

# Grant Thornton Ireland case study – an ED&I success story



**Shauna Rahman** – Equity, Diversity and Inclusion Specialist; and **Seán O'Driscoll** – Associate Director, Financial Services Advisory, Grant Thornton, present an overview of the importance of equity, diversity and inclusion in the workplace.

## Equity, Diversity and Inclusion in Ireland 2023

Ongoing change to Equality Legislation ensures reform takes place where required to reflect society in Ireland. A review of the Equality Acts (Equal Status Acts 2000-2018 and the Employment Equality Acts 1998-2015) is currently taking place in Ireland led by Minister for Children, Disability, Equality and Integration, Roderic O'Gorman TD. "As decision-makers, it is important that we continuously ask ourselves how we can achieve equality, and what improvements need to be made to ensure we are making positive advances towards equality."

There are nine key pieces of legislation, policies and acts related to employment in Ireland today. There are also nine key equal status grounds that every employer should commit to (see Figure 1).



Figure 1.

## Diversity in the workplace

There are four types of diversity in the workplace:

- Internal – race, ethnicity, age, assigned sex, physical ability, mental ability, gender identity, sexual orientation, etc.
- External – education, appearance, citizenship, religious beliefs, familial status, location, socioeconomic status, etc.
- Organisational – job function, place of work, seniority, pay type, management status, etc.
- Worldview – political beliefs, outlook on life, moral compass, etc.

## Importance of inclusivity

- Inclusive culture enhances employee engagement: An inclusive workplace allows for a better employee experience and assists in talent retention.
- Inclusivity is a core value: Every company should strive to appreciate and support equality, equity and diversity in the workplace and always use inclusive language.
- An inclusive workplace celebrates diversity: Extensive research has shown that embracing our differences can motivate a more productive workforce. (Reference: [www.mckinsey.com/featured-insights/diversity-and-inclusion/diversity-wins-how-inclusion-matters](http://www.mckinsey.com/featured-insights/diversity-and-inclusion/diversity-wins-how-inclusion-matters)).

As every company and organisation moves to becoming more inclusive, Grant Thornton Ireland is a successful example of how a structured equity, diversity and inclusion strategy can lead to more positive workplace culture and lead to impactful change.

## Case study: Grant Thornton Ireland

### ED&I at Grant Thornton Ireland

Equity, Diversity and Inclusion (ED&I) at Grant Thornton has always been at the forefront of our workplace culture agenda, and today, we continue to build and develop on our existing ED&I structure and strategy to meet our workplace culture needs. People are at the heart of our business and teams built with varied backgrounds, cultures, ages, gender identities, abilities and family types present diverse viewpoints, which need to be heard and valued. Our ED&I programme at GT is called Embrace and has five main pillar Employee Resource Groups (ERGs): Ability, Gender Equality, LGBTQIA+, Family and Ethnicity & Culture.

### Embrace structure

The ERGs are the key component in the outstanding success of our ED&I strategy at the firm and work together as one collaborative team at the helm of driving positive initiatives and inclusive change in our workplace. Although we have five pillars structurally, our one-team approach means we share knowledge and lessons learned with each other; recommend key contacts; volunteer and support across pillar activities; and pool resources. Recognising the intersectionality of the pillars – many of our colleagues can relate to multiple pillars – is also key to our success.

With the support from our ED&I Steering Committee, which consists of a diverse range of seven senior leader colleagues, the Embrace ERGs are at the helm of driving positive initiatives and inclusive change in our workplace. The ED&I Steering Committee follows a detailed Charter that outlines its roles and responsibilities as thought leaders in the ED&I space. Chaired and managed by our newly appointed ED&I Specialist and with the support from our ED&I Steering Committee and headed up by their Pillar Leads, the ERG members are responsible for developing and implementing our future ED&I action plans. Our strategy is based around three principles – to 'educate, integrate and celebrate'.

We have a concrete, organisational structure, which is the foundation for our activities (see Figure 2).

Over the last 12 months, Embrace has experienced a major increase in ERG members (approx. 80+ members) from over 50+ nationalities across the firm. We have implemented an ERG membership charter so each potential and existing member is aware of their role and responsibilities. Embrace has invested significantly in making tangible differences in how we operate and championing ED&I as a key component of our firm's DNA. Embrace ERGs meet bi-weekly and have quarterly meetings with the ED&I Steering Committee. The ED&I Lead is Chair of Embrace and has bi-weekly meetings with the ED&I Steering Committee and is the key coordinator between the ERGs and the Committee.

