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## **GUIDELINES ON HOW TO BUILD COALITION NETWORKS OF AFFINITY GROUPS OR MARGINALIZED COMMUNITIES IN THE PUBLIC WORKPLACES**

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## SUMMARY

Deliverable 3.3, "Guidelines on how to build coalition networks of affinity groups or marginalized communities in the public workplaces," represents the practical and operational output of the research conducted within Work Package 3 of the DiGiN project. These guidelines are designed to translate theoretical DEI principles into a strategic roadmap, providing European municipalities with a structured methodology to foster and sustain employee coalitions.

Employee networks have emerged as a critical mechanism for advancing diversity, equity, and inclusion within organizations. Beyond their impact on workplace culture, they increasingly function as strategic assets, enabling organizations to leverage diversity as a driver of innovation, performance, and organizational resilience.

The document is developed through a cohesive narrative that transitions from a conceptual framework—analyzing the strategic evolution and benefits of Employee Resource Groups (ERGs)—to operational guidelines. This roadmap serves as a guide specifically designed to navigate the lifecycle of a network through its foundational establishment, operational implementation, and long-term sustainability. By addressing the unique bureaucratic and operational hurdles of the public sector, the guide offers practical steps to ensure these groups move beyond informal social support to become integrated organizational partners. Finally, the document concludes with a dedicated analysis of challenges and mitigation strategies, offering targeted interventions to safeguard these networks against institutional volatility, member burnout, and resource scarcity.

Intended for municipal officers, HR staff, and DEI coordinators, this document integrates peer-learning insights from Ghent, Rotterdam, and Genoa, serving as a bridge between high-level policy and the active empowerment of the municipal workforce.

## INTRODUCTION

The DiGiN project is committed to fostering systemic change within European local governments. Despite the increasing emphasis on Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) at the EU level, research highlights a persistent "implementation gap" between the adoption of strategies and their effective impact. To bridge this divide, DiGiN promotes an intersectional approach to combat discrimination and ensure that diverse perspectives actively inform municipal decision-making.

The municipalities of Rotterdam, Ghent, and Genoa share a growing awareness of the need to strengthen DEI practices in order to reflect societal diversity, improve policy effectiveness, and position themselves as inclusive and attractive public employers. However, employees often recognize the importance of DEI but lack the formal tools, organizational support, or institutional channels to initiate meaningful change.

This Deliverable 3.3 serves as the main outcome of Work Package 3 (Coalition building of employee networks) and finds its empirical context in the survey conducted in January 2025 provided a situational analysis, exploring the scope and function of existing employee networks, their participation levels and need for new groups across the city partners. These



findings revealed the specific challenges networks face in fostering participatory work environments and provided the necessary context to develop the practical insights and advisory exchanges gained during knowledge exchange sessions with city partners, which form the basis for fostering resilient employee coalitions.

A core strength of the DiGiN project lies in the strategic interconnection of its Work Packages, which form a structured progression from initial assessment to sustainable implementation. Deliverable 3.3 builds directly upon the foundation laid by Work Package 2 (Capacity Building for Change Agents), where the Culture Assessment and Inventory of Training Needs was instrumental in identifying existing cultural norms. This synergy ensures that the guidelines are not merely theoretical but are designed to equip employees with the specific skills and methodologies needed to drive institutional transformation.

Furthermore, this work is harmonized with Work Package 4 (Inclusivity Panel Intervention), focusing on the integration of intersectional employee voices into municipal decision-making, and is intrinsically linked to the long-term objectives of Work Package 5. The ultimate goal is to move beyond temporary initiatives by embedding DEI as a structural and sustainable pillar of municipal administration.

By bridging the gap between bottom-up employee agency and top-down institutional commitment, these guidelines aim to support coalition building as a mechanism for organizational change that is resilient to administrative transitions and capable of supporting the vision of an inclusive public workplace

## Conceptual Framework

This section establishes the theoretical and operational foundations for the design, recognition, and development of employee networks within public administrations. While providing a critical lens through which the specific experiences of Genoa, Ghent, and Rotterdam are interpreted, this framework serves as a general reference for institutionalizing employee-led collectives.

### Clarification of terminology

To ensure conceptual clarity across different contexts, these guidelines distinguish between several forms of employee-led collectives. Although these terms are often used interchangeably in both academic and practitioner-oriented literature, they reflect different levels of organizational maturity, formalization, and strategic alignment.

**Employee Networks** an umbrella term for voluntary, employee-led collectives organized around shared characteristics or professional functions.

**Affinity Groups** usually refer to informal or spontaneous collectives formed by employees who share common interests, experiences, or identities, without formal recognition or strategic alignment with the employer's diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) agenda. While affinity groups may interact informally with organizational structures, they typically lack defined governance, leadership support, or explicit organizational mandates.

**Employee Resource Groups (ERGs)**, the most advanced and institutionalized form of collective. ERGs are formally recognized, operate with senior leadership support, and are strategically aligned with the organization's mission and objectives.

Throughout these guidelines, the terms *Employee Networks*, *Affinity Groups*, and *ERGs* are used to reflect different institutional contexts and stages of development. However, *Employee Resource Groups (ERGs)* remains the primary term employed, as it best captures the level of formalization and strategic alignment addressed in this framework.

## The evolution of ERGs

Employee Resource Groups evolved from affinity groups and emerged in response to the **civil rights movement and rising racial tensions in the United States**. Their early development was closely linked to efforts to address systemic discrimination and advance diversity, equity, and inclusion within organizations.

The first ERG commonly cited in the literature is the **Black Caucus**, established at Xerox Corporation in 1964 to advocate for fair employment practices and a more inclusive corporate environment. This was followed by other pioneering initiatives, such as Hewlett-Packard's creation of the first ERG for LGBTQ+ employees in 1978. These landmark examples established a foundation that has since expanded globally, despite the historically limited—though gradually growing—body of academic research on the subject.

Over time, the role of ERGs has expanded beyond their original focus on representation and advocacy. Contemporary ERGs increasingly contribute to leadership development, organizational learning, innovation, and change management precisely by addressing structural inequalities, underrepresentation, and barriers to participation within organizations. While the most prevalent ERGs continue to focus on women, race, ethnicity, cultural identity, and the LGBT community, other groups have emerged around individual characteristics—such as physical or cognitive disabilities, neurodiversity, age, career stage, or organizational tenure—where these dimensions intersect with issues of access, equity, and inclusion in the workplace.<sup>2</sup>

ERGs are designed to promote and sustain a **diverse and inclusive work environment** in alignment with the mission, values, objectives, policies, and practices of their host organizations. **Voluntarism** remains a defining feature: ERGs are composed of employees who choose to dedicate unpaid time and effort to initiatives aimed at improving both individual experiences and organizational outcomes.

The original notion of “affinity” continues to shape the purpose and functioning of ERGs. By bringing together employees who share common characteristics or experiences, these groups seek to strengthen members' sense of belonging visibility, and professional development.

