



## A Roadmap for Developing Effective Collaborations & Partnerships to Advance the Employment of Individuals with Disabilities in the Federal Sector



This resource was developed in partnership with and in support of the Employment Opportunity (EO) Workgroup, a collaborative effort of the U.S. Department of Labor's Office of Disability Employment Policy (ODEP), the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC), the Office of Personnel Management (OPM) and the Employer Assistance and Resource Network on Disability Inclusion (EARN). Through this partnership, the EO Workgroup is dedicated to ensuring that federal agencies have the tools and resources they need to recruit, hire, retain and promote individuals with disabilities.

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## Introduction

The successful implementation of a Disability Employment Program in the federal sector results in a workforce that is engaged and empowered throughout the employment lifecycle. Agencies continue to focus on goals to increase the recruitment, hiring, advancement and retention of people with disabilities in federal employment, especially in light of updates to Section 501 of the Rehabilitation Act issued in January 2017. Key to these updates are set representation goals of 12 percent for individuals with disabilities and 2 percent for individuals with specifically defined “targeted” disabilities. The following strategies have been shared to improve collaboration and communication between employees with disabilities and managers in the federal sector while advancing inter- and intra-agency collaborations to support these goals.

The implementation of internal and external communication and collaboration programs, such as the use of Employee Resource Groups (ERGs) with a focus on disability issues, would foster a diverse, inclusive workplace aligned with an agency’s mission, values, goals and business practices. These voluntary, employee-led groups could serve as a resource by helping to develop their members into future leaders, increase employee engagement and work collaboratively with agency leadership to address barriers faced by employees with disabilities.

This roadmap provides a checklist of internal and external communications to promote agency-wide collaboration. It also includes the steps for establishing and growing an ERG, short-term goals, as well as long-term accountability strategies.

## Internal Communications

Based on conversations with numerous employees and managers from different federal agencies, the following perspectives were given. These are said to be key components to strengthening internal communications between various offices and to aid in the development of an ERG. These include:

- ➔ Establishing an agency-wide leadership communications network
- ➔ Creating an intra-agency disability office to oversee a holistic approach to disability program management by bringing together the operational components of disability management policy, oversight, education and reasonable accommodations
- ➔ Establishing a disability employment advisory council composed of local, national and regional representatives including but not limited to human resources professionals, hiring managers, recruitment coordinators and employees with disabilities
  - Starting an agency-wide team which may also function as a disability-focused ERG or affinity group
  - Creating an executive committee with direct access to agency leadership
  - Developing a community of practice committee consisting of employees with disabilities and hiring managers to increase the network of disability resources, discuss best practices and share resources
  - Creating a “one-stop-shop” website of disability employment information and resources which could serve as a recruitment and mentoring tool and a reasonable accommodation resource for employees and managers
  - Adopting a recognition and awards program to acknowledge managers who achieve their office’s disability employment goals and milestones

## External Communications

By making disability-related policies and programs part of an agency's external communications plan, it sends a resonating message that diversity and inclusion are important to the agency, applicants, employees, managers, job seekers and other stakeholders. Some methods for effectively communicating about disability employment as it relates to your agency include:

- ➔ Reaching out to local and national disability organizations and advisory groups
- ➔ Connecting with key non-profit organizations that represent individuals with disabilities
- ➔ Establishing a presence on the Office of Personnel Management's (OPM) website to promote your agency as an employer of people with disabilities, along with a link to job opportunities in your agency; resumes collected through this portal will be referred to managers for consideration
- ➔ Using your agency's public website to:
  - Post hiring goals and progress toward achieving your agency's goals
  - Provide public access to agency's disability employment program, including guidance, supports and accommodation assistance
  - Provide information on employment opportunities, the hiring process, and how your agency assists in recruitment
  - Post updated reasonable accommodation procedures in easily accessible locations
  - Post your agency Disability Program Manager (DPM)/Selective Placement Program Coordinator (SPPC) contact information

## Employee Resource Groups (ERGs)

While ERGs have been prevalent in the private sector for many years, this concept is relatively new in the federal sector. Disability ERGs serve as a platform to enhance communication, collaboration and partnerships, both internally and externally. They help raise awareness about workplace issues that impact people with disabilities—whether temporary or permanent—and work to come up with new and better ways to retain and advance employees with disabilities. The following steps can be used to help your agency create and grow a disability ERG and measure its success.

