



Out of Office

Extending the reach and impact of disability ERGs/Networks to colleagues in operational roles.

PurpleSpace

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Forwords



We're delighted to renew our support for the **#PositivelyPurple** movement in 2024 as Headline Sponsor.

#PositivelyPurple is a celebration, and we have a whole lot of fun with it, but at the end of the day, it supports us to drive progress against two key pillars of our Disability Equity Strategy, namely 'Informing' and 'Involving'.

#PositivelyPurple provides energy, commitment, and global awareness. It has been instrumental in helping us to grow our global community of disability and neurodiversity ERGs.

Our ERGs provide us with the insights we need to build a workplace that works for everyone, where all our associates, including people with disabilities can thrive and have a great career. We know that to maximise impact, our ERGs must reach all our colleagues, including those working in manufacturing and our field force who spend much of their time travelling to meet with customers.

We've seen wonderful examples of what happens when our ERGs leadership includes representation from our manufacturing units. We want to scale this and in sharing this resource, who hope to increase the reach and impact of our own ERGs and equip others who want to do the same.

Stephie Elms, Head of Disability Equity & Neuroinclusion



We're delighted to continue our partnership with PurpleSpace on growing the **#PositivelyPurple** movement as an annual celebration of the contribution of disabled employees. We know that looking after our colleagues in a culture of trust and respect is essential to the success of Tesco. **#PositivelyPurple** provides the perfect platform for us to celebrate, raise the visibility of disability and the support available and to thank colleagues who lead by example.

As a leading multinational retailer with more than 330,000 colleagues, we know that as a business, you are only as good as colleagues' individual experiences. That's why we're committed to ensure that the positive impact of our Disability Network and the **#PositivelyPurple** movement is felt by our colleagues working across our network of stores.

'Every little help makes a big difference' is the value we live by to ensure we serve our customers, colleagues and their communities a little better every day. We hope that in sharing these lessons about growing a disability network's reach and impact, we can make it easier for disabled employees to benefit from community and the ability to share their experiences with their employers and each other.

Justin Alexander, Director Sponsor of Tesco Disability Network



We are honoured to support the **#PositivelyPurple** movement and the opportunity it presents to bring together voices from across the globe to celebrate the contribution of disabled employees and the power of positive networks.

Supporting disability Employee Resource Groups (ERGs) aligns perfectly with our mission, values and Equity, Diversity and Inclusion Strategy and aspirational goals. Our enABLE Employee Network creates a community among disabled colleagues and allies and provides our business with the insights we need to create an inclusive workplace.

Our colleagues work in a range of environments including our contact-centre based customer services team and the team at our Coalville site where we assess and recondition up to 25,000 vehicles a year.

We're proud to be accredited as a Disability Confident Leader in the UK, reinforcing our ongoing commitment to creating a thriving, inclusive workplace. But there's more to be done, and this motivates us to continually progress and grow.

In supporting this guidance, we hope to surface lessons that will inform our own approach to engaging our disabled colleagues wherever they are located. In sharing the lessons more widely, we hope to contribute to a conversation about how everyone can benefit from the work of high impact disability ERGs/Networks.

Mark Brown, Head of Impact & Sustainability and Employee Network Lead for enABLE

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Thanks to Business Disability Forum for images from their Disability Smart Image Bank
www.businessdisabilityforum.org.uk/ChangingTheImag



Introduction

Since 2017, the **#PositivelyPurple** movement has connected disability Employee Resource Group (ERG)/Network leaders around the world in a celebration of the contribution of employees with disabilities and as a mark of respect to the UN International Day of Persons with Disabilities.



Extending **#PositivelyPurple** as a universal, global and life-affirming celebration is a core part of the PurpleSpace strategy 2022 – 2026. We know that in order to achieve this, we must ensure that the movement touches the lives of all employees, no matter where they work.

We often hear from our community of disability ERG/Network leaders that, even if their network is mature, ensuring their reach and impact extends beyond colleagues in corporate or home-based roles is a challenge.

For example, it can be difficult for disabled colleagues in contact centres or warehouses to connect with each other. Factory workers with disabilities or first responders can't access content to help them build their inner confidence and organizations can't learn from the experiences of colleagues with disabilities who are transporting products or serving customers in retail environments.

High impact disability ERG/Network leaders consistently use external levers to push for internal progress. It is clear from the examples we share in this resource that the **#PositivelyPurple** movement provides an extraordinary opportunity to engage the whole organisation in both celebration, and action.

