



John Lewis Partnership: Getting Started with Disability Inclusion in the Workplace

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According to official figures, there were an estimated 3.7 million people of working age with a disability in employment during the first quarter of 2018.

However, while the fact that the percentage of people with a disability who are in work has now reached the momentous stage of just breaking the 50% barrier, disabled people still remain hugely under-represented in the workplace: the employment rate for people without disabilities is 81.1%.

The Recruitment Industry Disability Initiative (RIDI) has one purpose, which is reflected in everything we do: break down the barriers facing disabled people in the recruitment industry.

In July 2018, **Guidant Global**, on behalf of RIDI, hosted an exclusive event at the prestigious Devonshire Club to highlight the early successes of **The John Lewis Partnership's** disability confident journey and share best practice around disability inclusion to an audience of HR decision makers.

Representatives from the retailer, which picked up the 'Getting Started' accolade at the 2018 **RIDI Awards ceremony**, shared their experiences of taking the

first steps towards becoming more inclusive to disabled candidates and offered advice to others who may be beginning their journey.

Carole Donaldson and **Sarah Ockendon** from **The John Lewis Partnership** were joined on stage at the event by **Liz Johnson** from **Ability People**, **Evenbreak's** **Jane Hatton** and **Simon Blockley** of **Guidant Global**. **Kate Headley**, representing **The Clear Company** was the event moderator. The panel shared valuable insight around misconceptions around disability, the best way to engage disabled talent and the external support which is available.

The discussion and key recommendations are summarised on the following page.

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THE JOHN LEWIS PARTNERSHIP'S STORY

In 2016 **The John Lewis Partnership** embarked on a journey to make its recruitment process more accessible for disabled candidates. A year later, the organisation achieved its initial aim of becoming a Disability Confident employer. The Partnership worked with the Business Disability Forum to undertake a thorough review of its processes in order to assist with identifying changes needed.

This has improved both the accessibility of the Partnership's recruitment process and the candidate experience. Significant changes have already been made, such as changes to its external recruitment website (www.jlpjobs.com), training for the resourcing team, improvements to the reasonable adjustments process and work on its recruitment policy.

Future plans include formal training for the 120-strong resourcing team, hiring manager training and additional amendments to the Partnership's recruitment website such as Partner profiles, where disabled colleagues can share their journey. **The John Lewis Partnership** continued its work with the Business Disability Forum and the Department for Work and Pensions, and at the beginning of 2019 achieved its goal of becoming a Disability Confident Leader.

The John Lewis Partnership beat off stiff competition to take home the RIDI 'Getting Started' Award in 2018, after the judges were impressed by the practical steps the organisation was taking to shift the dial, including partnering with **Evenbreak** to advertise all external roles and using Evenbreak's Best Practice Portal, which provides invaluable resources for the Partnership's resourcing team.



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WHY DISABILITY CONFIDENCE MATTERS



disability
confident

When asked what prompted **The John Lewis Partnership** to focus on disability inclusion, one of the representatives from the company relayed a 'lightbulb moment' where they realised that it was not only the 'right thing to do' but it also makes commercial sense as,

"By recruiting candidates with disabilities we can better identify where customers find barriers." She continued,
"When sourcing hard-to-fill roles, why are we excluding a percentage of the population?"

The Partnership operates two well-loved brands - John Lewis & Partners and Waitrose & Partners and customers expect us to do the right thing: it was a no-brainer."

Speaking on the scale of the The John Lewis Partnership's initiative, the panellist said, **"We questioned which roles to post on Evenbreak - but then came to the realisation that every role needs to be as accessible as possible: true inclusivity makes it easier for everyone."**

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GETTING STARTED

Experts on the day agreed that the first step to becoming confident on disability can often be the hardest to take. However, all attested to the fact that becoming inclusive is not a difficult journey to begin in practice, with several pointing to the Government's Disability Confident scheme as a practical first step. One expert on the day promised, once you overcome the first hurdle, **"You get hooked."**

As another of the panel outlined, **"Some people have a preconception that in order to become inclusive they'll have to knock down the building and re-write policy. They think that making changes will be time-consuming and expensive. What is great about John Lewis Partnership's story is that they were not afraid to have a go, take risks, and learn from them."**

The same panellist also highlighted how, from a disabled candidate perspective, jobseekers are usually very forgiving. **"They know you're not going to go from zero to 100 percent overnight. I'd venture to suggest that no one has all the answers - we're learning all the time. But the more disabled people you hire, the more you learn and the quicker your journey will become."** Representatives from **The John Lewis Partnership** recounted how they began their journey with a **"co-operative vibe"**, seeking support from partners. As one pointed out, **"The RIDI website had loads of great advice: learning from others helps organisations to take the first vital steps."**

Succinct advice from another panellist was, **"Find someone who is a bit further ahead in the journey and look to them for support."**

All agreed that communication was key to success. As a representative from **The John Lewis Partnership** highlighted, **"Many managers are only involved in recruitment once in a while. They need to be able to speak confidently to HR - the whole team needs to be embedded in inclusivity. They feel confident to ask 'is this reasonable'. We don't have all the answers, we're not perfect - but if they don't ask us, it's not out there."**

Many on the day identified ensuring that candidates and jobseekers feel comfortable enough to disclose disabilities as a significant early hurdle to being able to respond to their needs. The consensus for overcoming this challenge on the day was learning to position the question in the right way.

