# POWER IN RECOGNITION:

The LGBTQIA+ Inclusion Awards Toolkit



EUROPEAN PRIDE BUSINESS NETWORK

Pride Biz Austria

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# INDEX


INTRODUCTION AND WHO THIS TOOLKIT IS FOR . . . . 4

WHAT ARE LGBTQIA+ INCLUSION AWARDS? . . . . 5

WHY LGBTQIA+ INCLUSION AWARDS MATTER . . . . 6

ETHICAL, CULTURAL AND EUROPEAN CONSIDERATIONS . . . . 7

CASE STUDY 1
THE AUSTRIAN MERITUS MODEL . . . . 8

GETTING STARTED: STRATEGIC PREPARATION . . . . 9
- Establish a project group . . . . 9
- Define the award purpose . . . . 10
- Plan the timeline early . . . . 10

DESIGNING THE AWARD METHODOLOGY . . . . 11
- Core elements of the methodology . . . . 11

AWARD CATEGORIES AND ELIGIBILITY . . . . 12
- Optional additional categories . . . . 12

THE CRITERIA CATALOGUE AND QUESTIONNAIRE . . . . 13
- Recommended criteria domains . . . . 13
- Question design . . . . 14

NOMINATION AND SUBMISSION PROCESS . . . . 16
- Why the Process Matters . . . . 16
- National and European entry points . . . . 17
- Submission process . . . . 17
- Required materials . . . . 17

CASE STUDY 2
CZECH REPUBLIC: PRIDE BUSINESS FORUM AWARDS . . . . 18

EVALUATION AND SELECTION PROCESS . . . . 20
- Administrative review . . . . 20
- Jury scoring . . . . 20
- Calibration meeting . . . . 20

THE JURY, GOVERNANCE AND CONFLICTS OF INTEREST . . . . 21
- Jury composition . . . . 21
- Independence . . . . 21
- Conflict of interest . . . . 21
- Confidentiality . . . . 21

COMMUNICATION AND OUTREACH . . . . 22
- Before the call . . . . 22
- During the application phase . . . . 22
- After the ceremony . . . . 22

CASE STUDY 3

EDGE ITALY INCLUSIVE COMPANIES . . . . . 23

PARTNERSHIPS, SPONSORSHIP AND STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT . . . . . 24
Potential partners . . . . . 24
Sponsor visibility and safeguards . . . . . 24

PREPARING THE AWARDS CEREMONY . . . . . 25
Core elements . . . . . 25
Programme structure . . . . . 25
Accessibility and inclusion . . . . . 25

CASE STUDY 4

SPAIN – REDI TOP LÍDERES LGBTI+ . . . . . 26
Additional Note: Individual Selection by National Networks . . . . . 27

FINAL CASE STUDY

EUROPEAN INCLUSION AWARD PROCESS . . . . . 28

LESSONS LEARNED FROM THE EUROPEAN PROCESS . . . . . 30
What worked well . . . . . 30
What should be improved . . . . . 30

DO'S, DON'TS AND STRATEGIC RECOMMENDATIONS . . . . . 31
Do . . . . . 31
Don't . . . . . 31
Strategic reflection . . . . . 31

TEMPLATES AND CHECKLISTS . . . . . 32
Project planning checklist . . . . . 32
Application checklist for companies . . . . . 32
Jury checklist . . . . . 32
Communication checklist . . . . . 32

CONCLUSION . . . . . 33

SOURCE AND EVIDENCE BASE . . . . . 33

THE EUROPEAN PRIDE BUSINESS NETWORK:
DRIVING MEASURABLE LGBTQIA+ WORKPLACE INCLUSION . . . . . 34

# INTRODUCTION AND WHO THIS TOOLKIT IS FOR

So, you are interested in launching your own LGBTQIA+ Inclusion Award.

- ★ Perhaps your organisation already works with companies, public institutions or employers on Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI);
- ★ Perhaps you have noticed that many organisations are making important progress on LGBTQIA+ inclusion, but that their work is not yet visible enough;
- ★ Perhaps you want to create a structured award process that recognises employers who are not only speaking about inclusion, but actively implementing it through policies, programmes and measurable practices.

