

Building a Future-Ready Diverse Workforce

Spring 2025



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Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Belonging (DEIB) Leadership Forum Series

The Leadership Series is the documented output from the CCMA's (Contact Centre Management Association) series of Leadership Forum meetings. These take place at the House of Lords and provide an exclusive opportunity for senior contact centre leaders to explore the factors that are driving change in their industry. The forum also provides a valuable platform to discuss continuing innovation and trends - and how to unlock further value for the benefit of the customer, colleagues, and the business.

DEIB Leadership Forum attendees:

Lucie Child, Head of Strategy, Planning & Controls, Customer Care, The Very Group

Claire Emery, Head of Contact Centre, TUI Group

Alison Heap, Customer Service Manager, United Utilities

Claire Hill, Customer Operations Director, Travel Counsellors

Kerry Holland, VIP Leisure and Groups Manager, LNER

Abby Hugglestone, Director Contact Centre, Norwegian Cruise Line Group

Vicki Mercer, Head of Customer Care, CAF Bank

Mark Nichols, Operations Director, Flagstone

Francesca Rea, Director of Customer Operations, NewDay

Alf Rodway, Global Service Delivery & Legal Support Director, Air France

Ryan Rubertazzi, Head of Consumer Sales & Care, Vodafone UK

Rula Samara, Head of Customer Experience, Novuna Consumer Finance

Kathryn Simons-Porter, VP Business Development EMEA, Local Measure

Ross Taylor, Managing Director, Sales, Operations and Portfolio, Lloyds Bank Merchant Services

Helen Wilson, COO, Atom Bank

James Wilson, Director, Head of Business Banking Financial Assistance, Barclays Customer Care



Contact Centres Setting the DEIB Agenda

Leigh Hopwood, the CCMA's CEO, started the discussion by noting how the contact centre is setting the pace when it comes to workforce diversity and the Diversity, Equity, Inclusion and Belonging (DEIB) agenda. "We're creating equitable, inclusive environments where everyone can thrive – but there's still much more to be done," she explained. "For example, are we doing enough to recognise neurodiverse strengths – and how are we applying technology to create a more equitable environment for all? Perhaps more importantly, why is DEIB so important to society?"

Leigh also highlighted the challenge that DEIB programmes might face following US President Trump's decision in January to co-ordinate the termination of what he described as "all discriminatory programs, including illegal DEI and "diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility" (DEIA) mandates, policies, programs, preferences, and activities in the Federal Government". Leigh questioned how this might impact private company DEIB activities – both in the US as well as other regions. Were UK contact centre DEI activities under threat? Leigh asked attendees for their own perspective on diversity within their contact centre operations.

How Diversity Informs Today's Contact Centre Operations

Kathryn Simons-Porter from Local Measure kicked off the conversation by drawing on her experience of autism and

ADHD in her family, and the need to move beyond traditional expectations. "We were told that my stepson would never do GCSEs but he's now in year two at university. We just want him to be given the chance to bring his authentic self to work." Kathryn contributed to the book 'The AI Mindset' that looked at GenAI and emotional intelligence and its potential for improved workforce productivity.

"Technologies such as generative AI can be part of a successful people strategy," she explained. "Combining AI voice capabilities, GenAI and emotional intelligence techniques can create virtual assistants that will support neurodiverse frontline agents with emotional support and guidance. And it's not just about enabling neurodivergent employees, it can also prove a great way of building a more blended and diverse environment and making teams more productive."

So how diverse are contact centre workforces? Norwegian Cruise Line Group's Abby Hugglestone explained: "We inevitably have lots of different languages, cultures and religions, but we also have a 77-year old team member as well as a severely ADHD team leader who's great in a support role. We've still got work to do though, as we had one employee who we thought was missing for half an hour a day. It turned out she was praying eight times each day but wasn't confident enough to tell anyone."