Beyond internal support, ERGs facilitate knowledge sharing and the exchange of experiences related to specific communities or lived realities. They also engage in advocacy-oriented activities, such as awareness-raising campaigns, organizational

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<sup>2</sup> Harshila Gujar, (2021), A Comprehensive Review of Employee Resource Groups (Ergs): Establishing and Supporting Ergs for Diverse Communities, International Journal of Core Engineering & Management

nudging, and internal consultation. Through these efforts, ERGs may influence organizational norms, behaviours, and practices; challenge stereotypes; and contribute to the design of initiatives related to workforce diversification, inclusion, and employee empowerment.<sup>3</sup>

## Benefits for Organizations and Employees

The rationale for ERGs lies in their capacity to effectively complement formal DEI policies, address unmet employee needs, and foster inclusive workplace cultures across multiple dimensions of diversity. When adequately supported, ERGs deliver a wide range of benefits that contribute to both individual well-being and organizational effectiveness. Organizations that actively recognize and engage ERGs are therefore more likely to achieve measurable improvements in DEI-related outcomes.

Key benefits include:<sup>4</sup>

- **Increased employee engagement, sense of belonging, and quality of interpersonal relationships.** ERGs foster a stronger sense of community by creating safe spaces for connection, mutual support, and shared identity, thereby employee engagement and long-term commitment.
- **Advancement of diversity and inclusion in organizational policies and practices.** ERGs have played a significant role in shaping inclusive policies related to flexible work arrangements, parental leave, accessibility, and training on physical, cognitive, and neurodiverse differences. Through their contributions, ERGs can help align organizational performance objectives with employee well-being, thereby enhancing organizational attractiveness and sustainability.
- **Innovation, creativity, and the transfer of ideas and skills.** By amplifying diverse perspectives and experiences, ERGs contribute to more inclusive decision-making processes. Cross-functional collaboration involving ERGs enables organizations to address complex challenges from multiple angles, often resulting in more creative and effective solutions.
- **Professional development.** ERGs frequently support skill development, mentoring, and leadership pathways for their members.

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<sup>3</sup> Welbourne M. T. Rolf S., Schlachter S. (2015) Employee Resource Groups: An Introduction, Review and Research Agenda, Academy of Management Proceedings, 2015 Academy of Management Conference

<sup>4</sup> Harshila Gujar (2021) A Comprehensive Review of Employee Resource Groups (Ergs): Establishing and Supporting Ergs for Diverse Communities, International Journal of Core Engineering & Management, Volume-6, Issue-12; Catalyst. (2020). Why diversity and inclusion matter

## METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

This deliverable combines conceptual insights, empirical evidence from three European cities, and practical guidance to support public administrations in the development, formal recognition, and institutionalization of ERGs. While the analysis also considers informal affinity groups and broader employee networks, the methodology focuses on facilitating the transition from spontaneous or loosely structured initiatives to formally recognized, DEI-oriented structures.

### Literature review

To provide a robust conceptual foundation for the guidelines, the methodology incorporates findings from a comprehensive literature review. The review synthesizes established theoretical frameworks related to DEI, the role of Employee Resource Groups in organizational change, and best practices in the governance and institutional support of employee-led networks. Particular attention is paid to the conditions under which ERGs effectively complement formal DEI policies and contribute to sustainable organizational transformation.

### Empirical Research: DiGiN Cross-Municipal Questionnaire

The DiGiN Deliverable, "Networks and Needs Assessment and Analysis," established a comparative framework to evaluate the characteristics and impact of employee networks across the partner municipalities. Administered in January 2025, the survey gathered data on the scope of existing networks, the perceived necessity for structured groups, and experiences regarding workplace discrimination and support.

Each partner adapted the questionnaire—modeled on a design by the Municipality of Genoa—to their specific institutional context while maintaining a shared analytical structure.

### Comparative framing and definitional differences

A primary finding concerned the varying definitions of "employee networks." **Ghent and Genoa** adopted a broad definition, encompassing both identity-based and shared-interest groups (e.g., sports, culture). Conversely, **Rotterdam** applied a narrow focus, restricted exclusively to networks connected to workplace Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI). These variations reflect differing stages of institutionalization rather than methodological limitations.

- **Genoa:** 1630 employee responded to the questionnaire. In the absence of officially recognized DEI networks, the survey functioned as a foundational needs assessment, yielding 205 suggestions for future group themes.
- **Rotterdam:** Focused on DEI-specific initiatives. With 79 respondents, the survey showed high awareness (80%) and high participation rate (68%). Notably, 37% of non-participants cited the absence of a direct invitation as their primary barrier, highlighting the need for active organizational encouragement.



- **Ghent:** 185 employees responded to the questionnaire. While 81% were aware of existing networks, 45% had participated in at least one. For non-participants, the most cited deterrent (24%) was the lack of a network aligning with specific personal interests or needs.

## Comparative Summary

Despite differing distribution methods, recurring patterns across the three cities emphasize that the evolution from informal groups to institutionalized ERGs depends on formal recognition, dedicated resources (time and funding), and senior leadership advocacy.

| Feature                     | Genoa   | Ghent                                  | Rotterdam                           |
|-----------------------------|---|--|-------------------------------------|
| Definition/Scope            | Broad. (Interests/DEI)  | Broad. (Interests/DEI)                 | Narrow (Focus on DEI).              |
| Official Status             | Baseline. No officially recognized networks.                          | Formalized.                            | Formalized.                         |
| Key Survey finding          | Potential: 15% positive attitude; 205 proposals for new groups themes | 81% awareness; 45% participation rate. | 80% awareness; 68% participation.   |
| Primary Area of improvement | Structural: Need for institutionalization and DEI alignment.          | Clearer goal and objectives (39%)      | Limited organizational impact (28%) |

## Peer learning and experience exchange

Peer learning was supported through three on-site visits (Rotterdam, Ghent, and Genoa) and a series of capacity-building activities, including participatory training sessions, culture assessment workshops, journey mapping exercises, and dedicated training on Inclusivity Panels. Additional online workshops facilitated knowledge exchange on organizational resistance, alliance-building, and the sustainability of DEI interventions beyond the project lifecycle.

In particular, a set of capacity-building activities was carried out at consortium level focused on the following thematic areas:

- Participatory approaches aimed at empowering core teams of change agents within municipalities to lead inclusive and sustainable institutional transformation
- Strategic framing skills, including the identification of windows of opportunity for change, the engagement of allies, the development of persuasive arguments, and the anticipation of potential resistance
- Monitoring and evaluation of DEI initiatives to assess performance and measure organizational change

- Workplace allyship, with the objective of fostering a comprehensive understanding of its pivotal role in advancing diversity, equity, and inclusion within organizations

This document is also informed by the results of two peer-exchange sessions held between ERG representatives from the partner cities of Rotterdam, Ghent and Genoa in January 2026. This collaborative process has served as a strategic platform to gather a comprehensive range of qualitative insights, lived experiences, and operational data.

The dialogue facilitated comparison of different organizational models, allowing for the identification of shared challenges and successful strategies. The perspectives collected during these sessions provide the foundation for the recommendations and best practices outlined in the following sections.