This toolkit is designed to support organisations, networks, NGOs and workplace inclusion initiatives that want to create, develop or strengthen their own LGBTQIA+ Inclusion Awards. It provides practical guidance on how to prepare an award process, define categories and criteria, communicate with companies, set up a jury, evaluate applications and organise an awards ceremony.

The toolkit is especially written for organisations working in the European context, where legal frameworks, workplace cultures and levels of LGBTQIA+ inclusion can differ significantly from country to country. It is based on the methodology developed within the EPBN-WISE project and draws on the experience of five participating countries. It builds on the Austrian Meritus model, a long-standing workplace inclusion award that recognises organisations for their commitment to LGBTQIA+ equality.

The aim is not to provide one rigid model that every organisation must copy. Instead, it offers a structured approach that can be adapted to different national contexts, organisational capacities and levels of experience. Some organisations may already have established workplace inclusion awards. Others may be preparing their first edition. Both situations are valuable. What matters is that the award process is transparent, credible, inclusive and rooted in concrete evidence of workplace change.

## HOW TO USE THIS TOOLKIT

Use it as a planning guide before launching an award, as an internal project-management document during implementation, and as a quality standard for improving future editions.

The chapters follow the logic of a full award cycle: strategy, methodology, outreach, submission, jury, ceremony, follow-up and sustainability.

# WHAT ARE LGBTQIA+ INCLUSION AWARDS?

LGBTQIA+ Inclusion Awards recognise companies and organisations that demonstrate a clear and active commitment to LGBTQIA+ inclusion in the workplace.

These awards are not simply about symbolic support or public communication during Pride Month. They are designed to highlight employers that embed LGBTQIA+ inclusion into their structures, policies, culture and everyday practices. This can include specific diversity programmes, inclusive HR policies, support for LGBTQIA+ employee networks, paid leave or additional support for transgender employees, inclusive gender options in internal systems, collaboration with LGBTQIA+ civil society organisations, awareness-raising activities, training programmes, inclusive communication and visible leadership commitment.

A strong LGBTQIA+ Inclusion Award should therefore ask not only whether a company supports LGBTQIA+ equality in principle, but how this support is implemented in practice. The focus should be on concrete measures, accountability, internal structures, long-term commitment and the real impact on LGBTQIA+ employees.

For the European model developed within EPBN WISE Project, the award process was structured around a standardized questionnaire. This made the process more accessible and allowed companies from different countries and organisational contexts to provide comparable information. The questionnaire focused on key areas such as strategy and commitment, motivation, responsibility and structure, concrete measures, communication, cooperation with LGBTQIA+ organisations and the sustainability of inclusion efforts.

| Awards should recognise... | Examples of evidence |
|---|---|
| Strategic commitment | Written strategy, policy, guidelines, leadership statements, budget and responsibility structures |
| Concrete workplace measures | Transition support guidelines, benefits, reporting systems, ERG support, training and inclusive HR processes |
| Culture and communication | Internal campaigns, inclusive language, leadership visibility, awareness activities and employee feedback |
| Community impact | Support for LGBTQIA+ organisations, partnerships, sponsorship, volunteering and advocacy |
| Sustainability | Ongoing resources, monitoring, governance, follow-up and continuous improvement |

# WHY LGBTQIA+ INCLUSION AWARDS MATTER

LGBTQIA+ Inclusion Awards matter because many LGBTQIA+ people across Europe still do not feel safe, comfortable or supported enough to be open about their sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression or sex characteristics at work.

For many employees, the workplace is not yet an environment where they can fully be themselves. Some remain closeted because they fear discrimination, career disadvantages, harassment or social exclusion. Others may experience microaggressions, biased assumptions, a lack of inclusive policies or the absence of visible support structures. Trans, non-binary and intersex employees often face additional barriers, especially when workplace systems, HR processes or health-related policies do not reflect their realities.

