1. Overview

This guide provides information on:

- what a Disability Employee Network (DEN) is
- the benefits of having a DEN
- how to establish a successful DEN.

2. What is a DEN?

A DEN is an employee-led group that champions the inclusion of people with disability within their workplace. Participation is voluntary.

DEN members can be people with lived experience of disability or allies.

A DEN may also be called a:

- Disability Employee Reference Group
- Disability Affinity Group
- Disability Inclusion Network.

Including the word 'disability' in the name of an employee-led group of this nature can be an important statement of pride and celebration.

3. Benefits of a DEN

3.1 Benefits for employers

A DEN has many benefits for employers including:

- demonstrating a commitment to being an inclusive and diverse employer that is welcoming and supportive of employees with disability

- building broader awareness of disability and breaking down barriers, stigma and negative assumptions about disability within the workplace

- attracting candidates with disability to apply for jobs within the organisation

- providing an opportunity for employees to take on a leadership role within the DEN and building these skills within the workplace.

3.2 Benefits for employees

A DEN also provides benefits to employees including:

- increasing engagement and connection between colleagues

- bringing tangible action to workplace values of respect, diversity and inclusion

- creating awareness of disability and a culture of inclusion for people with disability

- providing opportunities to lead strategies and projects outside of an employee's day-to-day job

- building new networks

- developing the personal and professional skills of members of the DEN.

The purpose of a DEN could include one or more of the following:

- to raise awareness about disability
- to create a more inclusive workplace for employees with disability
- to create a more accessible workplace for employees with disability
- to attract new employees with disability to the workplace
- to promote and support career development for employees with disability
- to ensure accessibility and inclusion are key focuses for employees and customers with disability
- to provide a safe environment for employees to discuss issues related to disability.

Case study

DENs within the NSW Public Service

There are a number of active DENs within NSW Government agencies and organisations.

The NSW Public Service Commission notes the important role which DENs play in improving the accessibility and inclusion of the NSW public service: 'DENs are a place where employees can feel safe to disclose their disability, share knowledge, raise awareness and champion inclusive change'.

A list of NSW public sector DENs can be found here: https://www.psc.nsw. gov.au/culture-and-inclusion/disability-employment/getting-support-for-your-disability/disability-networks.

Tip

When starting out, keep the purpose, goals and objectives of the DEN simple. These can be developed and reviewed once the DEN is established and successfully operating.

It is also helpful to consider the following points when determining the purpose of the DEN:

- How will the DEN work with the Diversity and Inclusion function within your organisation?
- What will the DEN's role be regarding the organisation's Disability Action Plan or Accessibility and Inclusion Plan?

4. Establishing a successful DEN

Below are a number of considerations and initial steps to take to establish a successful DEN.

4.1 Purpose

It is important to be clear about the purpose of the DEN. This will help to attract members, obtain the support of senior leaders and assist to develop clear outcomes and actions for members to work towards.

4.2 Developing a structure for a DEN

Once the purpose or focus of the DEN has been determined, the next step is to formulate a structure or operating model.

The structure or operating model of any DEN will depend on a number of organisational factors, including:

- the size of the organisation
- the type of organisation (for example, government department, private company, not-for-profit)
- the commitment from the organisation's leadership to support the DEN
- the purpose of the DEN
- the availability of funding.

The details of a DEN's structure or operating model are often captured in a document called the 'Terms of Reference' or 'Charter'.

The DEN's purpose should be captured clearly in the Terms of Reference or Charter.

Below are some other considerations to take into account when developing the DEN's Terms of Reference or Charter:

- **The composition of any governance body**

  A DEN will generally have a Leadership or Steering Group as its governance body. When determining how this governance body will be structured, consider the types of skills that should be represented on the body, together with any specific roles and responsibilities.

  See section 4.3 below for further information.

- **The term of any governance body roles**

  The Terms of Reference or Charter should also provide the manner in which members of the leadership or steering group will be appointed (for example, through a voting mechanism) and how long the terms of these roles will be (for example, one year).