## STEP BY STEP GUIDE

Drawing on the project's findings, this guide offers a concrete reference for building and managing employee coalitions. It provides a framework of actions—from initial outreach to long-term sustainability—that can be adapted to the specific institutional maturity and cultural context of municipal organizations. The goal is to serve as practical toolkit to navigate bureaucratic hurdles and establish inclusive networks that are both employee-led and institutionally supported.

## Foundational Principles

Employee Resource Groups (ERGs) may emerge through different pathways within organizations. In many cases, they originate **as bottom-up initiatives**, informally created by employees who share common identities, experiences, or interests and who seek mutual support, visibility, or collective action. Over time, these groups may secure formal recognition and resources. Conversely, organizations may adopt a **top-down approach**, actively encouraging ERG formation as a core component of their DEI strategy.

The practical application of these pathways varies across partner cities, reflecting different institutional cultures.

In the **City of Rotterdam**, groups generally follow a bottom-up trajectory. Once formed, they are **granted formal recognition** by the newly established DEI Office. To secure this status, groups must submit a strategic plan demonstrating their capacity to deliver added value to the entire organization. A recent example is the group centred on post-colonialism, which aims to create safe spaces for discussing workplace issues rooted in colonialism and racism. This group emerged within a broader context: in 2024, management-led training sessions and structured dialogues served as a formal acknowledgment of the necessity to address these themes within the professional environment.

In the **City of Ghent**, the initiative originated from a **theoretical model** formally approved by HR and the management team. This led to the establishment of three initial focus groups—centered on disability, migratory background, and LGBTQI+ themes—which served as the



foundational pillars for the current three ERGs. In Ghent, the presence of ERGs serve as a key indicator of the administration's success in achieving its broader DEI policy objectives.

In the City of Genoa, there are currently **no officially recognized ERGs**. While several spontaneous networks exist, they primarily focus on recreational or social activities (such as sports or volunteering) without formal ties to DEI mandates.

Regardless of their origin, the transition from informal to formal status is a critical juncture. While informal networks significantly boost morale, formal institutional recognition is essential to ensure long-term sustainability, access to dedicated funding, and a measurable impact on municipal policy and organizational culture.

## Needs Assessment

A structured and evidence-based needs assessment enables public administrations to identify workforce demographics, lived experiences, and priority gaps, ensuring that ERGs respond to **concrete organizational needs** rather than assumed or symbolic objectives.

While the impetus for an ERG may be top-down (administrative mandate) or bottom-up (employee initiative), the needs assessment remains a strategic tool. In top-down models, it ensures that institutional initiatives respond to **authentic employee experiences** rather than managerial assumptions. In bottom-up models, it provides the **evidence-based legitimacy** necessary to secure formal recognition and demonstrate how the group's goals align with the municipality's broader strategic priorities.

A robust assessment typically combines anonymous surveys, focus groups, and targeted interviews. These tools foster an informed understanding of employee needs and help ensure that ERGs complement existing DEI policies rather than duplicate or fragment them. The findings directly inform the definition of each ERG's mission, vision, scope, and measurable objectives, strengthening alignment between employee-led initiatives and institutional priorities.

The **case of Genoa** demonstrates that a structured survey may be a foundational step to uncover latent demand. Even in the absence of formal networks, **15% of respondents** (representing a dedicated cohort of nearly 250 employees) expressed a proactive interest in forming or joining new networks. The collection of **205 concrete suggestions** regarding potential group themes provides a data-driven pathway for the administration to transition from informal interests to structured frameworks.

Furthermore, employee networks may be perceived as a valid **instrument to prevent and combat discrimination**. In Genoa, while 55% of respondents believe the organization provides adequate tools to counter discrimination, **68% still see significant value** in establishing formal or informal support networks to address these issues. In this regard, it is worth noting that among respondents who experienced unfair treatment, the primary reason for not reporting incidents was skepticism regarding organizational responsiveness (specifically, doubting that the organization would take meaningful action). This was followed by 26% who considered the incident too minor to report, and over 24% who feared retaliation or negative consequences.

These findings may support the establishment of ERGs as **informal 'safe-space' mechanisms** designed to reach and support employees who would otherwise remain silent.

In **Ghent**, the administration primarily relies on broader tools, such as organizational well-being and climate surveys, rather than surveys specifically designed for ERG formation. Instead, existing groups act as **'institutional sensors'** for emerging needs, bringing unaddressed issues to the attention of the administration.

However, the experience of the **Ghent LINK network** (focused on migration background) demonstrates that even when a group is already established, targeted data collection remains a vital bridge between employee lived experiences and institutional change. A few years ago, the network conducted an **internal survey** exclusively among its members. The primary objective was not to justify the group's existence, but to map its composition and identify specific needs. Far from being a mere internal exercise, this evidence-based feedback was strategically used to **initiate a** dialogue with the Talent and Development Team, ultimately leading to a revision of recruitment procedures and the implementation of more diverse **hiring practices**.

## Strategic Alignment

Clearly articulated missions and structured activity programmes provide strategic direction, guide day-to-day operations, and establish shared expectations between ERG members and senior leadership. When embedded within the administration's core values and policy frameworks, ERG initiatives reinforce both internal inclusion and the municipality's capacity to serve the broader community equitably.

A baseline for this synergy is provided by the **DiGiN "Assessment and Analysis of DEI Interventions" (May 2024)**, which outlines the foundational DEI visions of the partner cities:

- Genoa: Removal of obstacles to equal opportunity; specific focus on disability and inter-generational inclusion.
- Ghent: Reflecting the diverse Ghent society; ensuring an organization where every employee can flourish.
- Rotterdam: "Rotterdam represents Rotterdam"; fostering an open, safe culture where different perspectives are retained and valued.

Despite these visions, **DiGiN Deliverable 2.1** identifies structural barriers—such as bureaucratic rigidity, hierarchical management, and departmental siloing—that limit cross-sectoral collaboration and delay the implementation of DEI initiatives.

For reasons largely due to different historical backgrounds in the institutionalisation of equality policies, DEI efforts focus on different axes:

- **Genoa:** Strong expertise in gender and disability, but faces challenges in adopting a broader **intersectional approach**. Priorities include overcoming generational resistance through strategic framing and supporting internal coalition-building across different diversity grounds..
- **Rotterdam and Ghent:** address a wider spectrum of diversity, including ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender identity, and neurodiversity.



### **Main Challenges and Priority Recommendations:**

- **Ghent:** Despite strong leadership commitment, there is a lack of representation of individuals with migration backgrounds in top management. Recommendations focus on improving bottom-up participation to bypass structural barriers to decision-making roles.
- **Genoa:** Faces a lack of transparency and a negative public perception of municipal efficiency. Efforts must focus on internal accountability and engaging under-represented voices to build trust.
- **Rotterdam:** Demonstrates strength in stakeholder engagement (e.g., Inclusivity Panel) but lacks consistent leadership accountability. Priorities include moving beyond a "business case" for DEI toward systematic reporting and interdepartmental coordination.

