



PurpleSpace

#ourdisabilityconfidence

10 steps to building #ourdisabilityconfidence at work

June 2016

What is PurpleSpace?

PurpleSpace is a unique leadership development and networking hub for disabled employee network / resource group leaders (or others who may have an interest in setting one up or supporting an employee network).

Membership is available to anyone working in any sector or trade. This includes private companies, government departments and agencies, police forces, NHS Trusts, Universities and local authorities.

Members join in order to increase the effectiveness of their networks, develop their skills and learn how to help their organisations to become disability confident from the inside out.

We are also building a new community of disabled employees keen to share experiences and learn from each other. This briefing is just one in a series of briefings bringing together life experiences of disabled employees as well those with a health condition or life experience that they would not define as disabling, yet still falls within the scope of disability as defined by the Equality Act.

What they have in common is the desire to get ahead at work as well as help others to do the same or to find that first, all important, job.

Disability Confidence

We hear a lot about organisations' being disability confident, at an organisational level, and many of the disabled employees we work with are employed by organisations who know how to build inclusive workplaces.

At PurpleSpace we also notice the need that individuals have to build inner confidence and resilience especially those people who are newly diagnosed with a health condition or disability or mental ill health. What does individual confidence mean to them? How do they stay confident at work? How do they ask for the adjustments they need? How can networking help?

In this first of several briefing papers that will explore #ourdisabilityconfidence we summarise ten steps offered by employees working at BT, E.ON Energy, Fujitsu, KPMG, Lloyds, Remploy and Shell.

Together with the many PurpleSpace members we are building a new movement about how together we can develop #ourdisabilityconfidence.

10 steps to #ourdisabilityconfidence at work

1. Be who you are

Life takes on a new twist when you acquire a disability or a health condition or if you have sustained a life-changing accident or injury. And there is nothing that can prepare you for it. It takes a period of adjustment. And we are not talking months. It can take years to learn how to be your new self so why not start now to be who you are?

“Be yourself at work. By bringing your authentic self to work, you’ll be happier, more successful and life generally becomes so much easier. Be proud of who you are, what you can do and feel comfortable with sharing your story with others. The journey you have gone through may be a life-changing event but it is an important part of who you are and your experiences, adjustments and coping strategies can help others who are going through a similar transition.”

Andy Kneen, Shell

“With life’s experiences come lessons that we can learn from, or ignore. I choose to learn and part of that personal development has been to accept and wholeheartedly embrace who I am. There is only one me for a reason, why would I choose therefore to be someone else? Our authentic selves are worthy and I encourage others to be true to themselves.”

Sarah Simcoe, Fujitsu

“While I was born with my vision impairment, from time to time it is still necessary to re-evaluate what this means for me regarding the environment or situation which I am in.”

Lara Green, Lloyd’s

2. Notice the soft insidious touch of low expectation.....

And then ignore it and/or go round it and/or confront it. But whatever you do, don’t absorb it. Colleagues and significant others who haven’t experienced disability or ill health might sometimes underestimate your skills set or your ambition or the creative way you work to deliver your pound of flesh – notice the different ways that pity arrives at your door – but don’t let it in and live inside you. Instead, trust your brilliance.

“Be bold and trust. Trust in your self-worth, capability and in the journey. Ask why not, rather than why. That inner confidence unlocked me being able to access the right support and help people see me and my potential.”

Claire Harvey, KPMG

“To be successful in the workplace you have to believe in yourself. Sometimes that is easier said, than done if you struggle with confidence due to your disability or health condition. Confidence comes with time and once you discover it you’ll be amazed at just how much further you want to push yourself.”

Laura Turner, Remploy

3. Research, research, research the best workplace adjustments for you

While some employees with the same disability or health condition need the same adjustment, we are all different and finding the right type of adjustment can take a bit of time. Your employer is likely to want to help source the right adjustment, and have a duty to explore the options with you, but ultimately you need to take an active role in this process or you might waste your time, your effectiveness and your reputation.

“My experience as Adjustments Service Manager has shown me that workplace adjustment reports are a recommendation and with the best will in the world not everything suggested will work for you as everyone is different. If something doesn’t really work or feel right don’t be afraid to try something else.”

Julia Merritt, Fujitsu

“I use a range of technology and other adjustments. Building networks of people around you who understand the technology is invaluable as there is nothing like another user of assistive tech to trouble shoot a problem you are having just as a critical deadline on a project approaches.”

Lara Green, Lloyd’s

4. Remember that ‘workplace adjustments’ are not about your employer doing you a favour or offering special treatment

The concept of workplace adjustments has been around since 1995 – it simply means there is a legal duty for employers to make adjustments in order that you can do your job. Some employers will refer to them as ‘reasonable adjustments’. Yes, the adjustment has to be reasonable taking things like cost

and convenience into consideration but do not fall into the trap of thinking an adjustment is a favour... we don't think of maternity leave as a favour, right?

"You shouldn't feel embarrassed or nervous about asking for adjustments. Adjustments are there to aid people to do their best and be the best you can be at work. This is fundamentally beneficial to the business, it makes sense for you and the company you work for to ensure adjustments are in place and successful."
Julia Merritt, Fujitsu

5. Shout it loud and shout it proud

Sharing personal information can help to educate those around us, though it's not everyone's cup of tea to do so. But remember this: offering something of our personal story, when shared in the right way, can often lead the way to a more informed and supportive relationship with your colleagues and manager. If they don't know what you need how can they help? Unconscious fear in those around us is derived out of a lack of understanding.... help colleagues to understand you or to get over 'adjustment envy!' – Your adjustments should help you to be effective and successful in your job.

