

CASE STUDY SERIES 2025

PurpleSpace

**WE
ABLE**

**ZAIN GROUP:
PIONEERING DISABILITY
INCLUSION IN THE
MIDDLE EAST**



Context

Zain, a leading provider of innovative technologies, enterprise solutions and digital lifestyle communications, operates in eight markets across the Middle East and Africa. Over 8,000 colleagues serve over 50.7 million individual and business customers.

Being a pioneer is at the heart of Zain's commercial success. They are disrupters who know operational agility sets them apart from competitors. They understand that future growth needs the best talent to stay innovative and competitive.

It is this pioneering approach that has seen Zain emerge as a trailblazer in disability inclusion within a region where such initiatives are still limited. Zain is defining inclusivity standards in the MENA region.

Part of the driving force for this change is the WE ABLE disability inclusion pillar and the establishment of “The Masters” employee resource group (ERG).

WE ABLE

Why Zain invested in disability inclusion

Zain's commitment to disability inclusion is rooted in a broader vision of equitable digital access and social responsibility. Recognising that individuals with disabilities represent a significant yet underrepresented demographic.

A unique difference from other MENA companies is that Zain views inclusion as a strategic advantage that drives innovation and benefits from diverse perspectives.

How did the WE ABLE pillar get started?

In late 2017, under the leadership of Vice-Chairman and Group CEO Bader Al-Kharafi, Zain launched one of the first Inclusion, Diversity and Equity (IDE) departments in the Middle East region.

In mid 2010, complementing the IDE department, the WE ABLE pillar was born, that immediately saw Zain's entry as a signatory into the International Labour Organisation (ILO) Global Business and Disability Network Charter. And now, with the launch of WE ABLE 2030, this vision has 4 strategic goals:



Inclusive Hiring and Retention Practices



Innovative Products & Services for PWDs



Global Recognition for Storytelling and Advocacy



Career Progression and Leadership Development

What impact has the WE ABLE pillar had?

- Inclusive Training Programs: The “Grow” program trained many graduates with disabilities across many countries where Zain operates, including Kuwait, Bahrain, Iraq, Jordan, and South Sudan, resulting in the recruitment of many individuals into full-time roles.
- Accessibility Enhancements: Physical audits of all seven headquarter offices ensured compliance with physical accessibility standards, resulting in an average of 81% groupwide physical accessibility, with some operations achieving 100%, based on ILO standards. Assistive technologies were implemented to support employees’ needs.
- Awareness and Education: Over 350 employees received sign language training, and events like Braille Day and World Hearing Day were recognized to promote understanding and inclusivity, with five online sign language libraries across Kuwait, Bahrain, Iraq, Jordan, and Sudan.
- Partnerships for Broader Impact: Collaborations with organisations like Be My Eyes have extended Zain’s commitment to accessibility beyond the workplace, providing real-time assistance to individuals who are blind or have low vision, which resulted in 482 successful calls on the Be My Eyes platform (over multiple sessions), and a 96% satisfaction rate among Be My Eyes users.

Awards

- Informa's Future Workplace Awards 2022 – “Best Diversity & Inclusion Strategy” WE ABLE led Zain to receive this Middle East-wide recognition from Informa, celebrating its comprehensive and impactful strategy for inclusion.
- Fast Company Middle East Innovation Awards 2024 Zain Group, including the WE ABLE pillar, was honored in the disability-inclusion category at this major regional awards event, underscoring its role in fostering workplace equity and innovation



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How did the Employee Resource Group (ERG) get started?

In September 2024, Zain introduced “**The Masters**,” the Middle East’s first corporate ERG dedicated to employees with disabilities. This started with approximately 25 members from various countries.

The group set out to focus on:

Disability Inclusion Strategy: the members supported with co-creation of the WE ABLE 2030, which was launched in June 2025, across all Zain operations.

Accessible Decision-Making: Integrating accessibility considerations into all business decisions.

Learning and Leadership: Providing development programs to empower members to lead the change.

Voice and Visibility: Amplifying the experiences and contributions of employees with disabilities.



What has been the impact of The Masters?