Overcoming these obstacles requires a transition toward a more structured, data-driven, and intersectional governance model that can bridge the gap between administrative ideals and the multicultural reality of the modern city. In this context, as highlighted during the knowledge exchange sessions among city partners in January, a foundational step for establishing a successful ERG is to identify **'who cares'**—pinpointing the stakeholders and lived experiences that necessitate formal representation. By fostering these networks, public professionals ensure the administration truly reflects the diversity of the community it serves. This ongoing dialogue transcends internal well-being; it strengthens the institutional legitimacy required for authentic civic engagement, transforming strategic alignment from a bureaucratic requirement into a vital pillar of local democracy.

## **Structure and governance**

Governance and operational structures are not 'one-size-fits-all' models; they must adapt to the size, culture, and strategic goals of each administration.

The sections below examine the participation criteria, leadership frameworks, and collaborative dynamics that allow these networks to integrate effectively into the workforce.

### **Membership and governance models**

The operational models of ERGs vary significantly across administrations, ranging from self-managed, informal networks to highly structured, cross-sectional advisory panels.

In **Ghent**, officially recognized groups—such as Network Roze Neuzekes ('Pink Nose') for LGBTQIA+ employees, LInk for colleagues with a migrant background, and Network AHA for employees with disabilities or chronic illnesses—enjoy **operational autonomy**. Each group defines its own internal governance and membership rules. The admission process is typically straightforward: employees can request to join by emailing the network's general contact address, followed by a brief identity verification.

The DIGIN survey in Ghent shows that a sense of belonging and community (21%) and the desire to drive change (20%) are the most common reasons among those who have joined at least one group at work. In Rotterdam, the most common reasons for joining at least one group in the workplace are promoting change (23%) and professional support (22%).



In contrast, **Rotterdam** employs a more segmented and **formal structure**. A central example is the *Inclusivity Panel*, which functions as a cross-sectional advisory network. It is organized into a Program Team for management, a Core Team of 8–10 members from diverse organizational areas meeting bi-weekly for strategic advice, and a broader Network for recruitment and input. The Panel operates under a formal framework that defines roles and responsibilities while emphasizing its independence through safe-space rules and inclusive communication. Other groups in the city, such as *R-Pride* (378 members) and the *Neurodiversity Network* (over 800 members), demonstrate extensive reach. Meanwhile, the *JongR* group (for employees under 35) maintains a highly inclusive model where membership is open to all eligible staff without formal registration.

The other groups, like R-Pride (Core Team of 10, network of 378) and the Neurodiversity network (over 800 members) demonstrate extensive reach. The *JongR* group, managed by a board of approximately 10 members, is highly inclusive; its membership does not require formal registration and is open to anyone under 35.

Despite the openness of general membership, board positions in Rotterdam are only accessible during vacancies and candidates are selected through a formal application process, with the administration being notified of any changes in leadership composition.

Drawing on these benchmarks, the **City of Genoa** is currently laying the groundwork for its own *Inclusivity Panel* following capacity-building sessions with Rotterdam. To apply these insights to the local context, participating staff have been organized into two dedicated task forces focusing on 'Selection and Recruitment' and 'Projects and Programmes.' This initiative serves as a strategic starting point for fostering internal cooperation and establishing a formal inclusivity framework within the city's administration.

## Alliance engagement

To maximize impact and mitigate the risk of perceived exclusivity, ERGs must transition from isolated networks into integrated organizational partners. Successful ERGs do not operate in a vacuum; they rely on a network of **institutional stakeholders** who provide the necessary political and operational leverage to navigate bureaucratic hurdles.

A key mechanism in this process is the involvement of **allies**—employees who do not belong to the demographic group represented by the ERG but who **actively support its mission and objectives**. Allies play an active role by participating in awareness-raising and educational initiatives, amplifying the voices of marginalized colleagues, and using their organizational position to promote inclusive practices. In some cases, allies may also act as **Change Agents**, holding formal or informal mandates to advance structural change within the administration. This structured engagement broadens the reach of ERGs and reinforces shared accountability for DEI outcomes across the institution.

Effective coalition building is supported by dedicated DEI roles and governance mechanisms that vary according to national and local contexts.

In the City of **Genoa**, key institutional allies include:



- **Committee for Equal Opportunities, Workplace Well-Being, and Anti-Discrimination (CUG):** a mandatory joint body composed of representatives from the municipal administration and trade unions. The CUG promotes equality, non-discrimination, and employee well-being in recruitment processes and working conditions. The members of this committee operate independently from managerial structures, enabling them to adopt a critical stance and act as a catalyst for organizational change.
- **Trust and Equality Officer:** an independent institutional figure who addresses cases of discrimination, mobbing, and sexual harassment through confidential informal or formal procedures.
- **Wellbeing and Equal Opportunities Office:** Operating within HR, this office manages organizational well-being and diversity mandates. It also launched the **Equal Opportunity Network**, a multi-stakeholder initiative (universities, regional bodies, private sector) to align equality policies at the city level.

The **City of Ghent** has established a **multi-layered DEI governance** structure, including:

- a **Steering Group** with political representation and senior management involvement;
- **Single Points of Contact (SPOCs)** within most departments, responsible for monitoring DEI issues and driving departmental action plans;
- a **cross-departmental working group** composed of HR staff and departmental SPOCs;
- within HR, a **Programme Team** led by a Diversity and Inclusion Coordinator.

The **City of Rotterdam** has recently established a dedicated **DEI Office**:

- a structure responsible for implementing the municipal DEI Action Plan. The Office consists of a manager and 3–4 staff members. The manager, currently being appointed, will be responsible over the next two years for developing the structures, processes, and pillars necessary to operationalize the plan.

As emphasized by a representative from Ghent's ERG, the impact of a network is significantly amplified when it successfully engages the majority, based on the principle that **"a minority is strongest when the majority defends its rights."**

By building a broad base of allies, ERGs bridge the gap between specific group interests and the wider organizational culture. A key strategy for this integration is identifying **"relatable" themes**—such as neurodiversity—which often resonate with the majority due to personal or social connections. These shared experiences serve as entry points for broader dialogue, allowing ERGs to consolidate common strengths and transform minority-led initiatives into collective organizational progress.

Together, these arrangements illustrate how ERGs, allies, and institutional actors form interconnected coalitions that bridge bottom-up initiatives and top-down strategies, ensuring that networks evolve into sustainable drivers of change.

## Sustaining and Resourcing the ERGs

Long-term sustainability requires a dual commitment from both senior leadership and organizational management. While ERGs are vital components of a DEI ecosystem, they cannot generate lasting cultural change without deep institutional integration.



## Institutional Engagement

Strengthening the connection between networks and strategic decision-making prevents ERGs from remaining isolated. A structured dialogue allows employee concerns to be translated into concrete actions while ensuring groups maintain their autonomy.

During the exchange sessions in January 2026, it was noted that a significant gap often remains between **formal legal compliance** and the **actual lived experience** of staff. Public administrations are frequently driven by **reputational risk management**—acting primarily to protect the institution's image. This often results in "symbolic progress" that is highly susceptible to political shifts. To counter this volatility, DEI professionals and ERG members should act as a **professional safeguard of institutional memory**, ensuring that inclusive practices survive administrative transitions.