"When I first started my current job around nine years ago, I was the first blind person most of the people in the office had interacted with. It took an open-minded manager, and my own open approach to make my colleagues feel comfortable. My manager confessed he did not know everything and suggested we learn together on the journey, and keep talking. Our joint approach made my colleagues feel more comfortable about asking questions. It enabled them to see me as a person, not the blind lady with the guide dog."
Mims Ibberson, E.ON Energy

"I have learnt to have the confidence to tell people about my hearing impairment. My colleagues now know I am not ignoring them and I don't have to pretend I've heard what has been said."
Neil M Forshaw, Fujitsu

"It took a lot for me to sit down with my manager and be open and honest about my disability. But once I'd taken the first step and explained my situation, a weight fell off my shoulders. I didn't have to pretend that everything was alright anymore. And, surprisingly, my manager was hugely helpful. It turned out that the same thing had happened to her brother – which I'd not known – and she was really knowledgeable about ways to make things easier at work. I wish I had taken this step much earlier."
Sally Ward, BT

“It’s a leap, it’s tough and it can be downright scary when we decide to share personal information with others, but in doing so you allow them to understand and support you.”

Sarah Simcoe, Fujitsu

6. Network with other successful disabled employees

There really are loads of us in work – and yet you sometimes wouldn’t think so. Somewhere, sandwiched between a narrative about the Paralympics and benefit scroungers there are many of us in work. In fact the Office of National Statistics tell us that all employers will have a workforce comprised of 10-12% disabled employees. Seriously. And of course many of our impairments are not visible. So we don’t always know about the experiences of our colleagues...

But do yourself a favour – seek out other successful disabled employees and share tips about how you develop your career. It’s the single most important thing you can do.

“Since joining my organisation’s Employee Resource Group and attending events with other disabled employees I have seen that no matter what the impairment there are commonalities of challenges and no end of interesting and innovative solutions people come up with to get on and ahead in work.”

Lara Green, Lloyd’s

7. Be selective about the battles you choose to have when people say the wrong thing

Sometimes a little forgiveness helps us more than the other person. Lets face it, in general, offence is rarely intended when it comes to the words we use in daily conversation. And when someone says something that trips off the tongue when they haven’t had time to stop, and think before they speak or act, we have two choices. We can slap them down verbally or we can chose to be kind. So, in the same way that we should be kind to ourselves it might be worth being patient and kind to others. That is not to say you have to swallow things that are just plain wrong – and nurturing the skills to help you suggest people use alternative terms or descriptions when they talk about disabled people is a good idea. But don’t live in that space (unless of course you like to educate others by being offensive too!).

“Often those without a disability are nervous to talk about disability for fear of offending or being seen as focusing on an impairment and not the person. The majority of people don’t mean to offend anyone and would prefer to be given a steer on a person’s personal preferences.”

Julia Merritt, Fujitsu

“At an international event I attended I was asked if the ‘unsightly people’ in the UK were educated in separate schools. The question came from someone with a genuine interest in understanding ways of improving the education system for disabled people. I explained about mainstream and segregated education provision in the UK, and I also expressed the view that we preferred the language of “vision impaired”. It later provided a huge amount of amusement among my friends.”

Lara Green, Lloyd’s

8. Embrace your inner Ghandi

...and be the change you wish to see in the world. To be a role model doesn’t have to come from being a senior manager within a business or indeed setting the business world alight... it comes from living and breathing the values of being our authentic selves and believing in our ability to inspire others to change too – especially when, one day, others may meet their future (disabled) selves.

“Whether it was really Ghandi who said this or not, the message is what I try to live by every day. If we are not happy with something, we should help to change it, if we feel others are silent then let’s be a voice – let’s be the change we really want to see.”

Sarah Simcoe, Fujitsu

9. Don’t apologise for being you

You will get better at this over time. Consider the value, on some occasions, to discuss your disability. You don’t need to justify yourself but it might be worth noticing the times where you sense a need to clarify things about the way you work that will help you to succeed. Sometimes you might be asked or others may be wondering from something they have seen or heard. Colleagues may fear causing offence and make unintended gaffes, or they simply may be unaware of your requirements. A quiet, but unapologetic word can work wonders.

“I find it helpful to have quick tips which I can provide to colleagues, either as planned snippets on how to negotiate interesting building features when providing sighted guidance or as a document for more formal work arrangements. As my impairment can affect the way my team needs to interact with me, I have found it helpful to offer them training.”

Lara Green, Lloyd’s

10. Develop your inner confidence collaboratively

The chances are you have supported others somewhere on life's journey – and in working with others. You may need support yourself sometime. When your circumstances change, your own confidence can be challenged and talking to others in your network is likely to be helpful. Everyone's confidence with different aspects of disability and impairment can vary. You really don't have to know everything – but find the time and invest in your own development. Disability and impairment are not normally life experiences that we chose to invite into our lives. Take the time you need to succeed well with your new 'you' and develop your inner confidence collaboratively.

“My top tip would be surround yourself with good people. Whether new to disability or struggling with self-doubt, they motivate you to move forward and remind you that you can do it. That's what got me to London 2012, as well as forge a successful career.”

Claire Harvey, KPMG