## EVIDENCE FROM EPBN-WISE RESEARCH

A first-of-its-kind European survey conducted by Associazione EDGE on behalf of EPBN within the EPBN-WISE project found that 63% of LGBTQIA+ workers surveyed felt their workplace was not inclusive due to microaggressions and non-inclusive language.

The research analysed more than 3,000 respondents across Austria, the Czech Republic, France, Germany and Italy, and highlighted the cumulative impact of everyday exclusion, stereotypes, non-inclusive language and subtle discriminatory behaviour.

The EPBN-WISE research on microaggressions shows why formal policies alone are not sufficient. Microaggressions are everyday slights, assumptions, exclusions or forms of non-inclusive language that may appear minor in isolation but can accumulate into minority stress, hypervigilance and emotional exhaustion. This means that workplace inclusion must be evaluated not only through written policies, but also through lived experiences, language, culture, leadership accountability and psychological safety.

The press release presenting the research also links these findings to broader European data, including the FRA report “EU LGBTIQ Survey III: LGBTIQ Equality at a Crossroads: Progress and Challenges,” noting that workplace discrimination levels have not substantially decreased in a decade. Against this backdrop, LGBTQIA+ Inclusion Awards can help transform inclusion from a general commitment into a measurable and accountable workplace standard.

Awards can create visibility for good practice, encourage companies to reflect on their own policies and motivate employers to move from intention to action. They also provide a framework for comparison, learning and accountability. When designed carefully, LGBTQIA+ Inclusion Awards can help raise standards across sectors and countries.

At the same time, awards can create a positive narrative around workplace inclusion. They show that LGBTQIA+ equality is not only a question of compliance or risk management, but also a driver of wellbeing, innovation, talent retention, leadership and organisational culture. Recognising inclusive companies sends a clear message: workplaces have a responsibility to create conditions in which LGBTQIA+ employees can thrive.

# ETHICAL, CULTURAL AND EUROPEAN CONSIDERATIONS

An LGBTQIA+ Inclusion Award is not only a competition. It is also a public intervention into national debates about equality, workplace culture and human rights. This means that organisers have ethical responsibilities toward applicants, employees, jury members and community stakeholders.

European countries differ significantly in terms of legal protection, public discourse, workplace maturity and social safety for LGBTQIA+ people. A methodology that works in one country may need to be adapted in another. The award should therefore be grounded in common European principles while remaining sensitive to national realities.

- ★ Do not force visibility. Companies may present internal practices involving LGBTQIA+ employees, but individuals must never be outed or used in public communication without explicit consent.
- ★ Protect confidential information. Applications may include sensitive HR data, internal documents, employee testimonies or information about discrimination cases.
- ★ Avoid pinkwashing. Public communication should not reward symbolic branding without evidence of internal substance.
- ★ Respect local risks. In some contexts, public LGBTQIA+ visibility can expose individuals and organisations to backlash. The communication strategy must be responsible and consent-based.
- ★ Model the standards you promote. The award process itself should be accessible, inclusive, gender-sensitive and transparent.

## PRACTICAL PRINCIPLE

The award should celebrate progress without compromising safety, confidentiality or community trust.

# CASE STUDY 1
# THE AUSTRIAN MERITUS MODEL

The Austrian Meritus model is one of the central reference points for this toolkit. Meritus has been awarded since 2009 and recognises organisations that integrate the diversity dimensions of sexual orientation and gender identity into their diversity management. The name “Meritus” derives from the Latin word for “deserved” or “merited,” underlining the award’s focus on recognising concrete and credible achievement.

The Meritus initiative is connected to Austrian LGBTQIA+ business and professional networks and has been supported by public institutions and private companies. Its methodology is based on a criteria catalogue, which functions as a structured questionnaire for organisations applying for the award.

The criteria catalogue evaluates several areas of workplace inclusion, including leadership and implementation, organisational responsibility, anti-discrimination mechanisms, social benefits, communication, people and culture management, supplier relationships and target groups. This structure makes the award transparent and comparable and allows the jury to assess applicants fairly.