- **The process for becoming a member of the DEN**

  In addition to any governance body, a much broader group of employees may wish to become members of the DEN. The process for becoming a member could also be included in the Terms of Reference or Charter, or an accompanying document.

There may also be additional roles for DEN members, beyond the governance body. For example, it is common to have DEN champions who promote the work of the DEN more broadly throughout the organisation.

- **Meetings**

  The Terms of Reference or Charter should outline the frequency and length of DEN meetings.

- **Decision-making processes**

  The decision-making processes to be adopted at meetings should also be captured within the Terms of Reference or Charter (for example, a voting mechanism).

- **Review of the Terms of Reference or Charter**

  The process for the review of the Terms of Reference or Charter should also be outlined. This is often tied to a time period (for example, after three years).

- **Provision for member recognition**

  The Terms or Reference or Charter for a DEN will often also include ways to recognise the valuable voluntary contributions of DEN members. This is a helpful way to demonstrate the important role that the DEN plays in an organisation's broader culture of diversity and inclusion.

4.3 Governance body

The size and composition of the DEN's governance body (often called the Leadership or Steering Group) will depend on its purpose and the number of employees who wish to be involved.

Below is a suggested structure for the governance body:

- DEN champion or sponsor—a senior leader in the organisation who will champion and support the DEN and its activities.

- Chairperson—to lead the DEN and its members and activities. Consider having two Chair roles, as a Co-Chair arrangement. This helps with succession planning and also shares the time commitment and responsibility among employees. This is an important consideration, as DEN participation is generally managed within an employee's own time.

- Secretariat or administration support role—to arrange DEN meetings, circulate records of meetings, and follow up on agreed actions.
- Activity Stream leads—depending on the size of your DEN and the organisation, you may wish to develop some key action areas or pillars and recruit a specific person to lead each of these areas. This may apply to activities, including membership and recruitment, communications and event management.

4.4 Strategic plan

To provide direction to the DEN's purpose, it is helpful to develop a short strategic or implementation plan.

The plan should outline a set of concise objectives and outcomes the DEN wishes to achieve, including key actions it will undertake to achieve these over the first 12–18 months. Accountability for each action item should also be captured within the plan.

An example strategic plan is outlined below:

Timeframe	Action	Outputs	Outcomes	Accountability
First 6 months	Develop a structure for the DEN.	**1.** Charter or Terms of Reference developed. **2.** Business case developed to obtain DEN funding and to recruit a senior leader or leaders to champion the DEN. **3.** Recruit a DEN Leadership or Steering Group. **4.** Communications and event plan developed to promote internal awareness of the DEN and its activities.	A clear statement of organisational commitment to improving inclusivity in the workplace.	This could be a HR or Diversity and Inclusion representative or an employee or small group of employees who are willing to take on a leadership role to establish the DEN.
First 12 months	Hold at least one DEN awareness event.	DEN launched on 3 December to celebrate International Day for People with Disability.	Promotion of DEN across the workplace. Attraction of new members.	DEN Leads/members
First 12 months	Review DEN structure and operations.	**1.** Charter or Terms of Reference reviewed and updated. **2.** Strategic plan reviewed and updated.	Demonstrates ongoing commitment to improving opportunities and workplace systems for people with disability.	DEN Leads
First 18 months	Attract and recruit new DEN members.	**1.** Two new employees appointed to DEN leadership roles. **2.** Increase in awareness activities with the DEN now planning quarterly activities to promote workplace inclusion and to develop a disability awareness training program.	Increased network capacity. DEN is more sustainable in the long-term. DEN has a broader impact on employees across organisation.	DEN Leads/members

4.5 Funding

Seeking funding for the establishment of a DEN should be considered in the same way as for any other project.

To obtain seed funding, consider approaching the Human Resources or Diversity and Inclusion Team or the DEN's champion or sponsor for assistance. Any seed funding that is secured can be used to raise awareness of the DEN. For example, by holding a launch event and developing a logo to represent the DEN and its work.

To secure further funding, it may be helpful to develop a 'business case' about the value of the DEN. Information that may assist with this is outlined in the IncludeAbility factsheets on *Disability and employment in Australia* and *The economic and business benefits of employing people with disability*.