To build further on this invaluable content, we will publish full case studies from Tesco, BP, Network Rail, PMI and National Ambulance Disability Network in March 2025.

As the year draws to an end, we continue to reflect on the outcome of our first Global Disability ERG Summit on 15 October, 2024. During the Summit, disability ERG/Network leaders around the world determined that they want their organizations to prioritize learning directly from their own people with disabilities, invest in effective workplace adjustments/accommodation services and normalize the experience of disability via the sharing of stories.

I predict that **#PositivelyPurple** will continue to provide a vehicle for ERG/Network leaders and their organizations to create change in all three of these areas. And as we build toward our next Global Summit on 15 October 2026 and define what constitutes success, it is clear that progress must be demonstrably felt by all employees, including those in operational roles.

Kirstie Wilson. Learning, Development and Engagement Manager and Communications Lead, PurpleSpace



About this resource

This resource was created by gathering the insights and experiences of nearly 80 Disability ERG/Network Leaders and DEI professionals from across the PurpleSpace community. Consultation occurred via a series of in depth interviews, a survey and discussions at our **#PositivelyPurple** and Networkology Impact Strategic Forums.



What are the challenges to extending an ERG/ Network's reach?

Disability ERG/Networks are driving culture change in organizations around the world. They are creating community, building confidence and enabling their employers to improve their practice by learning directly from their own people with disabilities.

Disability ERG/Network leaders within the PurpleSpace community represent the interests of colleagues with disabilities in a wide range of organizational settings beyond conventional office or home-based roles. These include factories, retail stores, contact centres, ambulances, warehouses, stations and signal boxes, offshore rigs and shipping to name just a few.

There are some common challenges in extending an ERG/Network's reach and impact to colleagues in operational roles. Here are some of the most common that our community of disability ERG/Network leaders have shared.

Time

It can be challenging for disabled colleagues and allies in operational roles to engage with ERG/Networks because they are often working in pressurised, time critical or time monitored positions. For example, employees in contact centre roles are often receiving incoming calls through the entirety of their shifts.

Freedom to engage

Employees in front line operations are often unable to leave their post outside of designated breaks or without permission. This means it is often impossible to join live sessions run by an ERG/Network.

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“If you want your ERGs to have a broad impact, then you must be intentional about resourcing and rewarding them in operational settings. At CCEP we recognise and reward ERGs for their contribution towards creating an inclusive culture, via our annual employee ‘Icon Awards’.”

Mohammad Kohealtee, Lead Accessibility Ambassador GB at Coca-Cola Europacific Partners

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Working hours

Part-time, shift, roster and night working all contribute to colleagues missing out on ERG/Network activity, which is often scheduled to take place during conventional working hours. With ERG/Network leaders being in voluntary roles and with limited time to carry out their activities, they often have to compromise on timings that suit the majority of members, which results in core time meetings and events.

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“Our colleagues work on shifts, and it is difficult for everyone to engage with PMI Able activities. Every time we organise an event, we consider the best way to include as many teams as possible.”

Andrea Maria Russo, Co-Chair of Able ERG at PMI

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Physical location

Colleagues in remote or offshore locations have limited or no access to corporate facilities, so attending meetings or events held in person, is challenging.

Access to information/technology.

Colleagues in operational roles may not work at a computer or be able to access one onsite, and frequently don't have a work mobile device. This means they are only able to access ERG/Network information on their own devices, outside of working hours and at their own cost. In addition, some central platforms may not be accessible on a personal device due to security restrictions.

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“Work environments and schedules can make it hard for frontline operational and control room staff to engage with the Disability Network. Technology has been a great enabler as all operational staff have tablets for work. We've been able to engage colleagues by producing digital content such as short videos, podcasts and storytelling campaigns that can be accessed in a variety of ways, such as via a QR code”

Dawn Poulson Whelan, Chair of the AACE National Ambulance Disability Network, UK

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With thanks to BDF for their image usage.



Manager confidence, capability and engagement

The managers of operational colleagues are often the first port of call for organizational information, but they may not feel able to give permission for colleagues to engage in ERG/Network activity if it is not formally mandated by the organization.

It can be challenging to get airtime and enthusiasm for ERG/Network activity through busy line managers. On a positive note, when managers are engaged, it can be one of the most effective ways of sharing ERG/Network communications.