NewDay's Francesca Rea felt that the company's fintech background and strong in-house development team leads naturally to a diverse workforce which meant that it had always been strong around neurodiversity, with the contact centre celebrating Neurodiversity Celebration Week and





recognising challenges for team members with ADHD. Alison Heap heads the United Utilities customer service team, and brought personal experience to the discussion. “I’ve one child with ADHD and another with mental health issues, so I can see the value of neurodiversity within the workplace. We’ve got people in our group with autism and ADHD – I think we’re doing a good job when it comes to diversity and inclusion, but how could we do it better?”

Flagstone is a fintech with an innovative cash deposit platform serving high net and ultra-high net worth customers. “We’ve got a diverse spread, with neurodiversity quite prevalent across product-led fintech firms, and a customer base that’s typically 55+,” said the company’s Operations Director, Mark Nichols. “So we’re asking questions like ‘how do you keep a team connected during Ramadan?’ or ‘how can we use AI to empower our teams to do jobs that they don’t do. We think AI could prove empowering for supporting neurodiverse performance.”

Claire Emery at TUI also has her own neurodiverse experiences, with a son who has autism and is currently doing A-levels, as well as a younger autistic son. “It’s vital that businesses are open enough to bring people in who can offer so much,” she said. “At TUI we embrace neurodiversity, but it’s more than that as we attract people from lots of different backgrounds and cultures – it helps us to embrace different cultures and bring travel alive.”

James Wilson said there was a strong level of diversity and a Manchester-based vibrancy to the Barclays Customer Care

team. “We’ve certainly invested in diverse hiring, in particular into key leadership positions, we have strong diversity at both frontline and are keen to support increasing the pipeline as colleagues progress their career.” Also based in Manchester, Travel Counsellors is a 30-year old business with a very-tenured colleague base. “This means we tend to not be as diverse as some other contact centres, but we put care at the heart of everything we do so diversity matters,” said Travel Counsellors’ Customer Operations Director, Claire Hill.

LNER’s Kerry Holland added: “At LNER our contact centre is the most diverse area of the business, particularly with physical disabilities – especially as it’s harder to support that on trains with their inevitable physical difficulties,” added Kerry Holland from LNER. “We’re on a journey with neurodiversity, and can see how technology can help towards removing potential barriers. AI will help us here, both through supportive chatbots as well as language support with the CRM.”

“As a global brand we’re incredibly diverse, with stations everywhere, local language, all races, disabilities, specific needs – we’re good, but are we great?” asked Air France’s Alf Rodway. “From a diversity perspective, we’re probably one of the leaders. But it’s the underlying issues that you can’t see, and often can’t ask about because of employment regulations, that mean that – like everyone else – we’ve still got some way to go.”

“We’re extremely diverse and as a Palestinian woman I’m proud of that,” added Rula Samara. “Trump becoming

President will have a big impact on diversity across the world, and it will make the task harder. At Novuna – for example, we’ve invested in a two-day offsite programme that everyone goes through that focuses on issues such as psychological safety and unconscious bias. We believe that feeling safe is an important factor in delivering an excellent customer experience.”

“As the UK’s first digital bank, Atom Bank was inevitably heavily technology-led, so our gender balance was heavily male leaning. We’re also based in Durham which is a small city with a limited diverse community,” explained COO Helen Wilson. “We’re working on these issues – encouraging applications that will boost diversity, and moving to Newcastle will open up new diversity opportunities. Other initiatives include an Atom Women’s Network aimed at encouraging the promotion of women into leadership roles.”

Based in Stoke-on-Trent, Vodafone’s contact centre is changing dramatically – doubling in size over the last three years. “This has provided an amazing opportunity to evolve our look and feel, and culture, but it’s important that this happened naturally, and we didn’t force the issue,” said Head of Consumer Sales & Care, Ryan Bubertazzi. “We want to make our contact centre a safe place for all our people, and it’s great that our agent population now largely mirrors our local demographic census data. Our contact centre is possibly the most diverse part of the business, but it’s important that we continue to do more.”