4.6 Awareness raising

Building awareness about disability within the workplace is generally a key role of the DEN.

Some ways in which a DEN can raise awareness include:

- **Sharing personal stories and case studies through workplace communication channels**

  This may include speaking at events, articles within newsletters or using social media platforms.

- **Using champions and sponsors to promote the DEN within senior leadership channels**

  This may include speaking about the activities of the DEN at forums or Town Hall events or promoting the DEN's work through leadership communication channels.

- **Holding disability awareness sessions for employees**

  This may include running 'lunch and learn' sessions that focus on a specific topic or involve a guest speaker.

- **Developing an 'experience hub' or 'empathy lab'**

  This is an awareness activity where some of the support devices and assistive technologies that people with disability may use in the workplace can be introduced to a broader group of employees. This provides an opportunity for all employees to learn, listen and try some of the workplace adjustments their colleagues may use on a day-to-day basis.

- **Establishing an internal DEN social media page or discussion group (for example, a Yammer group)**

  This provides a forum for people within and outside of the DEN to share information, tell stories and to promote upcoming events and activities.

- **Holding awareness raising events and sending out communications to celebrate disability inclusion for days of significance**

  This may include celebrations for International Day for People with Disability, a UN designated day celebrated annually on 3 December, or Global Accessibility Awareness Day celebrated annually on the third Thursday in May.

  There are also many other dedicated weeks or days that bring focus to a range of disabilities or medical conditions including Mental Health Awareness Week or National Hearing Week. A helpful list is included here: https://www.activerehab.net.au/disability-awareness-campaigns-your-calendar-of-important-dates.

Case study

ENABLE employee network at Commonwealth Bank

"At Commonwealth Bank, our employee-led diversity networks play an important role in promoting inclusion and informing solutions for our people and customers."

ENABLE plays an important part in raising awareness of people with disability through lived experiences to inform our strategies, policy and processes to enable accessible solutions for our customers and people.

In particular, ENABLE is focused on:

- **Inclusion opportunities:** Increasing awareness and fostering an inclusive workplace where employees with disability are treated equally and feel safe to be themselves
- **Employment opportunities:** Looking at ways to increase employment and development opportunities for people with disability
- **Engagement:** Creating opportunities to engage employees with disability and allies of people with disability as advocates and champions of change

ENABLE's achievements include:

- hosting digital content accessibility sessions and teaching Web Content Accessibility Guidelines to all CBA teams responsible for publishing digital content
- Sharing the stories of our people with disability to raise awareness, encourage empathy and convey the importance of designing accessible financial solutions.

For more information see: https://www.commbank.com.au/about-us/accessibility.html.

5. Resources

For more information on establishing a DEN see:

- Australian Network on Disability's article 'Employee Networks: A valuable resource for access and inclusion', available at: https://www.and.org.au/news.php/439/employee-networks-a-valuable-resource-for-access-and-inclusion.

- Thomson Reuters' list of '8 employee networks that foster an inclusive environment', available at: https://www.thomsonreuters.com/en/careers/careers-blog/thomson-reuters-employee-networks.html.

- Article on 'Starting a Disability Employee Resource Group (ERG)', available at: https://sheribyrnehaber.medium.com/starting-a-disability-employee-resource-group-erg-14f306a813cb.

Guide—Establishing a Disability Employee Network

This publication can be found in electronic format on the Australian Human Rights Commission's IncludeAbility website at **https://www.includeability.gov.au**.

For further information about the Australian Human Rights Commission or copyright in this publication, please contact:

Australian Human Rights Commission
GPO Box 5218
SYDNEY NSW 2001
Telephone: (02) 9284 9600
Email: **communications@humanrights.gov.au**

This guide is part of a suite of resources developed by the Australian Human Rights Commission as part of IncludeAbility to assist:

- employers provide meaningful job opportunities to people with disability
- people with disability navigate barriers to employment.

Further resources are available at **www.IncludeAbility.gov.au**.

Australian Human Rights Commission
www.humanrights.gov.au