The experience of the partner cities highlights how ERGs must navigate different levels of power:

In **Genoa**, the Inclusivity Panel pilot identified **leadership training for senior management** as a critical prerequisite. The goal is to move beyond temporary political preferences by embedding multi-perspective decision-making as a core, permanent administrative value.

The importance of navigating these different levels of power—both political and managerial—is evident in **the experience of Ghent**; ERGs representatives noted that while political interest in networks is valuable, constant effort is required to ensure it translates into substantive progress. The goal is to foster a relationship where institutional backing serves as a genuine catalyst for inclusion, **avoiding the risk of it becoming merely formal or symbolic**. Historically, Ghent's ERGs acted as strategic advisors; however, recent political changes have increased the **distance between networks and the political level**, leading to a lack of structured, direct meetings with decision-makers. This shift illustrates the 'tension field' in which ERGs operate, where maintaining visibility and influence becomes more challenging following administrative transitions.

**Regarding executive management**, a perceived gap in engagement often persists due to competing operational priorities. To counter this trend, ERGs have increasingly acted as a bridge for the most **vulnerable segments of the workforce**, such as frontline and maintenance staff with limited digital access. By bringing the specific challenges of these roles to management's attention, ERGs ensure that the push for inclusion reaches every level of the organization.

Regarding **Rotterdam**, new institutional models are emerging. A member of the Neurodiversity ERG noted that while the network has historically been the proactive driver of awareness, this dynamic is evolving. The administration is beginning to recognize the group as a valuable internal resource, moving toward **a model where the network is consulted for input and feedback on municipal projects**. The newly established DEI Office serves as **the facilitator for this transition**, acting as a bridge to ensure that the network's unique expertise is considered.

This evolution is further supported by the introduction of management '**ambassadors**'—dedicated liaisons who help navigate operational difficulties and foster a collaborative environment, signaling a gradual evolution toward structural institutional recognition.

**Ultimately, the final goal of ERGs is to go beyond internal well-being to the very mission of public service**, pointing toward a higher level of **institutional maturity**. As suggested by a Rotterdam ERG representative, a network's ultimate measure of success is its eventual **obsolescence**: reaching a stage where support structures are no longer "survival mechanisms" because the organization has successfully dismantled the underlying stigmas.

## ERG's activities and impact

ERG activities are multifaceted, ranging from internal support to the direct shaping of administrative policy. By bridging the gap between individual lived experiences and institutional procedures, these networks ensure that DEI commitments translate into tangible organizational change.

**Informal activities** serve as an accessible entry point for employees, fostering a sense of belonging and safe spaces for dialogue.

In **Ghent**, activities vary from formal seminars and conferences to informal social gatherings such as exhibitions and group dinners. A standout success has been the "**Movie Nights**", which serve as an accessible entry point for employees to reflect on sensitive DEI themes in an engaging, low-pressure environment. Similarly, spontaneous "potluck" gatherings—where staff share food and personal stories—have proven highly effective in building community and fostering deep personal connections across the workforce. These efforts often culminate in large-scale social events, such as the year-end gathering co-organized by all three Ghent ERGs to enhance visibility and promote their collective mission to the entire administration.

In **Rotterdam**, a similar focus on community is maintained through **self-organized monthly social events**. For example, the R-Pride network hosts regular gatherings that provide an important space for networking and emotional support, reinforcing a sense of belonging among diverse staff members.

Beyond internal well-being, ERGs act as **strategic advisors that drive substantive change**.

In **Ghent**, the Roze Neuzekes (LGBTQ+) network provided arguments necessary to implement **gender-neutral facilities**. Similarly, the LInk network (migratory background) reviewed administrative bereavement procedures, ensuring that official forms regarding the loss of a relative were culturally sensitive and appropriate.

Furthermore, LInk activity led to a procedural shift through a **specific internal survey** addressed to its members touching upon DEI hurdles during selection procedures. The results were presented to the Talent and Development Unit, which incorporated this feedback into official procedures by implementing **diverse selection panels**. This ensures that candidates feel equitably represented by recruitment committees.

A landmark achievement in Ghent has been the **diversification of Confidential Counsellors team**. Historically, the city relied on a "functional neutrality" model, assuming any trained counsellor could handle any case. The ERGs successfully challenged this, arguing that victims of identity-specific bullying (e.g., racism or homophobia) feel safer with counsellors who share similar lived experiences. Overcoming initial administrative resistance, the team

expanded from 10 to 17 members, transforming a generic support role into a more inclusive system.

In **Rotterdam**, the Inclusivity Panel (IP) has become a central mechanism for providing both solicited and unsolicited advice, frequently involving other ERGs on broader DEI issues.

A primary focus of the Panel is the **refinement of recruitment and selection procedures**. By participating as process facilitators and asking customized, intersectional questions during hiring decisions, the Panel ensures that selection committees remain accountable. While these interventions currently require significant effort, the city's long-term goal is to integrate these intersectional perspectives into a standardized framework, developing clear pathways and indicators to track the impact of DEI interventions on all future hiring processes.

## Resources

Providing ERGs with adequate resources is critical to enabling meaningful participation and preventing volunteer fatigue. Resources may include dedicated budgets, access to meeting spaces, protected time during working hours, and opportunities for direct engagement with senior leadership.

The **allocation of time** remains a significant challenge across partner administrations. Both Rotterdam and Ghent limit dedicated hours exclusively to **core members**.

In **Rotterdam**, a differentiated approach is adopted even among these active participants: core members of the Inclusivity Panel are granted **four hours per week**, while those in the Neurodiversity Network receive two hours. In contrast, ordinary members across all groups participate on a purely voluntary basis, utilizing standard personal leave hours. Some networks, such as *JongR* (Young Rotterdam), currently operate without any dedicated time allocation for their core staff.

In **Ghent**, core members are allocated only **two hours per month**—a timeframe widely considered inadequate to effectively manage the group's objectives.

Both administrations identify the conflict between these responsibilities and primary job duties as a major hurdle. Even when time is formally recognized, its actual use remains precarious; the final decision often rests with direct supervisors, who may deny requests due to competing organizational priorities. This makes the operational capacity of the groups highly dependent on the individual understanding and support of management.

**Financial support** varies significantly between the two cities. In **Ghent**, all ERGs receive a **fixed annual budget** of €3,000, distributed according to a tripartite model: one-third for team-building, one-third for promotion, and one-third for awareness campaigns. While groups establish an annual plan, the framework remains flexible, requiring documentation of expenses to ensure administrative accountability. In **Rotterdam**, the Inclusivity Panel does not have a standing budget, although networks may request operational funding on an annual basis.

**This limitation of resources often creates a "strategic tension" for ERGs.** With restricted time and funding, core members must constantly choose between investing **in internal community-building or dedicating those same resources to maintaining political visibility**.



As Ghent's experience highlights, this visibility is essential for remaining relevant to decision-makers, particularly when direct communication channels are limited. Consequently, as noted by ERGs member of Ghent, a difficult trade-off emerges where groups may sacrifice internal operational capacity simply to ensure their voice continues to be heard at the institutional level.

