Reaching out during the pandemic

Darren Smyth explains how LGBT+ community group IP Out continued to network with and support under-represented members of the IP profession during the pandemic, as it strives to broaden its reach

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IP Out is the LGBT+ community group for those working within the intellectual property sector and is one of the community groups within IP Inclusive.

IP Inclusive aims to foster diversity and inclusion initiatives among intellectual property legal professions, recognising that most IP specialist firms are too small to be able effectively to tackle the many barriers to access to the professions alone. The ethos has from the outset been to promote cooperation in striving together to achieve a more equitable profession.

IP Out held its first event in November 2016, and since then has held between four and five events per year. Some of these have been speaker events addressing particular issues, for example LGBT+ parenting, bisexual and pansexual identities, asexual and aromantic identities, issues facing trans people within the professions, and LGBT+ history.

However, our members indicated that the networking and socialising aspects of our meetings were also important to them, and so we have also held meetings without speakers that simply allow members to network. This seems particularly important in the IP Out community as in their normal working environment many members may be the only LGBT+ person, or perhaps one of a small number, within their organisation.

We have endeavoured to be completely open to anyone working in IP irrespective of their role, and so we welcome solicitors, barristers, patent attorneys, and trademark attorneys whether working in private practice firms, as sole practitioners, or within industrial departments, but also people working in those places in any other role, such as secretarial, paralegal, administration, formalities, IT, finance, and HR. Allies have also been welcomed to all our events, so everyone is warmly invited to attend whether or not they identify as LGBT+ themselves.

The IP Out committee has been active in producing written materials which are posted on the IP Inclusive blog and circulated to members, including reports from our speaker events, and dedicated pieces for LGBT+ History Month (which is in February each year).

The effect of the pandemic

The Covid-19 pandemic and consequent series of lockdowns brought our established pattern of events to a crashing halt. But the committee regrouped and reconceived our plans in an online format. Our speaker events moved from an evening slot (generally) to a lunchtime. For some events, we used Zoom breakout rooms to emulate the networking that would take place within an in-person meeting. But we kept the same mix of speaker and non-speaker events, including a festive social in December.

In addition, we collaborated with Women in IP on one of the iterations of their ‘coffee breaks’, in which small groups of people gather at the same time in a series of parallel virtual meetings for informal discussion of a topic, and this was hugely successful.

It was immediately apparent that attendance at the virtual events was very much larger than at the previous in-person events. There are a number of factors leading to this result, and it is worth considering them carefully.

First, our events were now accessible to anyone regardless of physical location. When organising in-person events, the majority had taken place in London. We had managed a few in other parts of the country, but outside London we had struggled to achieve the
numbers needed to make an event feasible, with the notable exception of the western region where the cooperation of the UK Intellectual Property Office made events possible. In the virtual versions, at all of our events, we had attendees from all over the country, some of whom were attending for the first time.

Secondly, even for those based around London, our events became easier to attend. The time commitment was just the duration of the event itself – there was no travelling to a different location. So, in general, the dropout rate of people indicating they would attend but not appearing on the day, was significantly lower.

Thirdly, there seemed to be an increased need for the kind of community support that IP Out offered. Many people were feeling isolated in lockdown, and wanted the kind of human interaction, albeit virtual, that the IP Out events and networking could offer.

Moreover, even outside the formal IP Out meetings, the relationships and friendships made between people who had met through IP Out provided an ongoing support structure that many of us have turned to.

We have continued our programme of written materials and this year, in collaboration with the Chartered Institute of Patent Attorneys, have provided the most expansive series yet of posts and videos for LGBT+ History Month.

**Reaching out beyond IP**

The IP sector faces specific challenges in relation to diversity and inclusion, with the result that we still lag behind other areas of the legal profession. It is not just that the work started rather later (although it did) and, as mentioned before, most IP specialist firms are rather small.

Since a technical background is needed for some roles within the professions, such as patent attorneys and some barristers, the long-standing diversity problems in science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) subjects has led to corresponding problems in the IP professions. In addition, as a rather small and niche sector, many people are simply not aware of the professions.

As such, it has been essential as part of the work of IP Inclusive to reach out and promote awareness of the intellectual property professions to the wider community. Hence the Careers in Ideas initiative has been an integral part of IP Inclusive from the beginning.

For IP Out this has included participating in various initiatives that foster diversity and inclusion within STEM, such as Pride in STEM and the LGBT+ STEMinar (a research conference for LGBT+ people working in any STEM field).

I have attended the LGBT+ STEMinar most years since 2017 with a poster explaining the work of IP Out, and in 2018 had a talk accepted at the conference. This continued with a virtual conference in 2021. We have also supported the diversity and inclusion work of the learned societies such as the Royal Society of Chemistry.

Members of IP Out have marched at Pride in London with the legal group each year since at least 2016 and attended many other Pride-related events. This kind of outreach work is one of the most challenging for us because IP Out is so small and the audience to be reached is so big, but I think it is essential in order to secure real progress in diversity and inclusion.

**Looking to the future**

Obviously, we are looking forward to holding in person events once circumstances permit. But we have learned from the last year that online events can be very much more inclusive, and so they will doubtless become a part of our regular scheduling. Harnessing the power of virtual events is likely to be one of the main positive things that we have come to appreciate through the pandemic.

But the pandemic has also taught us there is no fully effective substitute for real in-person meeting. So, when we do return to being able to meet in person, we are committed to expand events based outside London, with either regional events, multi-centre events taking place in more than one location simultaneously, or events held physically in one location but streamed to others. There are many models that are available, and we still have a lot to learn about which will be the most effective for us.

We also look to continue our collaborations with the other communities within IP Inclusive. This really began in January 2019 with the Allies event held (back in the in-person days) across all the IP Inclusive communities, which launched the IP Inclusive Allies badges, lanyards, and support cards.

The theme of allyship has continued with an online event on Allies and Supporters in June 2020 followed by a set of recordings on the theme of Allies And Intersectionality, and a further Ask Me Anything event in October 2020 with an associated set of Ask Me Anything recordings.
In addition, the well-received series of Women in IP coffee breaks have paired in turn with the other IP Inclusive communities. It seems more important than ever that the different communities support each other to make IP law a more accessible and inclusive environment.

We need to do more work on our representation and inclusion of all identities within the LGBT+ umbrella. For example, there are few visible trans people within the IP sector, and currently none on the IP Out committee. This must be to the detriment of trans inclusion within our professions. We cannot immediately change the situation, but we hope we can make progress by ensuring that our events address identities that are not at present well represented.

Intersectionality remains an important issue for us as the evidence shows that people with multiple minority identities experience more extensive discrimination. In our programme of events over the next couple of years, we are planning events addressing intersectional identities such as LGBT+ and religion, LGBT+ and disability, and LGBT+ experiences of people of colour.

Finally, we plan to continue our support for and collaboration with STEM groups and diversity efforts of the learned societies in STEM fields. We also aim to continue to work with and learn from the LGBT+ inclusion initiatives in the wider legal area. We have achieved a great deal in a few short years, but there remains a long way to go.

Authors

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