We align ourselves with key ED&I training programmes and partner with expert networks and organisations across our Pillars. We have successfully rolled out our Embrace initiatives across all offices in an inclusive one-firm approach to ED&I, including in Isle of Man, Gibraltar and Bermuda.

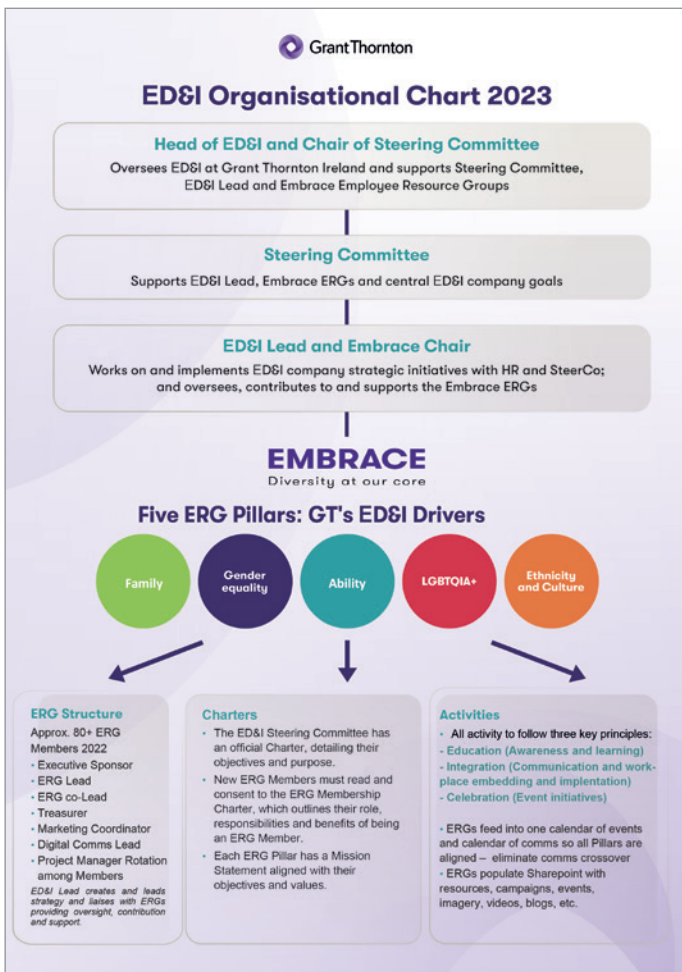


Figure 2.

## Driving Cultural Change

### Ability Pillar

#### Mental health

Our Ability Pillar led the way in 2022 with the approval by our Management Committee of the 'An Hour For Me' initiative. This initiative granted permission for all our colleagues to avail of one hour per month to look after their mental-health self-care. We also saw expansion of our Mental Health First Aider group. Mental Health First Aid is the initial help offered to those who are developing mental health problems, experiencing a worsening of an existing mental health problem or a mental health crisis. Our group of dedicated, trained Mental Health First Aiders across the firm grew from 35 to 55 First Aiders and we rolled out a successful communications campaign across the offices so our colleagues would know who they are if they needed to reach out to someone.

By signing up to the See Change Workplace Pledge, a six-step programme, which helps Irish companies challenge mental-health stigma and support a positive mental health culture in the workplace, GT and the Embrace programme are underlining the importance of looking after your mental health to all our colleagues.

#### Disability in the workplace

The Ability Pillar also continues to highlight disability in the workplace by bringing in the experts and we welcomed Ability Focus to host a webinar and training programme in December to coincide with International Day of Persons with Disabilities. We are aiming to launch our Reasonable Accommodation Passport this year, which allows reasonable accommodations for those with disabilities to access employment; advance or further their careers; and have access to training. Our Facilities team have incorporated Emergency Cord cards in all our disabled and

gender neutral bathrooms to ensure cords are left hanging for those who may need assistance.

We have also recently permanently employed members of the Trinity College Persons with Intellectual Disabilities Programme and are proud to have them represented on our teams.

