



## IP Ability: reflections on our first year

*It's one year since **IP Ability** launched. And what a year! Former IP Ability co-lead Francesca Rivers, solicitor at Cancer Research Technology Ltd, recaps what IP Ability got up to in its first year (and takes a peek at the year ahead).*

This time last year, [IP Ability](#) had just got off the starting blocks as [IP Inclusive's](#) newest community, aiming to support and champion disabled people, carers and their allies working within the IP professions and draw attention to the issues that matter to them. I've been pleased and privileged to co-lead IP Ability during its foundation year, alongside AA Thornton's Marianne Privett and a diverse, dedicated company of (frankly fantastic) committee members.

With IP Ability's first year complete, I've handed the co-leadership mantle over to fellow committee member Chris Clarke (patent attorney at Vectura), who's taking things forward alongside Marianne. This handover juncture seemed a good point to take stock of what IP Ability accomplished in its first year, so as to set out a handy summary of the various resources, articles, webinars and activities IP Ability has produced or got involved with so far.

If you haven't come across any (or all) of this before: please take a look! Read, watch, listen, and then spread the word. We want every IP professional (or aspiring one) who's impacted by disability-related issues to know we're here for them, and everyone else to have a chance to get more informed and confident about those issues.

### What is IP Ability?

IP Ability aims to provide a supportive and informative network focusing on issues relating to disability, neurodiversity and health conditions of all kinds, be they mental or physical, visible or invisible, permanent or temporary, sudden onset or progressive.

The community intends to:

- provide support for those already working within the IP professions, in all roles and at all stages of their careers;
- encourage and assist in making the IP professions accessible, inclusive and welcoming for those in the disabled and neurodiverse communities, with health conditions, and in care-giving roles; and
- raise awareness and understanding of disabilities, neurodiversity, health conditions, and care-giving roles within the IP professions.

### Launch survey

To help inform what shape the new network should take, in November 2019 IP Ability ran a launch survey exploring issues around disability and the workplace. Seventy people responded, of whom about 35% had a disability and 30% had caring responsibilities for a disabled person. Chris set out some of the key findings in a [World Trademark Review article](#), including the fact that less than half of the disabled/carer respondents had told their employer about their disability or caring responsibilities. The reasons for this varied, but sadly (if unsurprisingly), some respondents indicated it was due to worry about discrimination or stigma.

Most respondents felt appropriately supported by their line manager, but their comments showed this support was sometimes rather passive or took an unhelpful tack. Almost everyone felt valued and included by their colleagues – but some respondents felt that their colleagues sometimes excluded them, albeit unintentionally.

### Inaugural event

Not long after the launch survey, to coincide with the International Day of Persons with Disabilities (3 December 2019), we held an [informal launch event](#) at which we heard from Jane Burton, chair of the Law Society's Lawyers with Disabilities Division and Dr Natasha Hirst from Legally Disabled, a research project exploring the experiences of disabled people in the legal profession. Natasha reported some early findings from [Legally Disabled's reports](#) on the career experiences of disabled people working in the legal profession. Just under 300 people were surveyed as part of the research, the findings of which included an apparent lack of confidence around disclosing disabilities when applying for training and jobs – echoing the findings of IP Ability's launch survey.



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LinkedIn: IP Inclusive: IP Ability | Facebook: IP Ability community

### Articles & resources

Throughout 2020, committee members produced various articles to highlight and promote disability-related issues. These included an interview piece throwing the [spotlight on carers](#), and a recent article exploring [COVID-19 in the context of disability](#). There were also several insightful pieces published by IP specialist and membership publications, including a *World Trademark Review* article on [tackling the stigma of disability in IP](#), and the *CITMA Review* cover story “[Sense check](#)”, exploring what it takes to support colleagues on the autism spectrum.

IP Ability also published a “[tools and resources](#)” document, setting out various third-party websites, documents and schemes relating to disability and carer responsibilities that we hope might be useful sources of information and support for IP professionals and employers.

### Webinars & podcasts

If you don't have half a minute to read an article, as you're one of the many people juggling work, children, pets and/or overcrowded housekeeping (and the rest): never fear! There are some “hands free” options for you. IP Ability ran several webinars in 2019 exploring disability and health-related topics, with the recordings available online (for you to stick on while you're loading the dishwasher/chopping the veg). They include webinars on [invisible disabilities](#) and [dyslexia and dyspraxia](#) (hosted by Shakespeare Martineau and CIPA, respectively), and a session about [inclusivity and the menopause](#), co-produced alongside fellow IP Inclusive network Women in IP (and also kindly hosted by CIPA).

