

Guide:

Building an Accessibility Champions Network

Building a network of accessibility champions is the secret to driving culture-change through an organisation – but what does it take to start one up and keep it growing?

We spoke to five experts about their experience.

September 2021



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1. Introducing digital champions networks

It's said culture eats strategy for breakfast. One way of accelerating a culture of accessibility is via a network of accessibility champions. It's a great way to disseminate messages if you only have a small team with limited resources.

Champions networks are a proven way of driving change in political organisations, government technology sales teams, social groups and more. These networks can also help spread the message about accessibility and how it can meet the needs of disabled people to enable more accessible products and services and a more inclusive world.

But what does it take to start one up and keep it engaged, and growing?

We spoke to insiders from the BBC, Google, Intuit, Microsoft, and Ubisoft, who are building accessibility champions networks:

- Charlie Turrell is Change Manager (Accessibility Champions Network) for the BBC
- Christopher Patnoe is Google's Head of Accessibility Programs and Digital Inclusion
- Hector Minto is Senior Technology Evangelist at Microsoft UK.
- David Tisserand is senior manager for accessibility at video maker Ubisoft.
- Ted Drake is Intuit's Global Accessibility Leader.

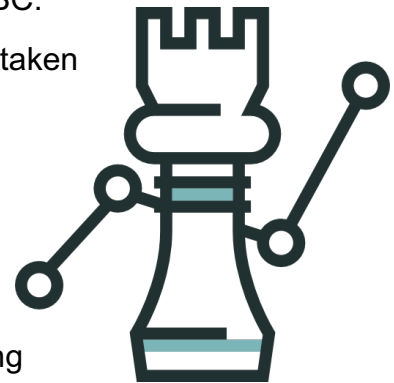
Based on these insider's tips we explore what a champions' network is, why you need one and we look at the different models they have evolved..

2 Why do you need an accessibility champions network?

Champions networks are the secret to driving accessibility through larger organisations such as the BBC. “We want to make sure that everything’s accessible but doing that with such a small team is almost impossible,” said Charlie Turrell, Change Manager for Accessibility at the BBC.

Turrell leads the corporation’s champions’ network having taken over from Gareth Ford Williams who founded the original network over 15 years’ ago.

Digital accessibility is enshrined in the corporations’ policy guidelines, but the champions’ network helps make accessibility part of its DNA.



“Having these champions means that not only is the training being pushed out there for the entirety of the business, but you’re also building these community groups of people. [They] are working on a specific product, talking about accessibility, and embedding it right at the beginning,” Turrell told us.

“Instead of trying to audit for accessibility or fix issues later, the champions network makes it part of the whole product lifecycle. We couldn’t do that with just us four. You have to make sure that there’s a community around out there to start those conversations,” she added.

For Google, champions’ networks become the “eyes and ears on the ground of an organisation,” so said Google’s Head of Accessibility and Disability Inclusion, EMEA, Christopher Patnoe.

He references the musical Hamilton. “You know the song ‘The Room Where It Happens’? That’s it,” he said.

Patnoe added accessibility champions “are the lifeblood of accessibility within an organisation. They’re the people who care, who try, who speak the language of the leadership of the organisation.... They know how to make the most convincing case to prioritise a given feature, or accessibility as a whole.”

Hector Minto, Lead Accessibility Evangelist at Microsoft UK, agrees accessibility champions are vital to keeping the accessibility conversation going.

“Everyone within an organisation can make a commitment to accessibility,” he said. “If you’re communicating newsletters within your team, if you’re creating SharePoint, if you’re building your own web collateral, everyone can make material accessible or not.”

“Everyone within an organisation can make a commitment to accessibility.”

Hector Minto, Lead Accessibility Evangelist for Microsoft.

“And, generally, accessibility is driven by awareness. Most colleagues, when the culture of an organisation is positive, productive and collaborative, when you give them the opportunity to be accessible, they will do it.”

Read on for five case studies explaining how the BBC, Intuit, Google, Microsoft, and Ubisoft set-up and are motivating a network of accessibility champions.

2.1 How do you build an accessibility champions network?

So how do you build a successful champions network?