Within the EPBN-WISE project, the Meritus model was used as a foundation for developing a European framework. The objective was not to copy the Austrian system one-to-one, but to extract transferable principles that could be adapted to different national contexts.

| Meritus principle Meritus principle | Transfer to European award design |
|---|---|
| Criteria catalogue | Use a structured questionnaire so applicants know what is evaluated and juries can compare applications. |
| Size categories | Evaluate organisations within comparable peer groups, especially where resources differ significantly. |
| Independent jury | Separate operational project management from evaluation and final decision-making. |
| Transparency | Publish rules, criteria, deadlines and jury procedures clearly. |
| Best-practice orientation | Use the award not only to rank companies, but also to guide organisational learning. |

# GETTING STARTED: STRATEGIC PREPARATION




Before launching an LGBTQIA+ Inclusion Award, your organisation should take time to prepare strategically. This is especially important if the award is intended to operate beyond one national context or if it will later feed into a European-level award process.

The experience of the WISE project showed that award development works best when it is built step by step. The process began with the implementation and adaptation of a methodology inspired by the Austrian Meritus model. Participating organisations explored how national award processes work, exchanged knowledge through a methodology webinar and then contributed to the creation of a European framework.

## ESTABLISH A PROJECT GROUP

The first step is the creation of a dedicated project team responsible for the implementation of the award. The project group should include people with project management, DEI, communications, event management, sponsorship and community expertise.

- ★ Project lead and overall coordination
- ★ Methodology and criteria development
- ★ Application and data management
- ★ Jury coordination and documentation
- ★ Communications and media relations
- ★ Sponsor and partner management
- ★ Event logistics and protocol
- ★ Reporting, budget, evaluation and follow-up

## DEFINE THE AWARD PURPOSE

The award needs a clear name, purpose and scope. For the European model, the focus was placed on LGBTQIA+ inclusion in the workplace. This made the award specific enough to distinguish it from broader diversity or corporate social responsibility awards, while still allowing companies to present a wide range of policies and initiatives.

## PLAN THE TIMELINE EARLY

Preparation should ideally begin six to twelve months before the award ceremony. The first edition usually requires more time because the methodology, visual identity, communications structure, application process and jury documents must be built from scratch.

| Phase | Recommended timing | Core tasks |
|---|---|---|
| Strategic preparation | 6–12 months before ceremony | Project group, methodology, categories, budget, partner mapping |
| Communication launch | 4–6 months before ceremony | Call for applications, website, outreach, info sessions |
| Submission phase | 2–4 months before ceremony | Application support, reminders, administrative review |
| Jury phase | 6–8 weeks before ceremony | Individual scoring, jury meeting, final decisions, documentation |
| Ceremony preparation | 4–6 weeks before ceremony | Trophies, scripts, seating, media, speaker briefing |
| Follow-up | 1–4 weeks after ceremony | Press release, photos, feedback, reporting, lessons learned |

# DESIGNING THE AWARD METHODOLOGY

A methodology is the backbone of the award. It explains how categories are defined, how applications are submitted, how the jury evaluates them, how conflicts of interest are managed and how decisions are documented.

A strong methodology creates trust. Companies understand what is expected from them. Jury members know how to assess applications. Sponsors and stakeholders can see that the process is independent. Community organisations can trust that the award is not merely a visibility exercise.

## CORE ELEMENTS OF THE METHODOLOGY

1. Award purpose and target group
2. Eligibility rules
3. Award categories
4. Criteria catalogue and scoring logic
5. Application and submission process
6. Administrative review
7. Jury composition and independence
8. Conflict-of-interest and confidentiality rules
9. Decision-making procedure
10. Communication, recognition and follow-up

## METHODOLOGY NOTE

The scoring system and point allocation can be based on the Austrian model, but should be understood as a suggested framework rather than a fixed standard.

Each country should be able to adapt weighting according to its legal, cultural and organisational context, provided the weighting is transparent.