“DEIB is all about making the colleague experience better,

but also ensuring that it clearly makes good business sense too,” added Vicki Mercer from CAF Bank. “And while I think we’ve got the direction and thinking right in terms of diversity, we’re probably still missing on the data points that will allow us to quantify progress.”

Lucie Child said that at The Very Group, they’d like to collect more data: “It’s an area where we need to do more work. Unless you can get access to the right data, you can’t measure the impact of your diversity activities effectively.”

Lucie also serves as Chair of the CCMA’s DEIB Special Interest Group (SIG), and gave a quick overview of the its activities. “We’re open to everyone who wants to come along, and our focus is on covering topics that will be of interest to the broader CCMA community. For example, our last session was focused on ADHD, particularly understanding how we can make adjustments to support neurodivergent colleagues to harness their superpowers. Next up we’re focusing on Social Mobility as that’s a topic our SIG members have said they want to learn more about. Hopefully it’s a great forum for asking questions, getting best practice advice, and also sharing resources.”

Recruitment – Merit or Diversity Targets

Leigh then asked the group whether, given their focus on diversity, was their goal to recruit based on merit or were they recruiting to hit diversity targets? Alf said that



they recruit on merit and can't discriminate. "However, we recognise that around one in five people have some form of disability so we need to ensure we can accommodate all needs."

Claire Hill agreed, adding that: "I strongly believe that you should employ the right person for the role, no matter what their background..., but we also acknowledge that simply employing like-minded, like-looking people doesn't really take us forward. What is important is for newcomers to be able to identify role models who can show them the way." Ross stressed the importance of establishing empathy, understanding and trust. "It's diversity of thought that I'm most interested in. I want to see people challenging me, but that means they need the confidence to do this. This requires trust, and it takes time to build."

Kerry talked about the challenges of recruiting in order to remodel contact centre performance. "If you're looking to rebuild operations then you will need like-minded people, I'm always looking for someone better than me – people who can create their own safe spaces around them and offer a model for successful behaviour. This can take time, but it has a direct impact – for example at LNER we've been able to take attrition down from 11% to just 1%." Francesca agreed, saying: "you need to be the change that you want to see."

Role of Technology in Creating a More Equitable Environment

When discussing what contact centre leaders could offer to provide additional support for their neurodiverse people, Leigh asked the group whether the focus was all about AI, or were other options available?

Claire Emery shared a great example of how neurodiverse people often don't always wait for technology support. "At TUI we had a neurodiverse colleague working in our complaints department who got really stressed when reading through lots of material that he had to summarise. On his own initiative he started using ChatGPT to help simplify the process, but was unsure if he should tell anyone. When he eventually did, he was recognised by the business, won a TUI National Award, and his solution is now deployed all over Europe!"

Ryan admired Claire for enabling the ChatGPT project,

noting that "we may have had restrictions in terms of what technology we can deploy! You have to be open to opportunities." Helen agreed. "We've got a programme of continuous improvement at Atom Bank, with suggestions coming in every week. It's surprising how often these ideas quickly become an AI conversation."

Mark also suggested that it's important that AI potential is directed where it's most needed. "Your CEO might be using AI after a meeting to sort out a transcript and actions for colleagues, but in the time this takes, the customer-facing colleagues who actually need the support may have been left on their own to field hundreds of calls while the CEO was still in the meeting."

According to Kathryn: "the challenge comes in identifying clear use cases that can be broadly applied. Using AI seems a smart choice. But when you're working with neurodiversity, you will inevitably be dealing with support for different frontline colleagues who might need solutions for different problems at different times. An example might be using AI to write an email that's expanded from an original text message. However this doesn't necessarily need to be GenAI – other large language models are available!"

Breaking Down Barriers Through DEIB Initiatives

How do we make it possible for people to feel safe and talk about the issues that are making it difficult for them to deliver their best performance? Lucie talked about the need



to work together to make contact centres a place “where everyone feels they belong and can bring their whole selves.”