We spoke to champions network pioneers to discover how they made their networks, maintained them, and the impact they've created with their efforts.

And we've also pulled together some of their best tips to help you do the same.

3 How the BBC runs its champions network



The BBC was among the first big UK organisations to establish an accessibility champions network. Gareth Ford Williams built the BBC's first network (2005 to 2008), rebooted by him in 2011 but Charlie Turrell now leads and inspires it.

An informal network provides support, a community Slack channel, and training to champions across the BBC's audience-facing products and services.

The network began with conversations and knowledge sharing. These thoughts turned into guidelines and training, which now extend into the wider community. It has grown organically, adjusting its structure to reflect new technology and the changing culture of the BBC, including how champions interact.

3.1 Training for the BBC's champions

Turrell and her team provide a mix of training, tailoring it to the needs of individual champions and their work areas. Training is a mix of interactive and more casual drop-in sessions, lightning talks, and community discussions.

"You want people to be really excited about accessibility and feel 'that's a brand-new thing I've never learnt before,'" said Turrell.

She added, "It doesn't have to be constant training, or these are the codes or the design patterns that you need to use. That's all in there, but making it interesting to people, and people getting involved in that community is, I think, the best way of encouraging people to continue their journey."

In the future, Turrell sees the BBC's champions network becoming more structured. For instance, developing pathways designed to bring new recruits up to speed and showing them that completing a few small tasks can help them understand and drive accessibility.

3.2 Sharing success and failure at the BBC

It's important to celebrate success and failure, believes Turrell. Success can help to share new ideas, techniques, practices, and specific features.

Sharing failures helps to influence future work.

“Nobody turns around and says, well, this is a failure that we're trying to avoid; we don't want to talk about it,” said Turrell. “They're more, 'let's have a discussion and see if it helps somebody else down the line'.”

Some of the network's biggest successes have been developing champions into accessibility professionals who drive cultural change across the BBC.

“The cultural change just happens, in all honesty, I think as the champions grow,” said Turrell. “I've seen champions that have started to create their own documents and their own versions of training that has changed the culture in their group.”

3.3 The benefits of a champions network at the BBC

Running a network can save time and money long-term. Specifically, it removes the need for time-intensive accessibility audits or the sudden shock appearance of severe issues in new products.

Leadership buy-in is crucial. “Senior leaders need to understand why you're doing something. Unless you are immersed in the accessibility community, or you're doing your own research, or you're having those conversations, it's difficult for people not to just want to do the bare minimum,” said Turrell.

Similarly, you need to keep an eye on the bigger picture.

“You have to understand the complete picture before you start designing things,” said Turrell. “I think people go ‘as long as we're covering these policies and these guidelines, we should be fine.’ It's not that.

“It's understanding the wider community and why one thing doesn't work for one person, or for a whole community, and that there are various options. Because we've created a good culture across the whole organisation, people always go, how can we make things better?”



See more from TechShare Pro on how to grow your champions' network at www.abilitynet.org.uk/tigger.

4 How Google runs its champions' network



Google's champions' network began as small groups of evangelists but has become a more structured network aligned to organisational goals.

Christopher Patnoe, Head of Accessibility and Disability Inclusion EMEA, Google took inspiration from a colleague's Jiu-Jitsu experience to create ideas around a black belt in accessibility. Patnoe developed a structure based around belts and levels, and the concept of the dojo applied to roles within Google.

"We took disparate groups of designers and engineers and program managers who wanted to do the right thing, and we helped teach them how to think about it. As a result, we created this concept called 'the dojo'," said Patnoe.

Patnoe added "There are different dojos, so an engineering dojo and a designer dojo. They need to learn different things, and we prioritise different things for each of them.

"A programme managers dojo would be different from a tech writer's dojo, but they all have the dojo as a common language."

Right now, the dojo has around 1200 members in total, with about 350 of those rising through the ranks every year, demonstrating strong levels of engagement.

4.1 Motivating champions using the model of "the dojo"

The dojo concept encourages champions to develop their expertise over time and helps ensure that they stay within the network.

"When we started, it was hard to motivate people," said Patnoe, "because they'd do a couple of things and then they'd get busy, they'd go and do something else. So having this idea of a blackbelt keeps people going."