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“Our Ability ERG works hard to engage line managers, especially those leading teams in our branch or contact centres. We encourage all managers to join Ability and cascade the ERG’s content and free their people up to attend key activities.”

Joanne Austin, Global Inclusion Delivery Support and former Global Co-chair of Ability ERG, HSBC

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Lack of information about the lived experience of colleagues in operational roles

Learning directly from disabled colleagues in operational roles can be challenging for the reasons already discussed. Lack of direct employee feedback makes it difficult for an organization to gather the insights it needs to improve policy and practice. For a disability ERG/Network leader, it can be difficult to develop an approach that meets the needs of colleagues in every part of the business.

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“It’s important to understand what colleagues want from the Disability Network and the barriers that prevent them from engaging with us. Once we understand this, we can start to develop an engagement strategy that reaches staff wherever they work.”

Dawn Poulson Whelan, Chair of the AACE National Ambulance Disability Network, UK

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Extending disability ERG/Network reach and impact.

Disability ERG/Network leaders have increased engagement by a range of methods, which we explore here.

Outreach

- Working with senior leaders to ensure that participation in ERG/Network activity won't impact on the measurement of operational colleagues' performance (e.g. if they are call handlers who are targeted to take a number of calls).
- Leverage existing mechanisms (where they exist) to engage operational employees. This might include ensuring that disability ERGs/Networks are featured whenever regular operations or non-essential duties are paused to allow employees to participate in training, development, and engagement activities.
- Using vibrant and visible external levers like the #PositivelyPurple movement on the 3rd of December to engage colleagues who aren't able to routinely participate in ERG/Network activity.
- Using novelty to create engagement with people who wouldn't ordinarily connect with a disability ERG/Network. For example, competitions with prizes, themed celebrations and 'events in a box'.
- Offering virtual meetings/calls as 'drop in' sessions for real-time support and discussion. Informal conversations and feedback channels are one of the most successful ways that ERG/Network leaders have learned directly from employees in operational roles.
- Using disability listening groups or surveys, to surface the experiences and challenges of disabled employees in operational settings.

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“Reaching people that we wouldn't ordinarily connect with is very important to us and something that we are working on improving, while ensuring our focus remains to support Network Rail employees. In line with this the content of our 10 year anniversary conference was beneficial to all, and was created for a wider audience. We are committed to sharing best practice with other organisations using levers like #PositivelyPurple”.

Alex, Co-Chair of CanDo, Network Rail

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As part of BP's International Day of Persons with Disabilities celebrations, we wanted to engage teams working on platforms in the North Sea. We sent colleagues an 'event in a box' that included an information pack and everything needed to participate in a purple sock 'selfie' competition. This engaged colleagues, who can't attend in-person events due to their remote location, in a global celebration of the contribution of disabled employees”.

Marie Mylordos, EMEA OTL Accessibility BRG, BP

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“Understanding the views and experiences of disabled colleagues who work in stores has always been a challenge. To address this, the Disability Network has partnered with the business to equip store managers to lead disability-focussed listening initiatives with their teams. The aim is to embed discussions on disability within the regular operations of stores, rather than being a network-led activity.”

Russell Price, Disability Network lead at Tesco

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“Disability ERG leaders who want to engage colleagues in operational roles must understand the needs of the business. This might mean not scheduling key activity during busy periods and leveraging existing engagement opportunities. For example, during the summer, we shut down for an afternoon where an entire shift comes together for a BBQ. This is a great opportunity to share messages about ERG activities.”

Mohammad Kohealtee, Lead Accessibility Ambassador GB at Coca-Cola Europacific Partners

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Communication

- Using the most effective communication channels for the organization and audience. It might be the intranet, internal or external social media, centralised communications, mobile texts or apps. It may also include posters or distributing printed materials, such as information on cards that colleagues can keep in wallets or purses.
- Ensuring that information and support is available to those who don't have a work device. This could be creating an ERG/Network website that is accessible on a personal device, sharing information on external social media or having an newsletter that can be subscribed to from a personal email address.
- Connecting with in-house Digital Teams, to ensure disability ERG/Network content and resources have been integrated into search results.
- Having a single point of contact (email inbox, query form, phone number or a person) that anyone can use, confidentially, as their first 'port of call'.
- Leveraging the power of 'word of mouth' via existing ERG/Network members in operational settings to share information about the network with their colleagues.

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Start small; get it right for the staff, whatever that looks like. That will build the reputation of the network. Don't get distracted and consumed by a plan that is too ambitious in its scope.”

