



## INSPIRING PRACTICE

# Safe Spaces at work: Ghent's staff-led inclusion networks

*by the Municipality of Ghent*

**June 2025**



# Inspiring practice: Safe Spaces at work: Ghent's staff-led inclusion networks



The Municipality of Ghent, Belgium, is fostering an inclusive workplace culture by supporting identity-based employee networks. Recognising the importance of peer support and belonging, the city has established three voluntary staff groups for employees with a migration background, employees with a disability and LGBTQIA+ employees. These networks aim to strengthen internal cohesion, provide a sense of community and reflect the diversity of Ghent's municipal workforce.

## Objective



The Municipality of Ghent has launched three internal employee networks aimed at building a culture of belonging and visibility for underrepresented staff. These include:

- 'Link' – employees with a migration background
- 'AHA' – employees with a disability
- 'Roze Neuzekes' – LGBTQIA+ employees

The goal is to create informal support spaces, strengthen social cohesion and reflect the diversity of Ghent's municipal workforce.



## Impact

These networks foster emotional wellbeing and peer connection among municipal employees. Though informal in nature, they contribute to a more inclusive internal culture and are occasionally consulted in matters related to DEI. Their presence has helped normalise conversations on identity and belonging at work, while offering a valuable perspective to management and HR.

## Implementation steps

### Phase 1: Initiation and internal mobilisation

The initiative was launched by the Diversity & Inclusion coordinator within the HR department, who organised an information session to present the concept and gauge interest. This low-threshold approach encouraged spontaneous engagement.

### Phase 2: Formation and support structures

Once interest was confirmed, the three groups were established. Each received:

- A modest working budget
- Two hours/month work exemption for core members
- Access to municipal spaces for regular meetings
- Importantly, these networks are employee-led and retain autonomy in defining their identity, purpose and pace.

### Phase 3: Activities and informal engagement

Network members meet periodically in a mix of informal social gatherings and semi-structured sessions. Activities focus on sharing experiences, fostering community, and promoting awareness. While not expected to drive policy, they are occasionally invited to share perspectives with HR or management.

### Phase 4: Cultural embedding

Though still developing, the networks are increasingly recognised as part of the internal DEI ecosystem. They are featured in internal communications, mentioned in HR presentations, and considered a good practice in fostering staff wellbeing.

## Lessons learned & challenges



### DOs

#### **Provide practical support and recognition**

Offer small but meaningful support: a basic budget, access to meeting space, and formal acknowledgment from HR and leadership. Recognition signals that these spaces matter.

#### **Respect autonomy**

Let each group decide its own direction. Staff-led initiatives thrive when they're trusted to evolve in ways that reflect members' needs.

#### **Promote visibility internally**

Feature the networks in newsletters, onboarding materials, or staff events to normalise their existence and make it easier for newcomers to join.

#### **Foster intersectionality and peer exchange**

Encourage light collaboration between networks and with other departments when relevant without forcing integration or centralisation.

#### **Safeguard safe spaces**

Ensure that participation is voluntary and that members can meet and speak freely without fear of retaliation or tokenism.

## DON'Ts

#### **Don't over-formalise or control the networks**

Avoid institutionalising these spaces too tightly. Overregulation can diminish authenticity and reduce participation.

#### **Don't expect policy-level input from day one**

These networks are not policy tools. Their value lies in creating connection and insight any consultative function should come gradually and respectfully.

#### **Don't underestimate time needs**

Two hours/month may not be enough for coordination. Consider allowing more time if members take on broader responsibilities.

### Don't ignore internal scepticism

Be prepared to address concerns from other employees who question the purpose of identity-based groups. Communicate clearly about their role in creating inclusive workplaces.

### Don't isolate these networks

Integrate their insights into the broader DEI strategy without burdening them with sole responsibility. Their input can inform, but should not replace, institutional action.

The networks offer meaningful emotional support and a stronger sense of community for participating staff. However, sustainability depends on time and capacity. Core members often feel constrained by limited time allowances. Internal questions about "separate groups" highlight the need for ongoing DEI communication and leadership endorsement.

## How can this replicated by others?

Municipalities can foster similar employee networks by creating enabling conditions dedicated time, budget and visible support. The key is to keep these spaces voluntary, autonomous and low-threshold, while embedding them as part of a broader culture of inclusion.

## Contact us

Reach out to the D&I office (HR Department)

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🎥 [Watch the video about Ghent's employee networks](#)

### DiGiN Consortium Partners:



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June 2025

**Factsheet design by Yellow Window ([www.yellowwindow.com](http://www.yellowwindow.com))**

This document is a result of the DiGiN Project, funded by the European Union under the CERV-2023-EQUAL call, aimed at integrating Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI) across European municipalities to reflect the diverse demographics of local societies.

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