Patnoe is clear that building a champions' network has its challenges.

It takes time, it takes resources and – ideally – it takes a budget. Obstacles crop up all the time, and progress isn't always linear or direct.

"It's sometimes three steps forward, two steps back. There's always progress, but sometimes it's not as easy as you want it to be. People will leave, and you have to train new people."

However, Patnoe believes it's worth it and hopes to extend the network to cover new parts of the organisation, including the sales team.

"I'd love to train 1,000 salespeople in accessibility and then have them include Google's accessibility mission and the tools that we have as part of their sales pitch. And see if we could have accessibility be a factor in increasing sales. That would be really cool."

4.2 Developing your champions' network

It also helps that Google has a policy where employees can focus on a project outside their primary responsibilities for 20% of their time. Accessibility projects fit under this umbrella and are recognised as a citizenship goal.

"The fact that we have so many accessibility teams and such momentum inside Google on accessibility is the direct result of the passion of people in the champs' network," said Patnoe.

He said, "[They] take it seriously, seeing it as a career opportunity, an opportunity to give back to themselves or give back in honour of someone that they love. Or just because it's a really cool problem that you get to solve."

Patnoe believes that it's always possible to do accessibility better.

"You're never going to get it completely right" he said. "But where you don't have a team, the champs' network is the de facto team. These are the people who are doing everything they can to make the products accessible."

"Their job, when it goes well, is to become that accessibility team. Then they really get to have the influence because they have management support, have the headcount, and work on a full-time rather than a part-time basis. I really see this as being the earth in which you grow that team."

5 How Microsoft runs its champions' network

For Hector Minto, Lead Accessibility Evangelist, Microsoft UK accessibility must go beyond simply meeting legal and policy requirements.

"Accessibility is a human thing," he told us. "You build an accessible experience, or you don't, and it has to be done deliberately. We've been incredibly successful across Microsoft UK and increasingly globally, to get that and make it clear that accessibility is everybody's opportunity."

Growing a champions' network has been a crucial element of this success.



"I very quickly worked out five years ago when I joined that we had to partner with the other parts of the organisation," said Minto.

"It's a very deliberate strategy, and we measure our progress."

Minto runs a virtual team inside Microsoft, recruiting champion leads within each part of the business, from Comms to Education to Customer Success.

5.1 Rewarding champions within Microsoft

Champions get training and share their knowledge through education programmes, lunch and learn events and representation events, and work closely with communities across the UK organisation.

The network has executive sponsorship and champions are recognised and rewarded through training qualifications and certifications that employees can add to their CV. “We give people individual responsibility within their part of the business to grow their champs’ networks,” says Minto, “we reward people for doing that work.”

For example, when Minto's team created skilling options for accessibility, it created a badge that members of the network can earn and post on their LinkedIn profiles.

Often when they do, Minto explains, they’ll add their reasons for getting involved.

“People say things like, my brother is dyslexic, and I love that I work for a company that cares about this. Now, what does that do? Well, two things. It drives amazing culture change inside the organisation; people are proud to work for a company that does good stuff, right? But they're also showing their customers, other people in the industry, that this is what we care about.’

Well over 30% of Microsoft employees in the UK have taken a qualification in accessibility. Within core teams, where it's most important, that rises to 100%.

5.2 Champions raise the bar on accessibility

A crucial role of Microsoft champions is to drive the overall accessibility plan and help the organisation innovate for all its customers. Success is measured by customer impact in promoting new accessibility technologies to customers and engaging them with new learning campaigns.

Microsoft UK also collaborates with disabled charities and communities to better understand the requirements of disabled people and use its status to drive accessibility forwards. For example, Microsoft is the Gold Sponsor of TechShare Pro 2021 - the UK's largest accessibility meet-up.

	Hector chaired a TechShare Pro 2020 session on how champions push accessibility ‘Beyond the Lone Evangelist’. www.youtube.com/watch?v=vkXBclGCOjM
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Champions play a significant role in all this work, and the aim is to raise the bar.

“It's difficult to excite people by the minimum bar. Every business of every shape and size and every champ’s network can go well beyond minimum bar on inclusion,” said Minto.