# AWARD CATEGORIES AND ELIGIBILITY

Organisations differ significantly in financial resources, structural capacities and institutional influence. Smaller enterprises and start-ups often operate with limited budgets and personnel, while large companies may have dedicated HR, DEI, CSR, communication and legal departments. Fairness therefore requires more than applying identical expectations to everyone.

The Austrian Meritus model and the European methodology distinguish organisations by size so that applicants are assessed within comparable peer groups. This does not mean lowering standards; it means evaluating inclusion efforts relative to organisational capacity, influence and resources.

| Proposed category | Employees | Evaluation consideration |
|---|---|---|
| Micro enterprises | Fewer than 10 | Focus on proportional effort, direct leadership commitment and authentic culture. |
| Small enterprises | Fewer than 50 | Consider informal structures, practical policies, employee involvement and community engagement. |
| Medium-sized enterprises | Fewer than 250 | Expect more structured HR processes, training, reporting and internal responsibility. |
| Large enterprises | 250 or more | Expect systematic implementation, governance, monitoring, benefits, communication and broader social impact. |

## OPTIONAL ADDITIONAL CATEGORIES

★ Public sector institutions
★ NGOs and civil society organisations
★ Educational institutions
★ Innovation in LGBTQIA+ inclusion
★ Trans and non-binary inclusion
★ Allyship and leadership commitment
★ Community impact or partnership award

The decision regarding categories should be made early and communicated transparently. However, organisers may also allow flexibility if the application pool develops differently than expected. For example, if no medium-sized company qualifies but two small companies demonstrate outstanding practices, the jury may recommend an adapted recognition structure if this is allowed by the rules.

# THE CRITERIA CATALOGUE AND QUESTIONNAIRE

The criteria catalogue forms the core of the award methodology. It defines what kind of LGBTQIA+ inclusion work will be recognised, how organisations can demonstrate their engagement, and what evidence they are expected to provide. A well-designed criteria catalogue ensures that the award is not based on general impressions, visibility alone or isolated symbolic actions, but on structured, comparable and evidence-based information.

The catalogue should cover both strategic and practical dimensions of LGBTQIA+ inclusion. Applicants should be asked not only what they have done, but also why they have done it, who is responsible, how implementation is monitored and what impact the measures have had. This makes the process more transparent and helps the jury distinguish between isolated activities and sustainable organisational change.

Below we recommend a criteria catalogue based on the Austrian model. It divides LGBTQIA+ inclusion into several thematic areas, including guiding principles and implementation, organisational responsibility, dealing with discrimination, voluntary social benefits, communication and administration, people management, suppliers and cooperation partners, target groups and further development. Each area is linked to specific questions and, where relevant, applicants are invited to submit supporting materials such as policies, examples, screenshots, guidelines or other documents.

## RECOMMENDED CRITERIA DOMAINS

| Domain | Suggested points | What to evaluate |
|---|---|---|
| Guiding principle and implementation | 25 | This section evaluates whether the organisation has written and binding strategies, mission statements, policies or guidelines that explicitly refer to sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression and sex characteristics. It should also ask whether these documents go beyond minimum legal requirements and how they are implemented in practice. |
| Organisation and responsibility | 25 | This section evaluates who is responsible for LGBTQIA+ inclusion internally, where responsibility is located and whether it is connected to leadership, HR, employee resource groups, diversity committees or dedicated roles. It should also ask whether sufficient resources are available, including budget, working time, personnel and organisational support. |
| Dealing with discrimination | 25 | This section evaluates whether the organisation has clear reporting channels, trusted contact persons, anonymous reporting options, response protocols and procedures for handling discrimination cases. It should also assess whether protection from retaliation is ensured and whether the organisation documents, evaluates and learns from cases. |