## Communication

The true strength of a network lies in its **ability to connect employees and dismantle organizational silos**. Workplaces can actively support this function by providing standardized channels for communication and collaboration. Rather than controlling the narrative, the organization should provide the infrastructure necessary to amplify ERG voices, ensuring that their message reaches the entire workforce with institutional legitimacy.

A clear distinction is made between **internal and external communication**. Regarding internal outreach to the workforce, networks in Rotterdam operate with a **high degree of autonomy**; each group has a dedicated space on the corporate Intranet to post content, workshops, and updates independently, without requiring prior management approval. Similarly, Ghent utilizes official corporate channels strictly for internal purposes. The city adopts a modular approach, tailoring communication to the specific objective: messages can be restricted to network members, shared across all three ERGs, or broadcast to the entire workforce of over 6,000 employees.

However, to maintain **institutional boundaries**, communication aimed at the external public remains subject to official oversight. While ERGs enjoy freedom of expression within the administration, any message directed outside the organization must align with corporate guidelines and requires formal authorization. This ensures that internal targeted dialogue remains professional and relevant without compromising the institution's official public voice.

A recurring strategic challenge is reaching **non-desk employees**, such as field or operational staff who do not regularly use computers. Ghent highlights that relying solely on digital tools risks excluding staff based on their professional roles or educational backgrounds. To ensure true inclusivity, a **multi-channel approach** is required. Even within a digital-first corporate strategy, the use of physical tools—such as posters and printed materials—remains essential to reach those working outside the traditional office environment.

A key strategic opportunity identified during the peer exchange is the **integration of ERGs into the onboarding process**. By presenting ERGs to new hires from day one, the organization markets its commitment to diversity at a moment when employees are most receptive, immediately establishing the workplace as a supportive and inclusive environment.

Effective communication must also **account for privacy and psychological safety**. As highlighted by the Ghent LGBTQ+ network representative, there is a significant intergenerational and cultural divide regarding visibility. While younger members may embrace open advocacy, older generations or individuals from specific cultural backgrounds or upbringing may prioritize anonymity over public advocacy. For these members, the ERG must function primarily as a safe space where they can engage without the pressure of public disclosure, even with “allies” within the organization.

This creates a constant 'tension field' for the network between **external visibility** through promoting the group's mission to the wider organization and allies and **perceived safety** namely maintaining protected environments for sensitive or vulnerable members.

The priority for ERG communication is to manage this internal diversity with sensitivity, ensuring that the push for organizational visibility never compromises the personal safety or comfort of the members the network is designed to protect.

## Networks interaction

ERGs should coordinate to achieve **common, transversal, and collective goals** through an intersectional coalition governance. An intersectional approach broadens impact and ensures that no group remains isolated. However, such a coalition must clearly define its scope of action: while it facilitates joint advocacy, policy review, and data sharing, it must not override the fundamental autonomy of individual groups or engage in partisan activity.

A core member of Rotterdam ERG, emphasize the importance of cross-sectional thinking addressing **intersectional identities**—such as employees who belong to both the LGBTQ+ community and a migratory background. By strengthening strategic links, ERGs can more effectively engage allies and create a unified front that recognizes the overlapping nature of diverse lived experiences.

In **Rotterdam**, occasional networking opportunities between different groups have taken place. While these interactions are not yet occurring on a regular basis, there is a clear expectation that cross-group engagement will evolve into a more systematic practice.

In **Ghent**, this synergy is more frequent: core members from all three networks meet every three months for brainstorming and exchange sessions, culminating in a joint annual event. A key example of this collaboration is the development of **joint promotional tools**, such as co-produced videos and posters featuring all three networks. These collective initiatives not only optimize limited resources but also project a unified image of intersectional solidarity, making the networks more recognizable to the entire workforce.

During the peer exchange sessions, an ERG core member from Ghent highlighted a crucial **evolutionary path** for networks. The establishment of identity-specific groups is an indispensable first step: in the early stages, it is vital for an ERG to focus on its specific community to build a sense of belonging, establish a "safe space," and consolidate its internal strength. Once ERGs have become firmly established, "joining forces" can represent the next evolution.

Transitioning toward a more unified framework is seen as strategy to mitigate **"perceived exclusivity"**—the risk that individual groups might be seen as closed circles. This collective approach allows for greater organizational impact and efficiency without replacing the original groups. Instead, it serves as a necessary progression to foster a more integrated organizational culture, provided that dedicated safe spaces for specific communities are preserve

Currently, while a formal, structured "coalition" has not yet been fully realized among partner cities, the ongoing discussion suggests a move toward balancing collective visibility with individual group autonomy.

## Key Performance Indicators

Regular evaluation and structured feedback are essential to assess the long-term effectiveness of ERGs. Currently, although the **partner cities have not yet developed standardized KPIs**, transitioning from informal feedback to **evidence-based evaluation** is seen as an important step to secure sustained institutional support and resource allocation.

To facilitate this transition, ERGs should develop their KPIs using the **Theory of Change (ToC)**. As defined in the DiGIN Evaluation Toolbox (Deliverable 6.2), a Theory of Change is a method that describes **how an intervention is expected to work**. It connects actions to outcomes, and ultimately to the DEI change you hope to see.

- Impact: Assess the contribution to high-level DEI goals (e.g., increased sense of belonging and improved employee retention).
- Outcomes: Measure changes in stakeholder behavior or institutional influence (e.g., ERG input resulting in updated municipal policies).
- Activities and outputs: Define specific actions (e.g., workshops) and their tangible products (e.g., number of sessions held, attendance rates).

Once the objectives are defined, ERGs should implement an **Evaluation Action Plan** to define:

- What to measure: Identify simple, goal-linked indicators.
- How to measure: Select appropriate tools (surveys, HR data, focus groups).
- Responsibility: Assign clear roles and timeframes for data collection.

ERGs should assess their impact across three complementary areas:

| KPI Area                      | Strategic Focus                    | Metrics & Examples  |
|-------------------------------|------------------------------------|---|
| People (Membership & Culture) | Internal engagement and Well-being | Membership/Attendance rates; Member Satisfaction (e.g. survey results); Qualitative feedback on sense of belonging.               |
| Mission (Policy & Strategy)   | Institutional Influence            | Number of policies, programmes, or practices informed by ERG input; qualitative feedback from senior leadership on advisory value |

| KPI Area                           | Strategic Focus               | Metrics & Examples  |
|------------------------------------|-------------------------------|---|
| Operations (Stability & Resources) | Organizational sustainability | Governance continuity within the ERG; stability of participation over time; availability and effective use of resources |

Cultural impact—particularly in relation to inclusion, psychological safety, and sense of belonging—requires **qualitative assessment methods**. ERGs may:

- collect narratives or case studies illustrating how participation has positively influenced employees' professional development or workplace experience;
- organize targeted reflection sessions, such as impact-focused focus groups, to discuss perceived changes in organizational culture, visibility, and policy influence.

Together, quantitative indicators and qualitative insights provide a more comprehensive understanding of ERG impact, supporting learning, accountability, and long-term sustainability.