### Neurodiverse community

At GT, we are huge supporters of our neurodiverse communities and sponsor and support AsIAm, Ireland's national autism charity. We have aligned to the AsIAm Same Chance Commitment Charter and support AsIAm activities and are rolling out neurodiverse training this year. If our colleagues within the neurodiverse community at GT request a 'Please Offer Me A Seat' badge for public transport purposes, we are also able to provide these as the initiative internally was spear-headed by members of the neurodiverse community within the Ability ERG. All of our ERGs share extensive resources on our Intranet Sharepoint site so everyone has equal access to them if needed.

### Gender Equality Pillar

Our Gender Equality ERG held an inspiring International Women's Day event for all our colleagues last year, bringing a much-needed social event to the fore at the close of the pandemic. This year, we will be following the #embraceequity theme and host a week of campaigns; panel sessions; and social gatherings. This ERG is responsible for our free, sustainable period and sanitary products initiative for our colleagues across all our offices and locations, and launched in January 2023. This is such an important initiative and we have partnered with Riley, the sustainable company, which is run by women and supports period poverty.

We have also hosted International Men's Day events to celebrate our male allies and colleagues, where we focused on highlighting topics such as role models; challenges and changes in today's workplace society. We provided key physical and mental health resources for men at the events. Through our Gender Equality ERG, we are also affiliated with the Professional Women's Network, the 30% Club, Lean in Network and Women in Finance. From a training perspective, GT has implemented tailored training programmes. Aspire and Accelerate Programmes (also aligned with Gender Equality) are focused on promoting and helping women progress to senior leadership roles at the company. We are also very proud to have an award-winning mentoring programme, which has equal male and female allies.

### LGBTQIA+ Pillar

In 2022, our LGBTQIA+ ERG led both educational and fun Pride celebrations across Dublin, Belfast and Cork, with hundreds of our colleagues celebrating the LGBTQIA+ community. Our Gender Expression and Gender Identity Policy was also launched in 2022 and 2023 will see us focusing on bringing more impactful education into the company and expanding our external reach into our LGBTQIA+ community. The ERG provided educational webinars with topics including the history of the Pride Flag, a useful guide to pronouns; members took part in a 'Belong To' video for the charity, which highlighted their 'coming out' stories and shared their experiences within the community.

### Family Pillar

Our inclusive Family Pillar policies received extensive media coverage in 2022 as market-leading family-friendly initiatives. The policy updates covered compassionate; fertility; IVF; and miscarriage leave as well as updating surrogacy, adoption and donor policies and also ensuring same-sex couples could avail of the same supports. The Pillar also hosts family-friendly events throughout the year. In 2023 we will be rebranding our Pillar to encompass all types of families at GT and we will also be launching effective policies to support our colleagues returning to work after extended leave.

### Ethnicity & Culture Pillar

In 2022, we had our inaugural Culture Night, hosted by the Ethnicity & Culture Pillar and it demonstrated our dedication to



Proudly presenting the Investors in Diversity Silver Accreditation plaque are: Dan Holland, Head of Equity, Diversity & Inclusion (ED&I) at Grant Thornton Ireland and ED&I Steering Committee Member; Shauna Rahman, ED&I Specialist; and our Embrace Employee Resource Group Leads and Members.

representing all our diverse colleagues in one forum. It was so successful and morale-boosting that we are considering a full Culture Week this year. Our members represent over 50 different ethnicities and backgrounds who work in Grant Thornton. The Ethnicity & Culture Pillar is responsible for creating an International New Joiner Package Guide to be launched this year, to help and facilitate our new joiners to embed into Irish society in a more seamless transition. This Pillar is heavily involved with International Hire Sessions and is a welcoming group for new joiners coming from overseas. There is also involvement with the Chartered Accountants Ethnicity Network with two of our members officially launching the Network in conjunction with EY in December 2022.

### Recognition, reward and rebrand

In April 2022, we were awarded the Bronze Accreditation for Diversity from the Irish Centre for Diversity. In September, we received the great news that we are on our way to Gold having since been awarded the Investors in Diversity Silver Accreditation. This Accreditation is highly valued in Ireland and is the benchmark for Diversity and Inclusion Standards and was driven by our outstanding Embrace ED&I programme, with firm-wide support. We created Investors in Diversity Focus Groups to further enhance the feedback our colleagues have given around ED&I initiatives at the firm and we will implement this feedback into our action plan and strategy for 2023.