He added: “We want to delight people with disabilities and be really, deliberately inclusive as a culture play.”

The champions network energises employees and helps drive accessibility, improving trust and the overall perception of Microsoft's brand.

Storytelling, claims Minto, is the best way to maintain the momentum of your network. "It's number one," he said. 'We live in an Instagram world, and there's nothing wrong with showing great stuff you do and taking time to celebrate progress.'

'Why not celebrate it and tell people about it?' he says, 'That's often the missing part of the jigsaw.'

Equally important is measuring success.

Minto feels it's vital that champions networks "recognise the progress you're making. You should measure it and then take time to say what amazing things you've done."

The real sign of success is when your network spreads. Your champions can represent accessibility across the organisation and spot where products or services are falling short.

"You've got to get to a stage where you know that this is wrong, that something's not going to work, and I see this all the time across Microsoft now. People are putting their hands up and saying, 'Hang on, this doesn't work, ". So, I don't need to be there all the time. And that's when you know that you've grown your network."



Discover how Microsoft, Unilever and WPP are building a culture of accessibility. www.abilitynet.org.uk/a11yculture.

6 How Ubisoft runs its champions' network



The video games industry has made real progress on accessibility over the last ten years. One of the leading companies has been Ubisoft.

To drive it further, Senior Manager for accessibility, David Tisserand, relies on the organisation's growing champions' network to spread awareness and share expertise. "We don't yet have access to accessibility experts in every country and every studio. "We're looking for motivated co-workers who are eager to learn and educate their respective teams."

"We put them in touch with each other as well as with our centralised team of accessibility experts. This way, everybody can learn from the experts, and the champions can learn from each other's successes and failures."

6.1 How Ubisoft grew its champions' network

Ubisoft's network began organically as a core team with interest in accessibility. The company worked to build awareness across the company's different – and geographically diverse – studios and teams.

"After every meeting, there was always someone who was interested to learn more and push for more accessibility on their team day-to-day," said Tisserand.

"These colleagues became part of an unofficial Champions Network. They were the accessibility reference on their teams, and they knew they could contact their peers or us across the globe who were working on the same topics."

These early efforts led to some great results. Ubisoft's development studios worked to make their games and supporting websites, events, and services more accessible. Initial successes made it easier to create a business case for a formal, centralised accessibility team.



AbilityNet has a range of assets designed to help you build a business case for accessibility. www.abilitynet.org/business-case.

6.2 Growing together through champions networks

Ubisoft's network is still relatively informal. "There is a team of 4 formally trained accessibility experts who are building best practices and available for support any time a champion has a question or faces a barrier," said Tisserand.

This team creates e-learning materials and benchmarks to test and spread best practices. It also shares ideas and training through internal knowledge sharing platforms and an internal accessibility conference where champions can discuss their successes and failures and the lessons and best practices.

The impact is being felt on Ubisoft products, with some successful initiatives becoming new processes or new technologies that can then be used elsewhere.

"Instead of everyone learning from their individual experiences, the network allows the company to learn faster through each individual experience. It's like a collective learning process," Tisserand said.

One concrete example is a design for how games can visually represent audio cues so that deaf or hard-of-hearing players can understand them and the direction from which those audio cues were coming.

"This team came up with a great design, which has now been praised by the community and received an award," Tisserand explains.

"They started sharing it with other development teams, and now most of our games have been reusing and refining it. So, each development team is learning from all the other teams' innovation and then giving back to the group."

Tisserand hopes to increase the visibility of Ubisoft's network, particularly to newcomers, by potentially making accessibility awareness part of Ubisoft's formal onboarding process. Otherwise, the main limitation on the network is time.

"Formalising and organising an internal champions network of hundreds of people with different skills, working on different products and in different time zones is time-consuming. So, it must become someone's responsibility to aggregate the lessons learned, deliver the expert content and manage the network."

Tisserand and his team are investigating how to formalise these aspects.

7 How Intuit runs its champions' network



An internal Pride network inspired Intuit's accessibility champions' programme. The Pride network let employees sign up for an ally program, watch videos, take courses, and add a badge to their company profile.