Pauline Hogarth, Deputy Chair of the AACE National Ambulance Disability Network, UK

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“Our ERG members work across a range of different departments - they know and understand our different working environments. Their input helps to inform our approach and they can sponsor and promote our activities to the colleagues they work with day to day.”

Andrea Maria Russo, Co-Chair of Able ERG at PMI

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“In the last three organisations I've worked in, I try and make sure I understand the cycle of comms and who I need to be connected with.

I have also seen examples where the staff networks would categorise their events into gold, silver and bronze to enable them to prioritise funds, resources and comms – making sure the gold messages got the spotlight they deserved on the main communication channels.”

Giles Barker, PurpleSpace Ambassador and Workplace Disability Lead at Channel 4

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Collaboration

Disability ERG/Network leaders have increased engagement with operational colleagues, by collaborating with other areas of the organization that are trying to reach the same people.

Examples include:

- Co-creating a communication plan with the internal communications team.
- Connecting with the DEI team, HR, L&D etc. to ‘piggyback’ on relevant plans and initiatives that target operational teams.
- Collaborating with existing groups who engage with operational colleagues – this could be other ERG/Networks, unions, social groups or employee forums.

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Disability ERG leaders will find it easier to engage colleagues in operational settings when the wider DEI strategy also supports this aim. For example, our ‘Infinite Ability’ professional development programme specifically engages colleagues with a disability from across our branch network, and as a result, the Ability ERG is increasingly visible to all employees.”

Joanne Austin, Global Inclusion Delivery Support and former Global Co-chair of the Ability ERG, HSBC

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“Securing buy-in from senior leaders, such as chief executives and chairs, has significantly increased the frontline impact that our networks have. By engaging with national ambulance groups such as EDI Leads, Communications Directors and HR Directors, we were able to get key disability events marked on local and national celebrations calendars; having communications from a national level opened up a wider audience.”

Dawn Poulson Whelan, Chair of the AACE National Ambulance Disability Network, UK

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“As part of our International Day of Persons with Disabilities celebrations, we worked with the business to light up corporate offices, refineries and port facilities in the UK and US purple.

It captured the attention of colleagues who had never engaged in conversations about disability and as a result, we generated new interest and grew the BRG’s membership.”

Marie Mylordos, EMEA OTL Accessibility BRG, BP

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“Our network has built relationships with Communications, I.T and the Facilities Teams and involve them from the beginning of planning for #PositivelyPurple each year and engage with them for post event feedback too.

It’s vital that key stakeholders are involved from the beginning of any event, as they play an essential role in the success and impact in promoting the network within areas of the organization where you might not have people actively championing you.”

Nicolo Curzio, Disability Employee Network Lead at Kyowa Kirin

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Sponsorship and support

- Mapping your professional network within the organization can help identify colleagues who could cascade your ERG/Network messages.
- Impactful executive sponsors will amplify your messages and connect you with influential leaders in operational parts of the organization.
- Encouraging senior leaders to share their lived experiences of disability – this fosters safety for all disabled colleagues, but can be particularly important for disabled colleagues who feel isolated in a remote environment.

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“Merlin Entertainments thrives in vibrant, dynamic settings - from theme parks to aquariums - where inclusion is at the heart of what they do. Their regional taskforces, comprised of employees from a range of backgrounds with a variety of disabilities and lived experience, provide invaluable insights who actively listen and collaborate to drive meaningful change.”

Claire Lawson, DI&A Director at Merlin Entertainments

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“Executive support for an ERG is even more critical in operational settings. In our world, it is the Site Director who holds the key to an ERG being able to engage colleagues. The best ERG leaders build collaborative relationships with Site Directors and the best Site Directors understand that disability inclusion is as important as other priorities like Health and Safety.”

Mohammad Kohealtee, Lead Accessibility Ambassador GB at Coca-Cola Europacific Partners

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“We have an amazing Board level executive sponsor who has opened a lot of doors with her contacts. This has really helped us to reach colleagues in different parts of the business.”

Marie Mylordos, EMEA OTL Accessibility BRG, BP

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“Sharing personal stories from colleagues, including a dyslexic Store Director, is helping us to normalise the experience of disability across Tesco. These stories are shared through a variety of channels and are also used as training materials to help colleagues understand disabilities”.