Francesca Rea described the DEI & Vulnerability month that they hold at NewDay: “Speakers from external organisations come in and we discuss all aspects of diversity. There’s a real focus on breaking down barriers – just talking about things can make such a difference and brings diversities to life.”

Abby mentioned how in the cruise line sector, guest services teams are predominantly female. “Inevitably many colleagues experience menopause, however few felt able to talk about it openly. We’re now much more open – I’m Menopause Champion in our office – and hold regular sessions that have really opened things up. Perhaps surprisingly, men are keen attendees as it’s obviously an issue that can impact them too.”

Kerry agreed, saying “menopause is one of the last taboos – up there with miscarriage”. Claire Hill from Travel Counsellors also found discussion sessions useful, adding “one of the real benefits we get from them is that our customers of course face the same issues. It makes for better understanding.” James also explained that there’s a massive menopause support network at Barclays. “Originally set up as a safe space to talk, it’s now become a much more normal and open discussion.”

Leigh added that these and other initiatives were important in opening up previously secretive issues. “It’s vital that leaders understand that there are probably very good reasons why somebody has decided to work from home today.” Alison felt you want everyone to bring their ‘best self’ to work. “So I would never stop ladies from going on the Menopause Café website, no matter how busy we were. There’s all sorts of diversity initiatives at United Utilities – we recently ran a tinnitus awareness campaign, and we’ve now created a guide dog space for one of our team who is blind.”

Mark said it was also about recognising that people often had very routine challenges but didn’t always feel able to voice them. “It could be as simple as scheduling shifts so people can pick their kids up from school, or freeing up team members so they can get to their 5pm 5-a-side game and make the hour up somewhere else. Or maybe somebody simply isn’t a morning person – but they have to prove that they’re more productive in the evening!”

Fitting Diversity into Your Operational Processes

Given the value and importance placed on diversity, how do organisations make sure that it gets prioritised during a time of huge transformational change? Ross suggested that: “With AI demanding attention at both a platform and a solutions level, it’s all too easy for diversity not to come into the conversation.” Alf explained that at Air France “we have a diversity and HR track that sits alongside every project. That way we always ensure that whatever we do has a diversity aspect.”

Ross questioned whether that approach might just slow projects down, however Alf re-assured the group by explaining how a key function for project managers was to make sure that tracks worked in cohesion. James added that at Barclays Customer Care there was a focus on building culture and diversity issues in at the project design stage.

Lucie felt that “ensuring business change has a DEIB lens is important. There are lots of different ways to ensure this happens, and it needs to be right for each individual business, however we also mustn’t allow it to slow down change.”



Shared Learnings to Benefit Industry Leaders

Bringing the CCMA Leadership Forum to a close, Leigh asked guests for any advice they have for their industry colleagues to help them to create more equitable, inclusive environments where everyone can thrive. Here's what they said:

Vicki Mercer, CAF Bank – “We need to continue to drive education in a vulnerable, authentic way – talk, but really listen. Diversity is a superpower, and we have the opportunity as leaders to support our teams to harness this superpower.”

Ryan Rubertazzi, Vodafone UK – “When it comes to building a more diverse, inclusive, and equitable workplace we've all made considerable progress – but you also have to be mindful about what comes afterwards. So build it in.”

Helen Wilson, Atom Bank – “Ask and listen to what people say – and take it on board! Ask questions, and listen when you're challenged.”

Rula Samara, Novuna Consumer Finance – “You can't do this on your own. You're going to need allies across the business, particularly if things are to continue when you're no longer in your role.”

Lucie Child, The Very Group – “Don't let fear of getting it wrong, or using clumsy language get in the way. Just start the conversation and keep learning. And remember, listening is key, but it's the action we take that matters.”

Alf Rodway, Air France – “Embrace the change, but you've also got to be prepared to challenge and educate where it's not right.”

