

# Employee Resource Group Builds Awareness and Provides Connection and Support



[icbc.com](http://icbc.com)

## OVERVIEW

ICBC strives to build a workforce that reflects the diversity of the communities it serves, while creating an organizational culture where employees feel welcome and valued. Their vision is to be recognized as the Diversity and Inclusion leader in the public sector by 2020. One way they are working towards this vision is by collaborating with employees through Employee Resource Groups (ERG). The ERGs are helping to remove barriers and build a supportive and inclusive corporate culture that is responsive to important needs, including persons living with a disability.

An important goal of the Living with a Disability ERG is to raise awareness among employees that disabilities can be visible or invisible (cognitive or emotional). The ERG is also working towards providing employee access to resources and workplace accommodations that support those living with a disability. This employee-led group also provides ICBC with a sounding board as it works toward its vision of being a leader in accessible employment.



## OBJECTIVES

In creating an Employee Resource Group (ERG) for Persons Living with a Disability, ICBC aimed to:

- Build understanding and sensitivity among employees of the wide range of visible and invisible disabilities.
- Create a resource for ICBC employees and managers seeking information on workplace best practices for disability accommodation and support
- Understand the barriers faced in the workplace from employees living with a disability.
- Encourage disclosure by providing a safe environment for employees to speak openly to their managers and coworkers about living with disabilities.
- From a business perspective, be seen as an equitable, inclusive employer.
- ICBC's workforce is representative of the B.C. population, with respect to persons with disabilities.

## APPROACH

The ERG was launched in mid-2016, in an effort to support ICBC's vision of being recognized as a leading employer in diversity and inclusion. The approach for this outreach program included the following components:

- Speaking to organizations that had formed ERGs to learn from their experience.
- Identifying an executive sponsor for the group who was passionate about the topic.
- Appointing a member of the Diversity and Inclusion Advisory Team to serve as a link between the business and the ERG, and provide advice.
- Creating an intranet post looking for interested employees.
- Planning next steps for the ERG by engaging employees in the discussion.
- Expanding membership & recognition.

### Speaking to Other Organizations

ICBC wanted to learn from those who had embarked on this before, and therefore set up a number of conversations with organizations who had ERGs. These conversations gave ICBC great insight which they are now sharing with others.

### Identifying an Executive Sponsor

To show how important this work is to the organization, ICBC identified an executive sponsor for the ERG who was passionate about the topic of accessibility, diversity and inclusion. The executive sponsor had worked for an organization prior to joining ICBC that was very committed to accessibility, and therefore had developed a passion for the topic, and knowledge on how to approach next steps. This person would serve as a link to the rest of the executive team to ensure that this group, and their work, would remain top of mind. The executive sponsor can also help identify a small budget to help the group plan activities and events. ICBC's budget came from the Organizational Development department.

### Appointing an Advisor

ICBC has a Diversity and Inclusion Advisory Team, with members from each area of the business at the manager level and above. This is to ensure that diversity and inclusion are top of mind in each department/business area. One member from the advisory team joined the ERG to serve as a link between business operations and the work of the ERG. This advisor also helps approve event ideas by coordinating with the executive sponsor.

### Recruiting Members

An internal announcement was developed for the intranet to invite members to join the ERG and help shape next steps. There was a small initial response to this of six employees, but those who joined were very committed and passionate. The time commitment requested was 2 hours/month, knowing that this time commitment will increase and decrease during peak times (e.g. lead up to mental health awareness week).

### The intranet post had the following components:

- Definition of diversity, definition of inclusion, and how the two go hand in hand. "If diversity is the mix of an organization, then inclusion is the deliberate act of 'making the mix work'. Inclusion efforts are focused on creating an environment where employees feel valued, respected and supported. It's about ensuring the right conditions are in place for each person to achieve their full potential."
- Percentage of individuals living with a disability in the workplace currently.
- A list of ways employees can show support or engage, with one example being the ERG.
- A person to contact for more information

### Planning Next Steps and Spreading the Word

The small initial ERG team started working on awareness initiatives to highlight the creation of the ERG and inspire other employees to join. The ERG developed a display for the ICBC Leadership Forum, which includes manager to executive level employees, to ensure the senior team was aware of this group. The executive sponsor of the ERG presented the vision and direction to other leaders within the organization, encouraging them and their staff to get involved and support the ERG.