Experts on the day advised that hiring managers and recruiters take a 'whole person' approach to asking for information. For example, rather than simply asking, **"Do you have a disability?"**

it was advised that the approach should be, **"We want to offer you the best experience so we know that you're the best person for the job. We want you to perform at your best and be safe. Do you need any adjustments?"**

This approach seemed to gain support from others in the room, as one disabled panellist confirmed on the day, **"I don't want to be labelled, but I'll share if I trust you."**

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SENTIMENT IN THE ROOM

A poll of attendees on the day found that while **82%** believe their company currently welcomes applications from disabled candidates, every single respondent felt that their organisation could do more to increase the inclusion of disabled people. This suggests both a deeper awareness of the disability agenda in recent years and a willingness to do things better: a survey of HR leaders by RIDI in **2015** found that **20%** of respondents believed that their company had disability inclusion sewn-up.

While, at events such as this, there is always a certain element of 'preaching to the converted', there seem to be positive indicators

that companies are doing more to engage with this valuable talent pool. Over half (**53%**) of those surveyed said their organisation considers a potential supplier's approach to inclusion before making a decision to engage, and over three quarters (**76%**) said that their company has run specific initiatives to increase the inclusion of disabled candidates over the past **12 months**.

Perhaps most tellingly, when asked if 'disability' springs to mind when discussing 'diversity', **88%** of respondents said 'yes'. In **2015**, this figure stood at just **31%**.

THE SNOWBALL EFFECT

The consensus on the day was that success breeds success. Small steps can make a huge difference and once a business is on the road to disability confidence, the pace of change quickly accelerates: the more disabled colleagues you have, the better placed you are to respond to individual and disparate needs.

As one panellist highlighted, his own company's success in this area was 'Built on promises'. He spoke about how if you talk about something enough, it 'grows a personality and becomes real': **"Disabled people are still the least talked about minority group, and five years ago, when we began our journey, there no bandwagon behind it."**

"We began to make it an agenda point - and kept talking about it - and everything came from there." The said company is now a Disability Confident Leader, and has won RIDI Awards for three consecutive years.

In a similar vein, another panellist advised, **"Never feel like the 'poor relation' - if you're just getting started, think about what your organisation could look like this time next year. Statistically, 2% of your workforce will acquire a disability or long-term health condition each year. Disability inclusion affects your business whether you are prepared or not - so start making things happen."**



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FINAL THOUGHTS

Disability inclusion levels in the workplace remain low, but we've now tipped the **50%** mark. The numbers are still too high, but we're moving in the right direction. While there is no doubt we still have a long way to travel to achieve true disability inclusion, bringing influencers together in this way enables us to tackle difficult questions together.

Events such as this most importantly keep disability confidence front of mind and top of the agenda. They offer insight in an open forum, wherever you may be on your own journey, by showcasing the efforts and learnings from other organisations who are breaking down the barriers faced by disabled job seekers. Crucially, they also help us all widen our professional network of like-minded, experienced contacts.

The answer to becoming more inclusive does not necessarily lie in massive investment in infrastructure or huge software initiatives - it's the little things that show you've got the culture right and no employer should think that they're not big enough or good enough to start a Disability Confident journey.

In our experience, organisations often don't enter awards because they think they're not doing enough, but as the John Lewis

Partnership's example demonstrates, even sharing the small steps you have taken - and the benefits that these have created - can inspire other companies to do the same.

Many companies position themselves as an 'Equal Opportunities Employer', but getting involved in initiatives such as RIDI sends a powerful message to differentiate you from the competition. Take risks, be authentic and don't be afraid of getting it 'wrong'. Think of the next step - big or small - and just do it.

No one has all the answers, but by asking questions and learning from others further along the same journey, organisations can open themselves to the widest pool of talent available. Half a million candidates a year go through the recruitment process, and if you get things right in terms of disability inclusion, you get them right across the board.

As a representative from **the John Lewis Partnership** summarised on the day, **"Disability inclusion is not just a moral issue, it's imperative for business: if we don't embrace disability we will simply leave customers, partners and ideas behind."**

Visit our website to find how you can get involved: www.ridi.org.uk



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