a fear of exclusion.





# Getting started

## FINDING YOUR MEMBERSHIP BASE

Once you've built strong foundations for your network, the next step is to grow your membership. LGBTQ+ employee network groups are run by employees for employees. The larger your membership, the wider the impact you can have – whether directly through peer-to-peer support or indirectly by helping to create a more LGBTQ+-inclusive environment.

➡ **ALL-STAFF COMMUNICATIONS** – these are a key tool for engaging colleagues and recruiting more members. Whether you use email, intranet posts, paper, or something else, all employees working at your organisation should be informed about the creation of the LGBTQ+ employee network group and how to join.

➡ **ENGAGE ALLIES** – not only are allies a source of great help for LGBTQ+ employee network groups, it can be easier for LGBTQ+ employees who aren't out at work to first get involved as allies

➡ **HOLD A LAUNCH EVENT** – these are a popular way to build momentum after creating a new network group. A launch event doesn't have to be costly or difficult to organise. It can be as simple as an informal social or networking event after work hours, or a roundtable for employees to discuss LGBTQ+ inclusion. You could use visible signs of support for LGBTQ+ equality such as putting up rainbow flags in the room of your event. Regardless of the format you choose, this is a great way to kickstart your network and find potential members. Remember to keep your members safe and comfortable, for example by checking for consent from everyone involved before sharing pictures of the event online.

## ➡ WORK TO MAKE YOUR NETWORK

**INCLUSIVE** – there can be barriers for some employees to get involved with LGBTQ+ employee network groups. This is particularly true for bi and trans employees, as well as other employees who may have felt excluded from LGBTQ+ communities in the past – for example, disabled employees, BAME employees, women, and employees of faith. Job type can also affect employees' ability to get involved – this is often the case for remote workers and shift workers. Your network should always be committed to listening to all LGBTQ+ employees and breaking down any barriers that prevent colleagues from getting involved.

➡ **DON'T GET DISCOURAGED** – growing your network group can be a slow process. Even with a small membership base, your network group can create positive change internally and see some great results. With time, your contribution to creating a more LGBTQ+-inclusive workplace environment is likely to help other employees feel comfortable enough to be out at work and get involved with your network.



# Getting started (cont)

## ACTIVITIES, INITIATIVES AND EVENTS

Once it's launched, you can start implementing your plans for your network group. There's an extensive range of events organised by LGBTQ+ employee network groups across the country and it can be difficult to know where to start with your own network.

- ➡ **START SMALL** – in the early days of your network group, make sure to focus on quality rather than quantity. Holding meetings every week or planning ambitious events straight away isn't essential for becoming a strong network group that effectively supports its members.
- ➡ **FOCUS ON YOUR AIMS AND OBJECTIVES** – regularly referring back to the goals you set at the beginning will help you stay consistent while deciding what to do as a network group. It will also help you focus on where you can have the greatest impact and avoid taking too much on.

➡ **DELEGATE** – make sure that everything your network needs to get done is appropriately allocated to willing members. Any arising tasks that don't fit into the role description of your chair, co-chairs or executive committee can be an opportunity for other members of the network group to get more involved. This will ensure that workloads are manageable, while also creating great professional development opportunities for members.

➡ **REACH OUT TO YOUR ALLIES** – building a strong relationship with LGBTQ+ allies within your organisation can help your network group achieve its goals and grow. Whether you are running an organisation-wide initiative, or your network group needs someone to perform a small administrative task, remember to reach out to your allies for support.



SPOTLIGHT ON:

# VIBRANT

## How did Vibrant start?

Eight years ago, a few colleagues and I set up Vibrant – CYBG's LGBTQ+ employee network group – together. The conversation started because we had all at some point felt alone and isolated as LGBTQ+ people in our workplace. If you don't know that there are people like you in your workplace, it's hard to believe that you belong there. At first, we were a very informal group. We were just like-minded people who noticed a clear gap within our structures to allow LGBTQ+ employees to be visible and supported, and we came together to discuss how we could change that. We have come a really long way in that time and now have a formal structure. We work with senior management and the Human Resources (HR) team to make our organisation more LGBTQ+ inclusive, and the size of our membership is almost 50 times what it originally was (starting from just a handful to almost 200 members).

## What was the process for formalising the network group?

Getting in touch with the HR team was our first step, because a lot of our objectives as a network group related to what they do. This was a good way for us to get an idea of how we could work together with the wider organisation, and improve the support that was on offer. The HR team really engaged with us and helped from a strategic point



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of view, supporting us in developing our objectives and explaining them in a way that was engaging for colleagues who may not be familiar with diversity and inclusion work. This was very helpful with the next step, which was to approach senior management and discuss the objectives and benefit to the business in setting up Vibrant. We went to them with ideas on how we could make our workplace more inclusive of LGBTQ+ employees and our plans for how the network group could contribute to these improvements. Starting this discussion was what allowed us to be formally recognised by the organization. The HR team also helped us get a member of senior

management to be our executive sponsor who sits on our executive committee meeting and is our first point of contact when the network group needs to discuss anything with senior management. Our current executive sponsor is a fantastic ally, and this way of working has been incredibly helpful and successful for us.