Ongoing ERG planning and action meetings are led by the ERG co-chairs. The co-chairs are in turn supported by a vice-chair and five team leads in charge of communications, membership, marketing, signature events and community engagement. The executive sponsor attends meetings occasionally, but allows the group to be led by their peers – the two ERG co-chairs. It was highlighted that access to senior leaders would be a great development opportunity for employees in the ERG, therefore their presence continues to be vital.

### Expanding Membership & Recognition

Through awareness initiatives, more interest was derived, and the dialogue around employee's experiences continued to grow. Key teams within the business were engaged to



raise awareness about the group and increase recruitment. Through these approaches membership grew organically. The group is now comprised of 31 people.

Recognition of the existing members also helps with recruitment. ICBC's Executive Leadership Team makes it a priority to thank members of the ERG for their efforts. Additional recognition comes from other employees providing their comments to personal stories shared on the intranet. In some instances, members report that they were recognized during their annual performance reviews for the work they've done on the ERGs.

## OUTCOMES

The ERG is in its first year and continuing to grow and expand, in terms of members, and reach within the organization. One of the biggest anecdotal outcomes is hearing stories of individual employees reaching out to each other, building connections, and finding support.

The team also just held their first large scale awareness event for Mental Health Awareness Week. The ERG collaborated with the Wellness Program Advisor and coordinated their message to focus on invisible disabilities and mental wellness. The event was hosted by members of the ERG in the North Vancouver head office as well as other locations across the province. Activities during the week included a lunch and learn on resilience, a mood wall and lunch hour informational booths promoting mental wellness.

Two employees volunteered to share their personal experiences of living with a disability on the employee intranet, an open forum where other employees could comment and discuss. The raw emotions expressed by the two employees profiled drew overwhelming support and other shared experiences through the online comments. The story opened up a corporate-wide discussion on mental health, just as the ERG had hoped. The story also included a poll question that asked employees what they thought was the most pressing need the ERG team should focus on. The overwhelming response (51%) was to support managers in recognizing and sensitively responding to the diverse abilities of employees.

Another initiative recently took place on Fibromyalgia Awareness Day (May 12), when two employees at ICBC's contact centre in Surrey reached out to their manager to ask if they could wear and share purple ribbons in recognition of those suffering from fibromyalgia. The manager was very supportive and suggested that in addition to what they proposed, the contact centre information screens (visible to all employees) carry the Fibromyalgia Awareness Day logo for the day in recognition and support. The employees were moved by this gesture and shared their gratitude with their manager and coworkers. Both of these examples highlight how powerful and impactful every day conversations can have in building awareness and encouraging change among employees.

## LESSONS LEARNED

Creating this ERG was a great learning experience for ICBC, and those learnings are listed below:

### **Get All Levels of the Organization Engaged**

What ICBC heard from various organizations is that it is important to be grassroots in the approach of creating ERGs. At the same time, buy in from senior levels of the organization is important in ensuring that the ERG is prioritized in the organization

There is now representation from across the province – and participants outside the Lower Mainland join meetings by Skype so everyone has the opportunity to be engaged.

### **Strategize on How to Build Awareness**

One of the most challenging parts of building the ERG was getting in front of all employees in an effort to engage and involve employees. The initial ERG worked hard to get in front of as many parts of the business as possible, but sited this as a challenge given competing priorities.

### **Patience is Key**

The group that came together was so passionate about the topic that they were keen for others to be just as passionate and tuned in. Reminding the group to be patient, and celebrate the small wins, was a key part of keeping them motivated and engaged.

### **Be Cognizant of Over-Engineering the Governance**

One thing ICBC learned early on is that over engineering the governance of the ERGs would not lead to success. ERGs are most successful when built from the ground up, and being too restrictive with guidelines or governance, does not allow for the grassroots approach that is so critical to success.

## NEXT STEPS

Following the first year of the ERG being created, ICBC continues to expand its membership and outreach. The group has received an interesting challenge from the CEO, Mark Blucher: How does ICBC become the leading organization in relation to individuals living with disability? The group is committed to meeting this challenge through its ERG members by continuing to raise awareness and build a supportive environment for employees living with a disability. Members will also be connecting with partners across the province to ensure that there is cohesion across the organization. The group hopes to meet with other ERGs to develop shared strategies for keeping their members active and engaged.