## Challenges and Mitigation Strategies

The establishment and sustainability of ERGs inevitably encounter organizational and operational hurdles. To ensure lasting impact and alignment with institutional objectives, these challenges must be addressed through structured mitigation strategies. The following section integrates the **empirical findings** from the partner cities (Ghent, Rotterdam, and Genoa) with strategic **risks identified in literature**.<sup>5</sup>

### 1. Institutional Volatility and Leadership Engagement

Securing consistent engagement from both political and administrative leadership remains a primary challenge, as DEI initiatives can be vulnerable to administrative transitions.

- **Senior Leadership Endorsement:** Ensure the appointment of a formal Senior Manager from the highest levels of the organization to support the network.
- **Demonstrate Value with Data:** Systematically collect and share success stories and quantitative data to demonstrate the strategic value and measurable impact of ERGs.
- **Scheduled Briefings:** Establish regular joint briefings between ERGs, Human Resources (HR), and DEI offices to ensure ongoing alignment.
- **Leadership Education:** Provide focused training to management on the core themes and strategic programs of the networks.
- **Goal Visibility:** Publicly recognize the achievement of targets through institutional communication to boost the network's legitimacy.
- **Joint Policy Development:** Create a documented of policy recommendations.

<sup>5</sup> Casey C. Judi Employee Resource Groups: A Strategic Business Resource for Today's Workplace, Boston College Center for Work & Family; Expert Panel, Forbes Councils Member, (2024), 19 Best Practices for Launching And Managing An ERG, Forbes; Lorimer D., Taylor G., (2024), Affinity networks and employee resource groups: what are the employment law risks?, Lewis Silkin, lus Laboris UK

## 2. Resource Constraints

Limited budgets, lack of dedicated time, and insufficient administrative support can severely hinder an ERG's effectiveness.

- **Dedicated Funding:** Secure an appropriate annual budget to support activities, professional training, and awareness events.
- **Protected Time:** Formalize a "Time Allocation Policy," providing employees with a set amount of paid working hours for ERG-related contributions.
- **Operational Support:** Ensure access to municipal meeting spaces and institutional communication tools.
- **Managerial Buy-in:** Engage direct supervisors to facilitate the actual use of allocated time, ensuring that operational needs do not systematically override DEI participation.

## 3. Participation and Engagement Gaps

Ensuring consistent participation is difficult given the voluntary nature of ERGs. Furthermore, reaching "non-desk" staff—who lack regular computer access—is a significant barrier to inclusivity.

- **Active Promotion:** Leverage internal channels (intranet, newsletters) to consistently broadcast ERG successes and the value they add to the organization.
- **Shared Event Calendar:** A visible platform for scheduling and promoting co-designed events and initiatives.
- **Collaborative Development Opportunities:** Mechanisms to jointly design training programs that are directly relevant to DEI objectives.
- **Data Sharing Framework:** A clear framework for sharing anonymized reports on the workplace climate, identified barriers, impediments, and progress made.
- **Multi-channel Communication:** Complement digital tools (Intranet) with physical outreach, such as posters and in-person gatherings
- **Onboarding Integration:** Present ERGs to new hires from day one to establish the organization as inclusive and supportive from the very beginning.

## 4. Over-Participation and Member Burnout

A common risk, especially for dedicated members, is dedicating "too much" time to ERG activities, leading to volunteer fatigue and burnout.

- **Governance Frameworks:** Define roles, time commitments, and term limits within internal governance documents.
- **Workload Monitoring:** conduct periodic check-ins with ERG core members to monitor workload balance.
- **Transparent time allocation:** Clearly communicate the amount of working time formally available for ERG-related activities.

## 5. Perceived Exclusivity

Identity-based groups may be perceived as exclusive, which can unintentionally create departmental siloing or resistance from the majority:

- **Openness and transparency:** Clearly communicate ERG missions, activities, and membership criteria, ensuring openness to allies and supporters.
- **Organization-wide benefit:** Frame advocacy efforts around improvements that enhance working conditions for the entire workforce

- **Ally Engagement:** Actively promote the role of allies to transform isolated networks into integrated organizational partners.
- **Inclusive Leadership:** Ensure that ERG leadership promotes cross-sectional thinking and respect for diverse perspectives

## 6. Structural and Literature-Based Risks

While not always immediately apparent during the initial formation stages, certain structural risks identified in organizational literature require proactive management to ensure long-term stability:

- **The “Panacea” Risk (Over-Reliance):** Avoid the risk of expecting ERGs to resolve systemic, historical inequalities single-handedly. Use governance documents to clarify that ERGs complement—rather than replace—institutional DEI policies and leadership accountability.
- **Overlap with Trade Union Mandates:** To prevent jurisdictional conflict, foundational statutes should define a “functional differentiation.” ERGs focus on lived-experience insights and workplace culture, while formal labor negotiations and collective bargaining remain the exclusive domain of trade unions.

# Summary of Recommendations and Good Practices

The development of ERGs is a strategic process that evolves from grassroots interest to formalized organizational integration. These recommendations consolidate insights from peer-to-peer reviews, cross-municipal exchanges within the DiGiN project, and academic literature.<sup>6</sup>

## Phase 1- Foundational Principles

| Practice                         | Rationale   | Recommendations and Good Practice   |
|----------------------------------|---|---|
| 1. <b>Mission and Governance</b> | Clear governance promotes transparency and accountability. It ensures the group's mission aligns with the organization's strategic goals while maintaining its independence | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ <b>Strategic Alignment:</b> Articulate how the ERG's mission supports municipal DEI goals and public service values</li> <li>○ <b>Role clarity:</b> Formalize the ERG's scope and relationship with the administration, including functional differentiation from trade unions mandates to prevent conflicts</li> <li>○ <b>SMART Framework:</b> Use specific, measurable objectives to guide initial actions</li> <li>○ <b>Good practice:</b> Rotterdam Inclusivity Panel operates under a formal framework that defines roles and responsibilities while emphasizing its independence through safe-space rules and inclusive communication</li> </ul> |

<sup>6</sup> Expert Panel, Forbes Councils Member, (2024), 19 Best Practices for Launching and Managing an ERG, Forbes; Bolden-Barret V., (2024) Employee Resource Group Toolkit: An Essential Guide, Academy to Innovate HR; Canadian Centre for Diversity and Inclusion, (2023), Employee Resource Group Toolkit for creating and sustaining effective ERGs



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|--|--|---|
| <p><b>2. Secure Managerial Support</b></p> | <p>Endorsement from the leadership provides the political and operational leverage needed to navigate bureaucratic hurdles and ensure legitimacy</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ <b>Senior Leadership Support:</b> Appoint an "Executive Lead" from the highest administrative levels to act as a permanent advocate and protector of the network</li> <li>○ <b>Leadership Education:</b> Implement targeted inclusivity training for senior management to ensure a deep understanding of the ERG's strategic value and professional impact</li> <li>○ <b>Good Practice:</b> Rotterdam's Management Ambassadors—senior figures who provide operational support and facilitate communication between the ERG and leadership</li> </ul> |
|--|--|---|