| Domain | Suggested points | What to evaluate |
|---|---|---|
| Additional and voluntary social benefits | 25 | This section evaluates whether benefits are inclusive of different family constellations, partnerships and life situations. This may include partner benefits, parental leave, transition-related support, healthcare, pension schemes, care leave, relocation support and other voluntary benefits. |
| Communication, administration and facilities | 10 | This section evaluates inclusive internal and external communication, representation in words and images, gender options in HR and customer systems, the possibility to change names and gender markers, access to gender-neutral sanitary facilities and the visibility of LGBTQIA+ inclusion in everyday organisational structures. |
| People and culture management | 25 | This section evaluates training, awareness-raising, leadership development, mentoring, employee networks and measures that support self-understanding, self-disclosure and psychological safety. It should also ask whether these measures are voluntary or mandatory and which target groups they reach. |
| Suppliers and cooperation partners | 10 | This section evaluates whether diversity and human rights considerations are part of procurement and cooperation decisions. Organisations can be asked whether they expect suppliers and partners to respect non-discrimination principles and whether they actively support or prefer cooperation partners with strong diversity commitments. |
| Target groups and community engagement | 10 | This section evaluates whether the organisation supports LGBTQIA+ communities externally, for example through sponsorships, partnerships, events, campaigns, community initiatives or cooperation with LGBTQIA+ organisations. This area should distinguish between authentic engagement and purely promotional visibility. |

## QUESTION DESIGN

The questionnaire translates the criteria catalogue into an accessible submission format. Questions should be clear, evidence-based and understandable for organisations of different sizes and levels of experience. Where possible, legal jargon should be avoided or explained. A good questionnaire does not only collect information; it can also function as a learning tool for organisations that are still at the beginning of their inclusion journey.

Questions should ask for both formal structures and practical examples. For instance, it is useful to ask whether an organisation has a written policy, but also how this policy is communicated, who is responsible for implementation and how employees experience it in practice.

A strong questionnaire should:

- ★ ask for written strategies, policies and guidelines, but also for concrete implementation examples;
- ★ ask who is responsible for LGBTQIA+ inclusion and whether this responsibility is resourced;
- ★ ask for evidence of impact, not only descriptions of activities;
- ★ include optional upload fields for policies, visuals, reports, screenshots, guidelines, testimonials and internal communication examples;
- ★ make clear which information will remain confidential and which information may be used for external communication;
- ★ allow applicants to explain alternative approaches, especially where formalised structures may not yet exist.

The questionnaire should be standardised so that submissions can be compared fairly. At the same time, it should leave enough space for organisations to describe their specific context, especially smaller organisations, NGOs, public sector institutions or local branches of international companies.

## ACCESSIBILITY PRINCIPLE

A standardised questionnaire improves comparability, but it must not become inaccessible. Clear language, explanations of technical terms and transparent instructions are essential. Applicants should understand what is being asked, why the information is relevant and what kind of evidence can be submitted.

Information sessions, webinars or Q&A formats during the submission phase can help ensure that organisations understand the process. This is particularly important for organisations that may have meaningful inclusion measures but limited experience with award applications, reporting formats or diversity terminology.

Accessibility also means recognising different organisational realities. A small organisation may not have the same resources as a large corporation, but it can still demonstrate commitment, responsibility and impact. The questionnaire should therefore be designed in a way that allows for comparability without excluding organisations with fewer formal structures.

# NOMINATION AND SUBMISSION PROCESS

A professional and transparent nomination and submission process is essential for the credibility of the award. Organisations should understand who can participate, which categories exist, what information is required, how their data will be handled and when decisions will be made.

The submission process should begin with a clear public call for applications or nominations. This call should explain the purpose of the award, the eligibility criteria, the award categories, the criteria domains, the expected evidence and the timeline. It should also clarify whether organisations nominate themselves, are nominated by others or can enter through both pathways.

The criteria catalogue should be made available before or at the opening of the submission period. This gives organisations enough time to understand the requirements, gather internal information, involve relevant departments and prepare supporting materials. Because the catalogue asks for evidence across several areas — such as policies, HR processes, benefits, communication, discrimination procedures and community engagement — applicants need sufficient preparation time.

A realistic submission period should usually last several weeks. Depending on the size of the award and the complexity of the questionnaire, a period of six to ten weeks can be appropriate. This allows applicants to collect documents, coordinate internally and provide thoughtful answers rather than rushed statements.