"I had been doing this for six years and I had this vague network of people that had been working on accessibility, but it wasn't really concrete," said Intuit Global Accessibility Leader, Ted Drake.

He added "I thought it would be great if we could at least give people some basic knowledge, give them a way of connecting with each other, and give people a method that, if they wanted to be their product leader, they could become their product leader. If they wanted to become a subject matter expert, they could become a subject matter expert."

7.1 Support from other accessibility professionals

Drake solicited advice from other accessibility leaders, including the BBC's Charlie Turrell. Then with his colleague, Sagar Barbhaya, Drake began building a new network around a database of accessibility stakeholders that he'd worked with during previous product development cycles.

Many of these had been thrown into the role, but Drake wanted to do things differently. 'I wanted people to say "I'm interested. I want to become the stakeholder. I want to become the leader. And that was the big shift."

>> Read more about how champions leaders are working together to create a network of champions' networks on [p17](#).

7.2 Building a community of champions

The team built the network around events, which gave novice champions something to get behind and feel part of the community, and ongoing education, with a system of levels.

"Even if all I did was take the level 1 accessibility training and become a level 1 champion, I get inserted into a Slack channel and, every Monday, there's a video. Every Wednesday there's something. So, there's continual education going on – passive education you could say. But that passive education becomes active at some point," said Drake.

For example, the network runs regular lunch and learn events, where champions might hear software engineers talking about accessible application development, a talk around neurodiversity or visiting academics talking about their own research. “Every week you’re going to learn about something that you never knew about,” says Drake. “The other thing is that all those presentations are not by me. We have champions coming forward and saying, ‘I want to talk about this, I want to talk about that,’ so it also gives this distributed champions’ network the ability to come forward.”

7.3 The next generation of accessibility leaders

The network has had demonstrable impact and helped Intuit develop new accessibility leaders. For example, one employee, Josh Harrison, joined Intuit with a little knowledge around accessibility, but through training, project experience and usability testing, became a subject matter expert and started building his own local champions’ network. 60% of the employees in that region are now members and accessibility has become Harrison’s full-time role.

Meanwhile, in the UK, Reuben Evans has built a network and played a crucial role in building accessibility into Intuit’s work on the Making Tax Digital initiative.

“We were the first major company to be able to be certified by the UK government as having an accessible version,” says Drake. “That was an example of a level 2 champion being able to drive a project from start to finish

Most of all, the network helps drive change within Intuit. When a hard-of-hearing Intern in her second week of work struggled when the CEO presented at an event without any captions, Drake suggested that she approach him.”

“Every major event has live captioning, and that was because one person became a champion, had the connections to know who to reach out to, and had been given the independence and the confidence to ask for change.”

Ted Drake, Global Accessibility Leader, Intuit

“The next week the CEO created a team, and we were able to set up live captioning. From that day on, every major event has live captioning, and that was because one person became a champion, had the connections to know who to reach out to, and had been given the independence and the confidence to ask for change.”

If there's one change Drake would like to see within the network, it's giving champions more job recognition.

"A lot of times the work they're doing on accessibility is in their 10% personal time, or they're doing it after work, or they're doing it and building it into products without really making it known," he said.

As champions are judged on their main work, not the work they put into accessibility, they don't always get recognition. Drake wants to change that, and not just for accessibility, but for the work champions put into security, privacy, performance and more.

Drake is clear that building and maintaining a network takes time, and that not all will be successful. "If you are going to create a champions programme, also consider what does success mean, and if you're not meeting success, do you need to pivot, do you need to change your goals or do you need to go ahead and start thinking that it's time to retire this?"

However, he also notes that networks evolve, with Intuit's growing to look at diversity and mental health. "It's not a problem to shift focus and that focus hasn't shifted because of me, but because of our champions," he says.

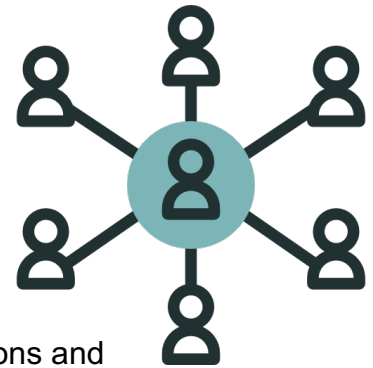
8 A network of champions' networks

Knowledge-sharing is a crucial part of any champions' network, so the next logical step is to take it outside the organization, and share expertise, experiences, tools, and research with other companies' networks.