Kerry Holland, LNER – “Getting this right is all about breaking down barriers, and this means looking closely at your organisation, removing toxic mindsets – and potentially also removing people.”

Claire Hill, Travel Counsellors – “You definitely have to inform and educate yourself. Things move really quickly; new trends and capabilities emerge – take ChatGPT for example – so you have to ensure that your DEIB policies evolve to take account of them.”

James Wilson, Barclays – “Across businesses we're always talking to different specialist partners. So we should be taking the same approach with DEIB and make sure we're talking to the people in our own teams to learn from them.”

Kathryn Simons-Porter, Local Measure – “How are you

measuring your DEIB activities? At some stage you're going to be asked what these programmes you're running have actually delivered. Your measurements need to be able to clearly demonstrate some top-level benefits.”

Claire Emery, TUI Group – “For me I think the biggest thing is to create an environment within my own team where people feel safe and can come to work as they are. Everything cascades down from this.”

Mark Nichols, Flagstone – “Diversity of input is really important. I remember what it used to be like in junior roles when no one really listened to what you had to say. We need to learn from our people and connect with what others feel is important.”

Alison Heap, United Utilities – “It's important that our people feel welcome and confident in their abilities at work. We all have to do more to achieve this, and part of this means selling the benefits of working in a contact centre long before people think about coming on board. We need to spend more time going into schools and college, sharing the good stuff that we do and communicating contact centres as an open and diverse environment.”

Francesca Rae, NewDay – “As contact centre leaders we've got to champion people who think or react differently.”

Abby Hugglestone, Norwegian Cruise Line Group – “People need to know that when they ask questions they are being listened to. When they share thoughts, ideas and concerns they need to be acted on. We have the opportunity to make their careers easier.”

Ross Taylor, Lloyds Bank Merchant Services – “In order to have an environment where DEI matters there has to be a whole load of trust. That's built up through connections to the people in your contact centres, caring about them individually and doing this with authenticity. Doing this right means it carries on when you eventually leave the room.”

Leigh concluded by encouraging members to get involved with the CCMA's Diversity, Equity, Inclusion and Belonging Special Interest Group to help the industry make a difference in society.

About the CCMA

For more than 30 years, the CCMA has been absolutely dedicated to supporting contact centre professionals. We're constantly pushing ourselves to do more for our thriving community, which happens to be the largest community of contact centre professionals in the UK. The CCMA was founded with the goal of sharing best practice and networking to improve skills and knowledge in order to progress contact centre operations - and we live by that to this day.

We give those that work in contact centres the chance to discuss ideas and share experiences through member-only Special Interest Groups and online and in-person events.

Members are invited to become Accredited through the Contact Centre Standards Framework and get independent guidance on where to focus for improvements. There is also the opportunity to benchmark the operation against 25+ KPIs.

The CCMA Academy gives everyone a structured learning opportunity to support both personal and professional development for the benefit of their operation.

And of course, we celebrate the progress our industry is making through the UK National Contact Centres Awards. Those that win go on to share their stories through channels such as the UK National Contact Centre Conference, Best Practice Visits and CareerTalk. They are invited to input into the Special Interest Groups and other events.

www.ccma.org.uk

About Local Measure

Local Measure is pioneering the future of customer service technology and empowers organizations to deliver proactive customer experiences that are intuitive and secure. With a team across Oceania, Asia Pacific, North America, Europe, and Africa, Local Measure's clientele includes the world's largest travel, hospitality, retail, financial services, and telecommunications businesses.

Engage is a pre-built, intelligent contact centre platform that transforms customer service. Engage combines voice and digital communication channels to improve operational efficiency and deliver valuable insights. The platform uses generative AI to enhance customer service interactions and create personalised experiences that cater to the changing needs of businesses and their customers. Awards won include Best New Technology Solution at the ICMI Awards, AWS Software Partner of The Year, and AWS Marketplace-APJ Partner of the Year.

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