After the submission deadline, the organising team should conduct an initial completeness and eligibility check. This step ensures that the organisation fits the award category, that the submission is complete enough to be evaluated and that required documents or explanations are available. If the process allows it, applicants may be contacted for clarification or missing information within a clearly defined timeframe.

The review phase must also be given enough time. Jury members need time to read the submissions, compare the answers with the criteria, review supporting materials and prepare for the jury discussion. This is particularly important because a fair evaluation requires more than counting activities. The jury should assess the quality, depth, responsibility, implementation and impact of the measures submitted.

A transparent process strengthens trust in the award. Applicants should know how the evaluation works, who is involved in the decision-making process, whether conflicts of interest are managed and how confidentiality is protected. They do not need to know every internal discussion, but they should understand the basic logic of the process.

The timeline should therefore include at least the following steps:

1. publication of the call and criteria catalogue;
2. submission period;
3. information session or Q&A opportunity;
4. submission deadline;
5. eligibility and completeness check;
6. jury review period;
7. jury meeting and final decision;
8. notification of selected organisations;
9. communication preparation;
10. award ceremony or public announcement.

## WHY THE PROCESS MATTERS

A clear submission and review process is important because it protects the credibility of the award. LGBTQIA+ inclusion awards can have significant public visibility. They can influence employer branding, public reputation and community trust. For this reason, the process must be transparent, fair and evidence-based.

Without a clear methodology, there is a risk that awards recognise organisations mainly for public communication rather than real internal change. A structured criteria catalogue and questionnaire reduce this risk by asking applicants to demonstrate concrete measures, responsibilities, resources and impact.

The process is also important for the organisations themselves. Preparing a submission can help them reflect on their current status, identify gaps and understand where further development is needed. Even organisations that do not receive an award can benefit from the process because the questionnaire functions as a self-assessment and learning tool.

Finally, transparency is important for the LGBTQIA+ communities the award aims to serve. Communities need to trust that recognised organisations are not only using LGBTQIA+ visibility for communication purposes, but are actively working on safer, fairer and more inclusive structures. A careful process helps ensure that recognition is meaningful, responsible and credible.

## NATIONAL AND EUROPEAN ENTRY POINTS

For the European LGBTQIA+ Inclusion Award developed for the European WISE project context, the participating EPBN-WISE countries nominate outstanding companies through an internal national process. Companies do not apply directly at European level. If a national award already exists, the nominated company should have won or at least been shortlisted at national level before being considered for the European award. This ensures that national awards remain the primary entry point and that organisations do not bypass their home country process.

## SUBMISSION PROCESS

- ★ Launch of call or national nomination process
- ★ Information session or methodology webinar
- ★ Submission through standardised online form based on the criteria catalogue
- ★ Optional helpdesk support during the application phase
- ★ Administrative completeness check
- ★ Transfer of complete applications to the jury
- ★ Individual jury review and scoring
- ★ Joint jury meeting and final decision

## REQUIRED MATERIALS

- ★ Completed submission form and criteria catalogue
- ★ Supporting documentation, such as policies, guidelines, visuals, reports or testimonials
- ★ Declaration of authenticity
- ★ Consent for the use of public information, logos and photos where relevant
- ★ Optional company profile for public communication if shortlisted or awarded

# CASE STUDY 2
# CZECH REPUBLIC: PRIDE BUSINESS FORUM AWARDS

The Pride Business Forum Awards in the Czech Republic provide a strong example of a national award process that recognises both organisational and individual contributions to LGBTQ+ workplace inclusion. The main aim of the awards is to advance LGBTQ+ inclusion in the workplace by recognising and motivating companies and individuals who actively contribute to fair, safe and inclusive working environments.

The awards are designed not only to celebrate existing good practice, but also to inspire other organisations to improve their approach to equality, diversity and inclusion. This makes the award both a recognition mechanism and a tool for broader workplace culture change.