This is what the BBC's Charlie Turrell is doing, building a 'network of networks' to spread accessibility know-how further and faster than ever before.

"One of the things I'm doing is linking up with other organisations and trying to get us to share knowledge rather than gatekeeping it," she said.

'Having people go and take that knowledge elsewhere is also helping the conversations that I already want to happen.'



8.1 Sharing information and knowledge

Turrell believes that accessibility leaders need to try and connect with their equivalents in other organisations, and break out of their bubbles, letting the ideas and information flow.

"Share with people and you'll be surprised what you get back as well...Having these conversations is really important and has provided me with so many different lenses and so many different ways of doing things," said Turrell.

She added, "I've tried some, and some work and some don't, but the feedback from the champions has been vital."

This network of networks is currently in its early stages. The meetings have a rough structure, with updates, introductions, and presentations, followed by breakout room discussions.

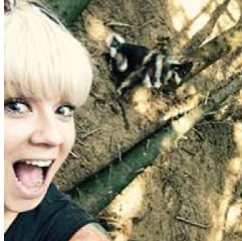
However, companies of the scale of Google, Microsoft, Intuit, Ubisoft, LinkedIn and Skyscanner are already involved.

"The main aim is for everyone that joins the network to eventually have a recognised Champs network in their organisation," Turrell said. "I would love to see smaller groups developing who either have the same issues or are in the same sector, so that they speak the same language and can support each other."

Intuit's Ted Drake thinks this is a great idea. "There's no reason to lock our champion programme or to be private about it," he said. "It's something that anybody can do. I'm continually getting people saying 'Hey, we set up a champion programme and we used some of your tools and stuff.' I think what's going to be really key is this new programme that Charlie has put together, because everybody's going to have unique ideas on how to scale."

9 Meet the experts

This paper is informed by interviews with leading experts running champions' networks at different stages of maturity.



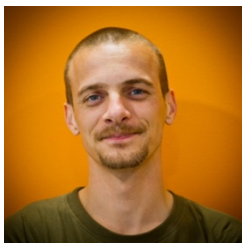
Charlie Turrell is Change Manager (Accessibility Champions Network) for the BBC. She uses the BBC's champions' network to amplify messages and drive systemic change across the corporation.



Christopher Patnoe is Google's Head of Accessibility Programs and Digital Inclusion. The company's champions' network draws principles from Jujitsu to motivate members. Christopher believes top 'swag' is a key component, too.



Hector Minto is Senior Technology Evangelist at Microsoft UK. He enlists digital accessibility champions to make accessibility part of the mainstream conversation within the company.



David Tisserand is senior manager for accessibility at video maker Ubisoft. David relies on the organisation's growing champions' network to spread awareness and share expertise.



Ted Drake is Intuit's Global Accessibility Leader. He works with engineers, product managers, and designers to understand how accessibility impacts the users, set realistic deadlines, and create the solutions to provide a delightful experience to all users, regardless of their physical, sensory, or cognitive ability.

10 Useful Resources from Abilitynet

- Sign up for our newsletter to stay informed about upcoming training and webinars <https://www.abilitynet.org.uk/sign-up-for-our-newsletter>.
- Download our FREE factsheet on Creating Accessible Documents <https://abilitynet.org.uk/factsheets/creating-accessible-documents-0>.
- Download our FREE factsheet on Designing for Dementia [Download our FREE factsheet on Designing for Dementia](#).
- Read insights from accessibility experts at TSP365, part of TechShare Pro www.abilitynet.org.uk/tsp356
- FREE webinars for your accessibility champions with AbilityNet Live! <http://www.abilitynet.org.uk/live>
- Invest in your accessibility champions with our role-based accessibility training courses www.abilitynet.org.uk/training
- Contact us about building a bespoke training programme for your digital teams www.abilitynet.org.uk/accessibility-services/speak-our-experts.