In February 2023, Embrace won the Outstanding Employee Resource Group Award at the National Diversity and Inclusion Awards held at Croke Park - an achievement we are very proud of. At the end of 2022, Equity was also officially added to our D&I Programme in all initiatives and activities. Equity signifies our dedication to the removal of societal barriers for all and providing equal opportunities with equitable outcomes.

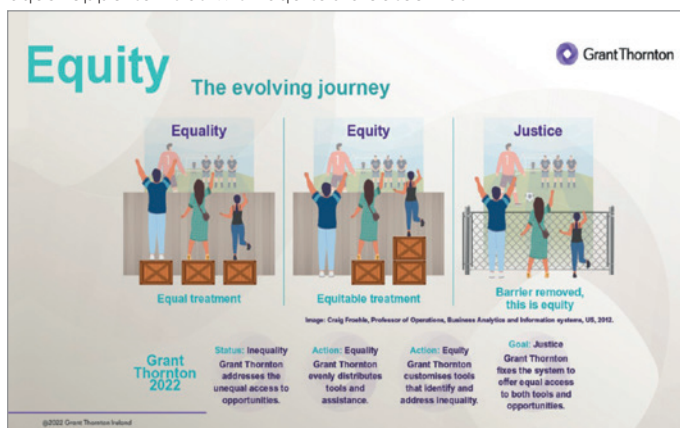


Figure 3

As a firm, we are completely aligned with sustainable development goals, Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) and responsible business practices. We are committed to an equitable, diverse and inclusive environment at GT. We believe our ED&I activities and initiatives are transferable across all industries and, when implemented, can only make for a more positive workplace culture for everyone.

### Starting Points for your Organisation

At GT, we constantly seek to improve and update our ED&I programme. We ensure our programme is reviewed and challenged on an ongoing basis. For organisations attempting to implement enhanced initiatives, making ED&I a strategic priority alongside engagement with employees is key as a starting point. Training should be tailored and relevant to the organisations' employee profile, with areas, which will have most impact to their employees, prioritised.

In addition, implementing diverse hiring practices and ensuring benefit programmes are inclusive will ensure the selection and retention of a wider set of employees. Legislative changes, including those to the Equality Acts should be monitored, with representation at senior levels also to be considered. While the list may seem vast, selecting each one and doing it well will provide a template for continuing change and ensure organisations progress their Equity, Diversity and Inclusion programmes.

### Importance of Internal and External Impact

GT has a highly motivated group of ERG members, across all our office locations, who have been given the autonomy and support to influence change within the organisation, and are also involved with influencing external stakeholders.

#### Internal impact

##### 1. Initial research report and recommendations

In December 2021, the ERG members undertook a research project to produce a detailed report, which included the following: competitor benchmark analysis of D&I strategies; a D&I strategy review of the Grant Thornton Network; where are we now (as-is) and where is GT's future state in D&I. The report was pivotal in recommending a number of key deliverables, which have since been achieved.

- i. Improved communications and structure – Intranet Sharepoint site designed and launched in Q1 2022 with Digital Communications Leads assigned in July 2022 to oversee, edit and update content. The intranet site design and format is led by the ED&I Lead but spearheaded by

the ERG members and provides access to information and supports available and increased awareness of the Embrace programme.

- ii. Third party review and accreditation – Investors in Diversity Accreditation obtained (Bronze then Silver in 2022).
- iii. Development of Action Plan – Initiative tracker created for 2022 as well as structure implemented across all Pillars; Treasurers assigned for each ERG and consolidated budget produced for 2023 with a structured strategy and calendar of activities in place.

## 2. Personal and professional development of colleagues within ERGs

- ERG Leads – development of project management skills and interaction with senior stakeholders/third party providers (link to performance management and career progression opportunities).
- Enhanced networking and cross-service line collaborative opportunities.
- ShoutOut is the firm's recognition scheme. The purpose of the scheme is to recognise and reward employees for excellence against one or more of the firm's five core values. To contribute to our culture, all our people have to live our values:

Over 70 ShoutOuts were awarded in 2022 linked to the participation in Embrace activities – this ShoutOut scheme is positive feedback called out and linked to a values badge on our internal HR Workday systems, which is visible on Workday profiles for performance managers.

## 3. Investors in Diversity Focus Groups

- Importance of listening to our workplace and feedback on our current workplace culture – the Embrace Leads (10) are led five working groups as Investor in Diversity Leads with 40-50 participants known as our Investors in Diversity Champions. They submitted an action-point proposal in order to incorporate and implement the feedback into our ED&I activities and initiatives for 2023.
- Enhanced reach outside of the ERGs to wider staff – positive feedback and collation of actions to ensure strategy is relevant to staff.