And if you haven't had a listen yet, definitely check out Episode 1 of CIPA's “[Two IPs in a Pod](#)” [podcast series 2](#), in which several committee members join CIPA's Lee Davies and Gwilym Roberts to talk about their personal experiences of disability and motivations for co-founding IP Ability (along with some requisite chat about ginger beards, grey eyebrows and ferocious netball).

### How to be an ally

A whopping one in five of us will experience some form of disability during our working lives. But that still leaves four out of five people who won't. If you're among that number, IP Ability still wants YOU (points finger like first world war recruitment photo, but without the handlebar moustache).

Support and understanding go a long way, and a lot of people want to offer that support but might not be sure how to go about it. There's no one right answer, of course: everyone's different and has their own needs, likes and dislikes. However, there are plenty of nuggets of wisdom out there about ways to be a supportive manager and colleague – and ideally, an ally (which is someone who actively promotes inclusion). To that end, IP Ability committee members took part in an IP Inclusive interview series last year about allies and intersectionality. In [Episode 3](#), Jonathan Andrews (Reed Smith) shared his experiences of being on the autism spectrum and LGBT, and in [Episode 4](#), Chris spoke about being a carer: both of which are worth a listen.

Marianne and I also took part in an “[ask me anything](#)” [allies event](#), in which representatives from all five of IP Inclusive's communities got together to answer some questions from the profession about allyship in our specific support areas. In one recorded discussion, I tackled a question about why people seem to be [afraid to speak directly to physically disabled people](#), while in further recordings Marianne discussed [disability and language](#) (what's the appropriate language to use, and how on earth can you keep up to date?), and also shed light on the [social versus medical models of disability](#).

### Spreading the word

In addition to the above, the IP Ability committee sought to speak at various forums during 2020 so as to promote disability-related issues, including the CIPA congress 2020 and the [Law Society's Diversity and Inclusion Conference](#). We're also alive and kicking on various social media platforms, sharing relevant news and views. If you want to drop us a line or get involved, you can find us on Twitter (@IP\_Ability), LinkedIn (IP Inclusive: IP Ability) and Facebook (IP Ability community).



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### **Exam adjustments workstream**

Disability is a diverse area, so in order to represent a range of different issues effectively IP Ability has formed several sub-groups focusing on specific aspects of disability and caring. One such working group exploring reasonable adjustments for patent attorney examinations, an area where it's becoming increasingly apparent there are currently some pretty woeful inadequacies. A first step has been to run a survey to establish people's experiences of seeking adjustments for the UK and European patent attorney examinations. The survey closed recently and produced some useful insights, which the working group hopes to share and build on in the coming months.

### **Wider initiatives**

IP Ability also inputted into some wider IP Inclusive initiatives during 2020, looking at [social mobility in the IP professions](#) and [career support and barriers for black, Asian and minority ethnic \(or "BAME"\) IP professionals](#) – two areas where attention and progress are painfully needed. If you don't think that's the case, I urge you please to read up on these issues or attend some events about them. It's the people who already have their foot in the IP career door, like you and me, who can help to open that door for others and foster a more meritocratic environment. A crucial first step is to understand the ways that systems are unconsciously (sometimes consciously) stacked in the favour of people of a particular colour, ethnicity and social background – and against people who don't fit that mould.

No doubt there will be more from IP Inclusive on those issues in the coming year, and IP Ability will be keen to pitch in. Particularly to support and represent disabled people and carers who also fall into those underrepresented demographics, and are potentially being doubly disadvantaged (or greater multiples!).

### **New Year's resolutions**

2021 is FINALLY here, and IP Ability's hoping to continue highlighting disability-related issues via social media, articles, podcasts and events, and develop the work of our our sub-groups.

We're keen to keep growing our network across the UK. Virtual meetings have become a well-established medium: we plan to capitalise on that, so as to improve access and involvement and generally bump disability issues up the IP community's agenda.

Most importantly of all, we're keen to listen to what you say the IP profession needs, and act on it. So if you have any requests for things you would find helpful, suggestions of things we could start doing (or do better), or want to get involved in the committee or wider network, please do drop us a line via social media or at [IPAbilityNetwork@gmail.com](mailto:IPAbilityNetwork@gmail.com), we'll be glad to hear from you.

On that note, all that's left is to wish you a very happy new year. May it be filled with more promise and positivity – and far more socialisation – than last year.

*Links to all of the articles, webinars, podcasts and resources mentioned in this article, and more, can be found under the [Resources section of IP Ability's website](#) and on the ["IP Ability in the Media"](#) web page.*



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