### STEP 1: GAIN THE SUPPORT OF SENIOR LEADERSHIP

ERGs are organization-sponsored entities comprised of employees who share common goals and interests. Over the years they have contributed significantly to diversity and inclusion efforts as well as improved business practices and outcomes. Employees who participate in ERGs are often more engaged and better aligned with organizational missions and strategies. Although these groups are typically initiated by employees, for sustained success it is critical to present a business case, gain top management support and to identify a senior-level "champion." As a basis for gaining the support of senior leadership it's important to:

- ➔ Establish a purpose, mission and focus for the ERG
- ➔ Identify how the ERG's purpose is connected to the agency's mission
- ➔ Identify an executive sponsor (organization "champion")



- ➔ Present agency-specific statistics and goals to support the establishment of a disability-focused ERG
- ➔ Clarify that employee participation is voluntary
- ➔ Present budget requirements, if any

## STEP 2: DEVELOP A CORE LEADERSHIP TEAM TO GUIDE ERG OBJECTIVES

The following positions and roles in federal agencies have been identified as being both potential members and advisors to organizing an ERG leadership team to sustain stewardship, address internal challenges and conduct outreach across the workplace:

- ➔ Equal Employment Opportunity (EEO)/Civil Rights Director
- ➔ Affirmative Action Manager or designated DPM
- ➔ HR Director and/or Chief of Recruitment
- ➔ Legal Department Representative
- ➔ Budget & Finance Officer
- ➔ Facilities Manager
- ➔ IT Support Representative
- ➔ Training & Development Representative
- ➔ Employees with targeted disabilities, hired under Schedule A Hiring Authority, and career conditional/status employees

The Committee should identify or formulate:

- ➔ Time and frequency of meetings
- ➔ Meeting agendas
- ➔ Specific objectives of the ERG as determined by areas of mutual concern
- ➔ A committee charter and “letter of appointment” process for membership

## STEP 3: CREATE A COMMITTEE CHARTER AND OBTAIN A LETTER OF APPOINTMENT

The development of a “letter of appointment” from agency leadership is critical to formalizing the ERG as a working committee and recognizing its official status by all levels of the workforce. After senior leadership approves the ERG as a formal, sanctioned agency committee, all employees should receive access to the ERG intranet site’s information/resource platform, thus aiding in the outreach and dissemination of the group’s mission and resources.

To drive employees to the internal ERG site, it is recommended that the ERG leaders work with their team to develop outreach strategies and to generate interest in joining the group.

The following steps are suggested to reach this objective:

- ➔ Choose a name for the ERG that reflects the purpose, mission and values of the group
- ➔ Develop informational materials to introduce the group
- ➔ Advertise the ERG through:
  - Agency newspaper or e-newsletter
  - E-mail broadcasts from department supervisors
  - Intranet site or similar information/resource sharing platforms maintained by designated ERG members
  - Flyers on organizations' bulletin boards
  - Events such as a welcoming breakfast or brown bag lunch
  - Staff briefings by leadership teams

#### STEP 4: CREATE PARTNERSHIPS WITH EXISTING INTERNAL DIVERSITY TEAMS AND PROGRAMS

For agency-wide collaboration and program development, the new ERG Leadership Team should partner with other internal diversity groups, including the agency's Special Emphasis Program Managers (SEPMs) and DPMs. Also include the SPPC and Section 508 Coordinators. Employees interested in participating should request permission to attend meetings from their immediate supervisor. These types of partnerships afford employees the opportunity to share ideas, brainstorm and share success stories and best practices.

#### STEP 5: SET MISSION AND GOALS

The ERG's mission and goals should be established in collaboration with all ERG members and be linked to specific goals that stem from the Leadership Team's initial objectives, submitted with the Letter of Appointment. This should communicate both the agency's and the ERG's core values and common interests.

#### STEP 6: DESIGN A SUSTAINABLE STRUCTURE

The Leadership Team should then consider the newly formed organization's structure and meeting schedules.

Once the goals and the ERG meeting parameters are established and agreed upon, a budget should be prepared and submitted to the Organization Champion. The budget should detail support for implementing it. Note that the Organization Champion represents senior management and is therefore likely to be well-positioned to advocate for the group, and secure funding necessary to implement the ERG's stated mission and goals.

The ERG should also make decisions relating to logistical matters including:

- ➔ Determining the day, time, length and frequency of meetings (monthly, quarterly)
- ➔ Creating an alternate plan for individuals who are unable to attend in person (e.g., teleconferences, SharePoint archives and notices)
- ➔ Selecting an accessible meeting location

- ➔ Considering specific roles for members
- ➔ Discussing members' roles
- ➔ Creating a procedure for handling meeting accommodations requests such as materials in alternative formats, sign language interpreters, audio loop, etc.