Russell Price, Disability Network lead at Tesco

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“Stakeholder mapping is really helpful. It’s important to understand who the key ‘movers and shakers’ are within different areas of the organization as they can help you to get a much wider buy in for your network.”

Suzie Austen, GB Workability Co-Chair at WTW

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Leadership lessons for Disability ERG/Network leaders

Disability ERG/Network leaders who develop their network's reach and impact beyond the traditional corporate setting tend to:

- Agree that great leaders don't leave anyone behind.
- Find ways to help the organization learn directly from its operational colleagues.
- Think creatively to overcome logistical problems.
- Use external levers to create broader engagement. For example, the Paralympics or the **#PositivelyPurple** movement.
- Routinely measure ERG/Network impact to ensure it includes as many colleagues as possible.
- Build relationships with key stakeholders who can help them extend their reach e.g. digital, internal comms, DEI and executive leaders of operational functions.
- Double down on their efforts if others say that reaching colleagues in particular settings "can't be done" or is "too difficult".
- Keep things simple and don't try to 'reinvent the wheel' by leveraging existing organizational mechanisms to engage operational colleagues.
- Embrace technology and leverage more traditional communication methods e.g. posters in communal areas or cubicle doors in restrooms when helpful.
- Ensure that operational colleagues are part of the disability ERG/Network leadership decision making process. For example, by ensuring that one co-lead is always from an operational part of the organization.
- Not be deterred if engaging with colleagues who are 'hard to reach' takes a long time or if they don't get it right first time.



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In any ERG, a co-chair structure can enable leaders to spread accountabilities and ensure the right mix of skills and experience. Ensuring that ABLE’s leaders come from both corporate and retail roles has created an ERG that aims to serve the whole of our disability community”.

Zara-Maria Montgomery, Store Manager and Co-Chair of ABLE ERG
Levi Strauss & Co

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“Progress is more important than perfection – we have an aspiration to represent everyone, but we can’t change the world overnight. We need to keep bringing people in, keep expanding and this is a continuous journey. It’s not going to be perfect on our first try, so we need to be kind and patient with ourselves.”

Rosina Kostiana, EMEA OTL Accessibility BRG, BP

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“Go back to basics and reconnect with your purpose; why are you doing this and what do you want achieve? Use both qualitative and quantitative data to understand the needs of your members and effectiveness of the network.”

Alex, Co-Chair of CanDo, Network Rail

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“Our Network utilise a range of communication platforms, but some operational staff won’t access them; they’ll come straight to us for support by phone call or email, and that’s ok.”

Pauline Hogarth, Co-Chair of North East Ambulance Network

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With Thanks to

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Alastair Smith	Lloyds Banking Group
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Tom Berry	Lloyds Banking Group
Zara-Maria Montgomery	Levi Strauss & Co

And all PurpleSpace members who joined and took part in surveys during our 2024 **#PositivelyPurple** Strategic Forums.

Images on pages 1, 11, 14, 30 provided by Business Disability Forum’s Disability Smart Image Bank, part of their Changing the image of disability campaign
www.businessdisabilityforum.org.uk/ChangingTheImage

About PurpleSpace

PurpleSpace is a unique leadership development membership hub for disability ERG/Network leaders, champions, and allies around the world.

Our 4,500 members across 180+ employer brands employ over 1.5 million employees with disability between them. Members join to increase the effectiveness of their disability ERGs / Networks, develop their leadership skills, and learn how to help their organisations to become disability confident from the inside out.

We call it Networkology and it is having a powerful worldwide impact on driving the next phase of cultural change within many different types of organisations.

The introduction of rights-based legislation is what we call the first phase of change. In some parts of the world that is still on the move.

The second phase is the process where employers tap into the enabling products and services that help them to create better policy, practice, and procedure. That phase continues.

Meanwhile, the third phase of change has begun. Where employees with disability build inner confidence, lean into their careers, and create meaningful conversation about how to get ahead at work. High performing disability ERGs and Networks are at the vanguard of this change. This is the new modern approach to sustaining culture change.

It's what we do.

Find the space to think Networkology.



Powered by The Futurists

Futurists support PurpleSpace’s mission to accelerate the global growth of disability ERG/Networks and develop the confidence of every employee with a disability.

By contributing to the creation and development of a shared knowledge hub and repository of information and learning and development, Futurists enable PurpleSpace to cascade the intellectual assets more widely.

For more information about becoming a Futurist, contact your Member Coach.



Find the space to help your people develop their career for personal and business success.

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