## 4. Awards

- In 2023, Embrace is representing GT at Ireland's inaugural National Diversity and Inclusion Awards in the Outstanding Employee Resource Group category.
- In 2022, GT Ireland was awarded Firm of the Year at the Grant Thornton International 'Go Beyond Awards'.
- In 2022, GT was awarded as having the Most Impactful Mentoring Programme of 2022.
- Embrace also officially won the Outstanding Employee Resource Group category at the inaugural National Diversity and Inclusion Awards on February 2, 2023, for their ED&I strategy.

## External impact

### Trinity Access Programme

The Trinity Access Programme (TAP) at Trinity College Dublin prepares students from under-represented backgrounds, such as those from disadvantaged areas, to attend college.

Now in its 14th year supporting the next generation, GT has been making a financial contribution to help fund the programme, providing engaging soft-skills training to all students, and providing mentoring by our colleagues, who volunteer to work on a one-to-one basis with students throughout the academic year. In addition to this, four students are offered summer internships at our offices.

The GT Student Mentoring & Career Development Programme is an important partnership for the following reasons:

- An effective way to engage employees: GT employees volunteer their time to become mentors to the TAP students. They provide guidance and mentorship to the students which is not only great for the students, but it is also a rewarding and fulfilling experience for our employees.

- Access to talent: Under the GT-TAP partnership, several workshops are conducted to the benefit of the students. Many of these are presented by people from the firm. Six of the TAP students enrolled in the summer internship program last year and we see many of the talented TAP students applying for permanent roles within the firm.
- Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR): TAP is a major CSR endeavour undertaken by the firm. Unlike a once-off donation or CSR day, this is more continuous in nature and has created a positive impact in the life of the TAP students.
- Impact: As per the GT-TAP report 2021-2022, over 70% of the students enrolled in the programme have went on to pursue higher education. Most of the students in TAP come from underrepresented groups and therefore, this program empowers such students to continue in their growth and education.
- Ease of management: The GT-TAP partnership is managed by the Trinity TAP coordinators and there is minimum management required by our coordinators. Even the mentors are provided with flexibility in terms of how often they meet their mentees, so the process is one of both structure and ease.
- Opportunities for our people: As part of the programme, we conduct regular workshops and the mentors are also encouraged to meet the students to provide them with guidance. Any workshops conducted by GT employees provide them with the chance to enhance their presentation skills and through the mentorship sessions, they have the opportunity to improve on their leadership and communication skills. All of these skills are of paramount importance, especially for those aiming to take on management positions within the firm.
- 85% of participants have said it was a very positive experience – “the GT-TAP Programme improved my skills in a wide range of areas including presentation and communications skills and provided me with knowledge of a professional environment – GT-TAP participant 2022.”

### Trinity Centre for Persons with Intellectual Disabilities

The Trinity Centre for Persons with Intellectual Disabilities (TCPID) is a non-profit organisation operating a pioneering programme for persons with intellectual disabilities, since 2016, which aims to promote the inclusion of these persons in education and society. GT has been in partnership with TCPID since 2020 and has offered three programme participants internships and has since employed two programme participants on a permanent basis. Each participant was allocated dedicated mentors and given specific roles and responsibilities in Financial Services Advisory; Tax; and Facilities teams. They were then supported by a 'buddy' system. “Everybody at GT has been so welcoming and I work closely with my colleagues, who support and help me every day. It is a great place to work and I am lucky to work in a company with such an inclusive culture” – Shane McGilton, who came to work in GT in October 2021, has since been made permanently employed.

### Business in the Community

GT is also a committed member of the Business in the Community (BITC) Ireland network – a movement for sustainable change in business. Our participation in BITC is to enable our firm to support a sustainable, low carbon economy and a more inclusive society where everyone thrives. In addition to holding a “leader” membership, Grant Thornton is also accredited with the BITC third party certified standard – the Business Working Responsibly Mark. The Mark is the leading standard for sustainability in organisations. It fosters a culture of continuous improvement, ongoing accountability and leadership. In 2023, GT signed up to BITC's Elevate Pledge - this signifies our firm's commitment to building a more inclusive culture at the firm and annually report on the progress and impact of our pledge action for the year.