## STEP 7: CREATE AN INNOVATIVE BUSINESS SOLUTION TIED TO AGENCY MISSION

Identifying a special feature for the program is critical to generating interest, fostering participation and enhancing attendance. Defining this feature as a business solution that is parallel to the agency's mission or current strategic objective creates added value and increases support for, and recognition of, the ERG.

Finding ways to achieve the goals established in the January 2017 updates to Section 501 of the Rehabilitation Act is a top priority for federal agencies. Creating a disability ERG is a valuable strategy in meeting this national objective, and elevating the discussion and organizational commitment at all levels to consider disability an important part of diversity and to foster a more inclusive workplace.

## STEP 8: CHALLENGES

When faced with potential challenges or barriers during development, implementation or maintenance of a disability ERG, it's critical to identify root causes and then take steps to reduce or eliminate them. Some challenges may include:

- ➔ Obtaining senior-level support
- ➔ Recruiting employees
- ➔ Maintaining member participation
- ➔ Managing work schedules
- ➔ Addressing meeting conflicts
- ➔ Securing funding, if, when and where needed
- ➔ Dealing with a lack of resources
- ➔ Maintaining and growing the ERG's membership
- ➔ Achieving the ERG's identified goals

ERG members should consider taking the following steps to mitigate any potential barriers to the group's success:

- ➔ Define the challenges
- ➔ Analyze the causes
- ➔ Explore solutions
- ➔ Decide whether the challenge is worth solving or if a solution is even possible
- ➔ Take action to overcome the challenges
- ➔ Consider the necessary steps to avoid similar challenges

## STEP 9: MAINTAIN MOMENTUM

Ongoing organization and member support is vital to success. The ownership for maintaining the momentum resides with the entire group, including: the head of the ERG and including senior leadership's Organization Champion. Some ways to maintain and grow a newly formed ERG include:

- ➔ Establishing credibility by adhering to mission, objectives and timelines
- ➔ Raising awareness about the ERG's work by utilizing all available internal communications vehicles
- ➔ Building a network to increase enrollment
- ➔ Creating visibility by conducting or participating in special events
- ➔ Responding to challenges and working to quickly resolve any issues that impede the growth and success of the ERG

Activities to maintain momentum and sustainability:

- ➔ In-house networking events
- ➔ Workshops on topics related to the program (e.g., Lunch and Learn seminars, National Disability Employment Awareness Month celebrations, career development training, reasonable accommodation updates)
- ➔ Regular updates on program status

Suggested "in-house" communications vehicles to use as a basis for educating agency employees about the ERG:

- ➔ Organization newspaper/newsletter
- ➔ Intranet/internal agency website
- ➔ Bulletin boards

## STEP 10: LEVERAGE RELATIONSHIPS WITH OTHER ERGS & THE EEO COMMUNITY

At their core, ERGs represent a community of team members who share a common interest relating to ethnicity, gender, nationality, culture, disability, or sexual orientation and gender identity. These groups often find it advantageous to form relationships with one another in order to gain additional visibility, to garner more support, and to increase their impact. In the case of federal agencies, ERGs are often tied to SEPM functions and/or the EEO/Civil Rights Offices.

Some ways to leverage relationships with other agency ERGs may include:

- ➔ Gaining an audience with the area Federal Executive Board and/or the EEO community (via a Diversity Council, if one exists)
- ➔ Identifying area agencies for establishing similar groups or EEO/SEPM activity to share best practices
- ➔ Maintaining an ongoing partnership with the leadership of other groups
- ➔ Establishing and maintaining open communication with members from these groups
- ➔ Exchanging or sharing information and resources with disability organizations
- ➔ Collaborating on community and professional events and activities

- ➔ Disseminating ERG announcements about news and upcoming events
- ➔ Sharing financial resources
- ➔ Reporting progress

## STEP 11: MEASURE SUCCESS

To measure success, an ERG must first establish clear goals and desired outcomes. These benchmarks will ultimately define group accomplishments, deliverables and effectiveness. An external facilitator may be especially valuable in gaining momentum, raising awareness and measuring the success of the ERG.