The Masters have made a difference through storytelling. Many employees with disabilities agreed to share their experiences. These stories began to create a culture where it is OK to be visible and confident about disability.

CO-CREATION OF ZAIN'S DISABILITY INCLUSION STRATEGY

Members of The Masters played a pivotal role in developing Zain's updated disability inclusion strategy. By sharing personal narratives and insights, they ensured that the strategy authentically reflected the needs and aspirations of employees with disabilities. This collaborative approach emphasised the importance of lived experiences in shaping inclusive practices.

AMPLIFYING VOICES THROUGH MULTIMEDIA CAMPAIGNS

To raise awareness and recognize the contributions of employees with disabilities, The Masters initiated a storytelling campaign across Zain's platforms. This campaign featured personal stories, experiences, and different narratives, highlighting the diverse experiences of employees with disabilities. Such storytelling efforts not only educated colleagues but also challenged societal perceptions about disability.

REINFORCE

GLOBAL CREDIBILITY

WE ABLE

LEADERSHIP IN EDUCATIONAL WORKSHOPS AND EVENTS

The Masters members led various workshops and events aimed at educating staff about disability awareness and inclusion. By sharing their own stories during these sessions, they provided firsthand perspectives on the challenges and triumphs associated with disabilities, fostering a more understanding and supportive workplace environment. Since the launch of The Masters in September 2024 until late June 2025, in 10 months, the members have successfully delivered 20 awareness sessions about disability, across 10 different locations.

PARTICIPATION IN GLOBAL INITIATIVES

Through storytelling, The Masters connected with global networks and initiatives focused on disability inclusion.

By sharing their experiences on international platforms, they contributed to a broader dialogue on inclusion and positioned Zain as a leader in advocating for the rights and recognition of individuals with disabilities.

FOR DISABILITY CULTURE CHANGE

The Rationale

- Across the region, disability remains largely misunderstood and is still framed through a lens of sympathy rather than inclusion. People with disabilities are often perceived as individuals who need help, not as professionals with skills, ambitions, and leadership potential. As a result, their presence in the private sector workforce remains minimal, and when employed, they are rarely visible in core business functions or leadership roles.
- Cultural hesitation around even the language of disability continues to surface. Terms such as “special needs” are often used as a way to soften or avoid the word “disability,” reflecting a broader discomfort rather than progress. Inclusion, when discussed, is typically treated as a charitable act rather than a human right or business imperative.
- In this environment, the People, First Campaign emerged as a direct challenge to these barriers. 11 videos were produced and promoted on Zain Group’s LinkedIn page. The campaign reframed disability not as a limitation, but as a lived experience with depth, resilience, and value. By placing employees with disabilities at the forefront of the narrative, leading their own stories and naming their own realities, the campaign aimed to dismantle long-standing stigmas and offer a new, more authentic standard for inclusion in the region’s corporate culture.

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About the Campaign: People, First

Eleven original video stories were created and shared across two months. Each video was about 2 minutes long.

Stories focused on real themes such as:

- How physical accessibility impacts independence
- Reflections on first-day-at-work experiences
- A 31-year career journey with disability
- The power of technology and digital accessibility
- The role of social labels and the need to shift public language

The campaign included:



LinkedIn polls inviting public reflection and engagement



More than 11,500 views and interactions, generating strong regional visibility



Collaboration between The Masters, the Corporate Communications team, and the Inclusion, Diversity and Equity function

Impact of Storytelling on Organisational Culture

- **Enhanced Awareness:** Employees across the organisation have gained a deeper understanding of the experiences of their colleagues with disabilities.
- **Empowered Employees:** Employees with disabilities feel more seen, heard, and valued, leading to increased engagement and retention.
- **Setting new Narrative:** Not only has this campaign highlighted the true meaning of disability, but also introduced a new narrative in the region, with over 11,500 viewers on LinkedIn.

Through the power of storytelling, The Masters has not only amplified the voices of employees with disabilities but also driven meaningful change within Zain, setting a precedent for organisations across the Middle East and beyond.