## Phase 2- Structure and Governance

| Practice  | Rationale   | Recommendations and Good Practice  |
|---|---|--|
| <p><b>1. Outreach and Multi-channel Communication</b></p> | <p>Effective outreach ensures that the network is representative and accessible to the entire workforce, preventing the isolation of specific employee categories</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ <b>Inclusive Messaging:</b> Use diverse institutional channels to attract a varied membership, emphasizing that participation is voluntary</li> <li>○ <b>Onboarding Integration:</b> Present ERG opportunities to new hires during their induction to normalize DEI culture from Day 1</li> <li>○ <b>Sustainable Programming:</b> Schedule a diverse calendar (mentorship, workshops, social gatherings) with hybrid options to maximize participation</li> </ul> |



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|--|---|--|
|  |   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>o <b>Good Practice:</b> Ghent's multi-channel strategy: combining digital Intranet updates with physical flyers and posters to reach "non-desk" staff who lack regular computer access</li> </ul>   |
| <p><b>2. Strategic Planning and safe Space</b></p> | <p>Coordinated activities increase institutional visibility and foster a sense of belonging through. Visibility must be balanced with member privacy to maintain trust and protect vulnerable participants.</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>o <b>High-Visibility Launch:</b> Host a kick-off event with leadership presence to signal institutional commitment</li> <li>o <b>Inter-network Synergy:</b> Coordinate communication and awareness campaigns across different ERGs to amplify the message and optimize resources</li> <li>o <b>Balanced Calendar:</b> Offer a mix of public awareness events (seminars/workshops) and private "safe-space" gatherings (support groups)</li> <li>o <b>Good Practice:</b> Development of joint promotional initiatives among ERGs such as the video and poster featuring the 3 networks in Ghent</li> </ul> |
| <p><b>3. Resourcing and Budgeting</b></p>          | <p>Adequate resources transform ERGs from symbolic entities into sustainable strategic partners capable of driving change</p>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>o <b>Resource Identification:</b> Develop a preliminary budget and identify required resources, including amount of protected time needed, meeting spaces and communication tools</li> <li>o <b>Protected Time:</b> Formalize a "Time Allocation Policy" (to protect participation from operational and supervisory pressure)</li> <li>o <b>Stable Funding:</b> Implement a fixed annual budget to ensure long-term sustainability and consistency</li> </ul>   |



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|  |  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>o <b>Good practice:</b> Rotterdam's 4 hours/week allocation for the Inclusivity Panel and Ghent's fixed annual budget assigned to all ERGs.</li> </ul> |
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### Phase 3: Sustaining and Resourcing

| Practice   | Rationale   | Recommendations and Good Practice  |
|--|---|--|
| <p><b>1. Coalition building and allyship culture</b></p>     | <p>Cross-sectoral collaboration and institutional allies amplify the group's impact and ensure its survival across political and administrative cycles</p>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>o <b>Intersectional Approach:</b> Encourage "joining forces" between ERGs to address overlapping identities and optimize resources</li> <li>o <b>Institutional Allies:</b> Engage formal administrative bodies and departments as strategic allies to ground the ERG within the bureaucracy</li> <li>o <b>Bridge Communication:</b> Maintain direct links between the ERG and the DEI/HR departments.</li> <li>o <b>Good practice:</b> Ghent's quarterly inter-network brainstorming sessions; Genoa's engagement with the CUG (Equal Opportunities Committee), Trust and Equality Officers, and the Wellbeing Office; and the multi-layered DEI governance in Rotterdam and Ghent</li> </ul> |
| <p><b>2. Institutional integration and policy Impact</b></p> | <p>Mature ERGs function as "institutional sensors," bridging the gap between administrative ideals and the workforce's lived experience to drive structural change. Sustainability requires preserving institutional memory and fostering a culture of recognition.</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>o <b>Policy Review:</b> Utilize ERGs to identify barriers in procedures and inform and to provide insights to inform policy development</li> <li>o <b>Diversify Support:</b> Move toward support systems that reflect the diversity of the workforce</li> </ul>   |



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|  |  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ <b>Recognition:</b> Publicly celebrate member contributions to foster a culture of appreciation and high morale</li> <li>○ <b>Good practice:</b> Ghent's collaborative review of bereavement leave for cultural sensitivity; Rotterdam's mandate for the Inclusivity Panel to consult on recruitment procedures; and the diversification of Confidential Counselor teams in Ghent to ensure representative support</li> </ul>             |
| <p><b>2. Evidence-Based Evaluation</b></p> | <p>Data-driven insights support strategic adjustments, demonstrate the group's organizational value, and justify sustained resource investment</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ <b>KPI Framework:</b> Monitor impact across People (Well-being), Mission (Policy), and Operations (Stability)</li> <li>○ <b>Continuous Assessment:</b> Utilize periodic surveys and focus groups to remain responsive to evolving workforce needs</li> <li>○ <b>Good practice:</b> The LInk network in Ghent, which conducted a targeted internal survey to map its composition and identify specific operational requirements</li> </ul> |

# CONCLUSIONS

The present Guidelines provide a comprehensive roadmap for building and sustaining coalition networks within public administrations. By navigating the lifecycle of Employee Resource Groups (ERGs), this document has transitioned from a conceptual and methodological framework—grounded in both academic literature and the empirical findings of the DiGiN project—to a practical, step by step guide for implementation in the public sector.

A primary conclusion of this work is that ERGs must be viewed as an integral component of broader DEI strategies. Rather than being isolated initiatives, ERGs function as the "operational arm" of DEI policies, transforming high-level institutional commitments into tangible workplace improvements. By serving as "institutional sensors," these groups provide the lived-experience data necessary to inform and refine DEI goals, ensuring that municipal strategies are not merely top-down mandates but are responsive to the actual needs of a diverse workforce.

The journey toward creating inclusive public administrations demonstrates that the successful establishment of ERGs is not a one-time event, but a continuous strategic process. The cross-municipal exchanges between Ghent, Rotterdam, and Genoa have highlighted that while local administrative cultures differ, the core requirements for ERG success remain universal. Institutional legitimacy, secured through senior leadership advocacy and formalized governance, is the bedrock upon which these networks are built. However, legitimacy alone is insufficient without practical resources—specifically protected time and dedicated funding—to shield these initiatives from operational pressures and member burnout.

Furthermore, these guidelines emphasize that for ERGs to be truly transformative, they must move beyond social support and function as strategic advisors. This shift is facilitated by "joining forces" and fostering an allyship culture, transforming isolated networks into integrated organizational partners. Intersectional collaboration and joint initiatives amplify institutional impact, effectively preventing departmental siloing and ensuring a more cohesive approach to inclusion.

In conclusion, the sustainability of these networks depends on a permanent synergy between grassroots energy and structural leadership commitment. If properly integrated and supported, ERGs serve as a vital safeguard for DEI values and a repository of institutional memory. These guidelines provide the necessary framework to ensure that the commitment to equality remains a permanent pillar of municipal governance, resilient to political shifts and administrative transitions, ultimately turning the vision of an inclusive public workplace into a sustainable organizational reality.



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