An ERG's goals and its criteria for gauging success should be easily understood and support its mission. Some success criteria for consideration may include:

- ➔ The impact of the ERG on the hiring, advancement and retention of employees with disabilities
- ➔ The number of new members recruited each year
- ➔ The number of members who remain active and regularly participate in meetings
- ➔ The frequency of outreach events conducted
- ➔ Effective utilization of community resources and guest speakers
- ➔ Increased participation and attendance at meetings and events

## Accountability and Continuous Improvement

Tracking the success of a program and the impact of these initiatives should be part of the agency's overall accountability and continuous improvement strategy. Agency hiring managers and human resources staff must improve their efforts to employ workers with disabilities through increased recruitment, advancement and retention strategies. Training and information-sharing are key to promoting buy-in, raising awareness and achieving the goal of becoming a model employer of people with disabilities. It's also critical that both agency leadership and staff understand their obligations relating to accessibility and reasonable accommodations. The following actions can help to ensure accountability and continuous improvement, we recommend the following actions:

- ➔ Offer training and network with other agencies
- ➔ Provide training on disability-related issues, including attitudinal barriers, to all personnel, particularly those involved in the recruitment, hiring, advancement and retention processes
- ➔ Provide training as well as resource materials to managers, human resources staff and others on Schedule A and other special hiring authorities
- ➔ Explain to managers and supervisors how elements included in their performance plans relate to the recruitment, hiring, advancement and retention of persons with disabilities
- ➔ Participate in interagency committees and workgroups to share information on recent changes and best practices
- ➔ Work closely with OPM to build its interagency network relating to best practices and model strategies for successful recruitment of persons with disabilities



- ➔ Designate responsible individuals and assign areas of responsibility; for example, DPMs and appointing disability coordinators at sub-agency and subordinate levels for specific areas (i.e., processing requests for reasonable accommodations)
- ➔ Assign and define the scope of responsibility and level of authority for implementation to specific individuals
- ➔ Maintain communication and collaboration with program operating components, internal and external offices, programs and organizations
- ➔ Conduct self-assessments of employment-related policies, practices and procedures
- ➔ Track progress in achieving goals and on a monthly/quarterly basis review all employment-related activities including the collection, maintenance and reporting of accurate employment information on disability and providing updates to include actions over the previous quarter and planned initiatives/efforts for the upcoming quarter
- ➔ Provide regularly-scheduled (e.g., monthly/quarterly) reports to agency leadership

## Summary

When equipped with a clear mission, defined Committee Charter and an approved Letter of Appointment, disability-focused ERGs can be strategic partners that contribute significantly to the success of a federal agency's diversity and inclusion efforts. As any effective business practice, an ERG needs to be carefully planned and managed along with clear, measurable outcomes. ERGs are most effective when senior management is a part of the Leadership Team and a Champion is assigned to lend support and ensure that the group's mission is directly linked to the agency's larger organizational goals and objectives. Further, the Disability ERG's internal and external communications can serve to enhance the collaboration and partnership among the leadership in the federal sector, with the ultimate goal of increasing the recruitment, hiring and retention of individuals with disabilities in Federal Government jobs. Including and empowering employees with disabilities as the foundation of the Disability ERG sends an important message of diversity and inclusion. Individuals with disabilities are disproportionately represented at lower levels of employment within the Federal Government. Establishing and tracking a separate goal for representation at GS-11 grade level and above should rectify this imbalance and is a key component of the updates to Section 501 issued in January 2017.

This workforce analysis is also largely consistent with current requirements under MD-715. As explained above, although Section 501 generally prohibits employers from asking questions about whether an individual has a disability before making a job offer, there are still a number of ways that agencies may learn about a particular individual's disability.

- ➔ The individual may choose to self-identify his or her disability, or the disability may be obvious.
- ➔ The disability may be included in paperwork establishing eligibility for appointment under the Schedule A hiring authority for persons with certain disabilities.
- ➔ An employer is permitted to invite individuals to self-identify as individuals with disabilities or targeted disabilities prior to a conditional offer of employment, if the invitation is made pursuant to an affirmative action program for people with disabilities, and if the information is used only for that purpose.

The updated Section 501 rule does not specify a timeframe for achieving the goals. Rather, the rule requires each agency to create and submit a plan to EEOC that includes specific steps reasonably designed to gradually increase the number of employees with disabilities and targeted disabilities, with the objective of achieving the goals. It also provides examples of such steps, including increased use of hiring authorities that take disability into account: additional outreach and recruitment efforts; disability-related training for all employees; and adoption of training, internship and mentoring programs for individuals with disabilities.