## What challenges did you face and how did you overcome them?

At first, convincing the rest of the organisation of the importance of an LGBTQ+ employee network group, and having the appropriate resources, was a bit of a challenge. People were asking us 'How much will this cost?', and 'Will this take time away from members' day jobs?'.



SPOTLIGHT ON:

# VIBRANT

CONTINUED

We had to be honest about what we needed. It was particularly important for us to be able to carry out network group activities during working hours, and we knew that funding for some events and activities would allow us to achieve our goals. We sent senior management a structured response, detailing the kind of the support we needed, as well as what it would bring to the organisation. This helped them understand that having a network group would not only provide essential support for LGBTQ+ employees, it would bring a lot to the wider organisation.

Explaining why it's worth the time and money and articulating the network group's purpose in a language that made sense to our internal audiences was a very important step. Of course, resources are limited, and at times we've had to compromise. For example, Vibrant doesn't have a set yearly budget, but we are still able to apply for funding for specific events we want to organise or attend. We like to see this as a personal development opportunity for our members. Building a case for funding for an initiative is a good way to develop project planning and costing skills, as well as learning how to track outcomes.

We've also had to be resourceful and come up with initiatives that wouldn't require a considerable budget, especially at the start. Lunch and learns are one of our go-to activities to engage the wider organization and raise awareness of various topics related to LGBTQ+ inclusion at no financial cost. Our members volunteer and prepare an educational presentation, and colleagues come to

have lunch together while listening and learning. We also use the organisation's conference call system so that colleagues working remotely can join.

## How did you grow as a network?

Having the support of allies – or friends of the network as we call them – within the organisation was crucial. Colleagues who aren't LGBTQ+ but care about inclusion helped us spread the word about the network group. They also supported us with our events when they had relevant skills. Having friends and this support was essential, especially during the early days when we were trying to kickstart the network group. For network groups like ours, there's definitely strength in numbers, and to this day, even with a bigger, more developed network group, the support and contribution of allies remains invaluable.

## What was your impact on other network groups internally?

Vibrant was one of the first two network groups to be set up at CYGB. We knew there was a severe need for it, but we didn't have much experience or knowledge when it comes to running a network group. We had to go through some trial and error and take some risks before we figured out what works and what doesn't. Since we first started, several new network groups have been set up at CYGB for other diversity strands. Vibrant's work helped pave the way for them, and we all learn from each other so all of CYGB's network groups can achieve their goals.



# More from Stonewall

## PROUD EMPLOYERS PROGRAMME

Proud Employers Programme is Britain's leading programme for ensuring all LGBTQ+ people are accepted without exception in the workplace. Join today and receive expert guidance on how to create an equal environment for LGBTQ+ staff and service users. We'll review your policies, give you access to networking with over 700 organisations, and support you every step of the way.

**For more information about joining the programme, visit:** [www.stonewall.org.uk/inclusive-workplaces/proud-employers](http://www.stonewall.org.uk/inclusive-workplaces/proud-employers)

## LGBTQ+ LEADERSHIP PROGRAMMES

Stonewall's flagship empowerment programme builds an understanding of how participants' LGBTQ+ identity has impacted their leadership journey and their ability to drive positive change. In a uniquely supportive environment, participants explore what it means to be an authentic and inclusive leader and how harnessing this potential benefits individuals, workplaces and communities.

**For more information about offering this opportunity to your LGBTQ+ senior champions, visit** [www.stonewall.org.uk/workplace-conferences](http://www.stonewall.org.uk/workplace-conferences) **or contact:** [empowerment@stonewall.org.uk](mailto:empowerment@stonewall.org.uk)

## ALLIES PROGRAMMES

Stonewall's allies programme empowers non-LGBTQ+ individuals from all levels of an organisation to be active LGBTQ+ allies. It equips them with the confidence, knowledge and skills to create inclusive cultures and positively impact the lives of LGBTQ+ people.

We also deliver trans-specific allies programmes, empowering LGB and non-LGBTQ+ individuals to bring about positive change in their workplaces and communities for trans and non-binary people.

**For more information about our in-house and open programmes, contact:** [www.stonewall.org.uk/workplace-conferences](http://www.stonewall.org.uk/workplace-conferences)

## WORKPLACE CONFERENCES

Held annually in Cardiff, Edinburgh, Manchester and London, Stonewall workplace conferences are Britain's leading events on LGBTQ+ workplace inclusion. Experts bring our guides to life and help you adapt them for your organisation. Sessions cover a range of topics including service delivery, working with limited resources and supporting trans staff and service users.

**For more information, visit:** [www.stonewall.org.uk/workplace-conferences](http://www.stonewall.org.uk/workplace-conferences)

## FURTHER RESOURCES

Stonewall produces a range of best-practice guides and research to help you create inclusive and accepting environments for your staff and service users. For the full range of resources, visit: [www.stonewall.org.uk/workplace-resources](http://www.stonewall.org.uk/workplace-resources)