“Sharing my story gives me a sense of pride and self-worth. I’ve learned to embrace my identity with confidence and to see my disability not as a weakness, but as a source of inner strength and growth. I feel a deep sense of acceptance and authenticity. I value the chance to inspire understanding, break stereotypes, and show that true ability lies in the heart and mind.”

Marwa AlQattan, Zain Bahrain



“I was happy to participate in telling the story; it was an opportunity for me to share my struggles since the beginning of my disability and my acceptance of life’s circumstances, as well as my interactions with the community. Moreover, my professional life has given me confidence in dealing with colleagues and officials.”

Salim Al Kindi, Omantel (a related Zain company)



“As a member of The Masters, I was given the opportunity to freely talk about a workplace that truly considers the needs of people with disabilities — and how Zain’s slogan, 'A Wonderful World,' is more than just words. After the video was published and I watched the stories of my colleagues, I realized how these stories serve as powerful support, motivation, and inspiration for other people with disabilities. I felt proud and honoured that Zain helped me achieve independence and showed me that disability has never been a barrier to my success and progress.”

Mohammed Edwan, Zain Jordan

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What the People, First campaign hopes to continue sharing

The campaign is not a conclusion, it is a starting point for an ongoing conversation. What People, First hopes to share is that the disability narrative is not singular, it is complex, personal, and shaped by culture, experience, and identity.

Throughout the campaign, participants introduced themselves in different ways; some chose to use the term people with disabilities, others preferred people of determination. Each choice was acknowledged and reflected in how their story was told, because in reality, these are more than just words, they are expressions of how people perceive themselves, their journey, and the world around them.

This diversity of language is not a challenge, it's the very point. Disability representation should never be flattened into one tone, one message, or one identity. Every participant came from a different country, culture, and context, and their tone, phrasing, and self-expression reflected that. That is what makes inclusion real: difference layered over difference, not erased in the name of uniformity.

The campaign also serves as a marker of progress, not perfection. The goal is not to arrive at a final message, but to keep going, to keep raising the voice of people with disabilities until it becomes part of the collective voice of our communities. Because in the end, it's not about what we personally prefer to see, it's about what deserves to be seen by all.

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Conclusion

People, First was not simply a campaign, it was a declaration led by people with disabilities, for people with disabilities. It set a precedent for storytelling that is authentic and transformational.

Its legacy now lives on, not only in the hearts of those who shared their stories, but in the strategies and systems built around them.

This campaign will be used as the baseline for future editions, driving Zain's WE ABLE 2030 strategic pillar Global Recognition for Storytelling and Advocacy.



"I am a totally blind individual whose purpose in life is not to be a consumer of inclusion but rather a producer of it."

**Waad Al Azmi,
Inclusion & Accessibility
Advocate, Zain Group**

Tips from Waad on key leadership traits to lead an ERG

- To lead is to have the desire to get others to have the same as me.
- The campaign is not serving my ideology but wanting to see everyone benefit.
- Disability vs. determination — I am determined to make a difference.
- Empower others to lead and accept different languages.
- Lead with an assumption you can do this.
- Start small, people will join in as they gain confidence.
- Believe in yourself.
- Accept help from people in leadership.

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About PurpleSpace

PurpleSpace is a unique leadership development membership hub for disability ERG/Network leaders, champions, and allies around the world. Our 5,000+ members across 160+ employer brands employ over 1.5 million employees with disability between them.

Members join to increase the effectiveness of their disability ERG/Networks, develop their leadership skills, and learn how to help their organisations to become disability confident from the inside out. We call it Networkology and it is having a powerful worldwide impact on driving the next phase of cultural change within many different types of organisations.

The introduction of rights-based legislation is what we call the first phase of change. In some parts of the world that is still on the move. The second phase is the process where employers tap into the enabling products and services that help them to create better policy, practice, and procedure. That phase continues.

Meanwhile, the third phase of change has begun.

Where employees with disability build inner confidence, lean into their careers, and create meaningful conversation about how to get ahead at work. High performing disability ERGs and Networks are at the vanguard of this change. This is the new modern approach to sustaining culture change. It's what we do. Find the space to think Networkology.

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