Participation is open to companies as well as individuals. Companies can be recognised for their structural and organisational commitment to LGBTQ+ inclusion, while individuals can be nominated for their personal impact, leadership and advocacy within the workplace. This dual focus is important because sustainable inclusion depends both on institutional responsibility and on people who actively drive change from within organisations.



For companies, the evaluation focuses on a broad range of workplace inclusion areas. These include inclusive policies and benefits, support for trans and gender-diverse employees, inclusive recruitment and employee development, LGBTQ+ employee resource groups, leadership commitment, internal communication and training, as well as impact measurement and continuous improvement. Companies are assessed not only on whether policies exist, but also on how these policies are implemented in practice, how employees are engaged and what outcomes can be demonstrated.

For individuals, the assessment focuses on their contribution to LGBTQ+ inclusion, their leadership and advocacy efforts, and the extent to which they go beyond their formal responsibilities to create a safer and more inclusive workplace. This allows the award to highlight role models, allies and internal change-makers whose work may not always be visible in formal organisational structures.

The nomination and submission process is based on a self-evaluation form. Applicants provide information about their inclusion measures and include supporting documentation as evidence. The submitted materials are reviewed and assessed on a point-based system by a committee. The results are then reviewed by a jury, combining structured evaluation with independent judgement.

The process includes both a selection committee and a jury. This structure strengthens the credibility of the award because it separates the technical assessment of applications from the final review and recognition process. The full award process usually takes around three months, from submission and review to final decision-making.

What makes the Pride Business Forum Awards a relevant good-practice example is their comprehensive and carefully designed evaluation framework. The framework gives appropriate weight to different criteria according to their importance and impact on LGBTQ+ inclusion. Rather than focusing only on declared intentions, policies or public commitments, the assessment places strong emphasis on practical implementation and measurable outcomes.

The Czech example shows how a national award can combine visibility, motivation and accountability. By recognising both companies and individuals, the Pride Business Forum Awards highlight that LGBTQ+ workplace inclusion is created through policies, leadership, culture, employee engagement and continuous improvement. This holistic approach can inspire other organisations and networks that want to develop their own LGBTQIA+ inclusion award systems.

# EVALUATION AND SELECTION PROCESS

There are different ways to evaluate and select award recipients. The method should fit the organisation's capacity, the number of applications and the complexity of the award. What matters most is that the process is transparent, documented and fair.

## ADMINISTRATIVE REVIEW

Before jury evaluation begins, the project team should check whether applications are complete and eligible. This is not a substantive evaluation. It is a quality and completeness check to ensure that the jury receives comparable documents.

★ Check whether the applicant belongs to the correct category.

★ Check whether all mandatory questions are answered.

★ Check whether required declarations and supporting materials are included.

★ Clarify missing information before the jury phase if the rules allow this.

## JURY SCORING

Jury members should receive a structured evaluation file for each application, including the questionnaire, supporting documents and scoring sheet. To reduce differences in interpretation, the organiser should provide a scoring guide with examples of low, medium and high evidence quality.

## LESSON FROM THE EUROPEAN PROCESS

Jury feedback showed that evaluation was more time-consuming than initially estimated.

Some jury members also reported that missing or insufficiently detailed evaluation criteria led to differences in how applications were assessed. Future editions should therefore include clearer scoring guidance and a calibration meeting.

## CALIBRATION MEETING

Before the final evaluation, the jury should discuss one or two sample applications together. This helps align expectations, clarify scoring logic and reduce differences in interpretation. Calibration is particularly important in European processes where jury members bring different national perspectives and legal contexts.

# THE JURY, GOVERNANCE AND CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The jury is one of the most important credibility elements of the award. Its composition, independence and working procedures directly influence the legitimacy of the process.

## JURY COMPOSITION

- ★ Diversity and inclusion experts
- ★ LGBTQIA+ workplace specialists
- ★ Representatives from civil society
- ★ Researchers or academics
- ★ HR and inclusion professionals
- ★ Business leaders with credible inclusion expertise

For a European award, the jury should ideally include at least one representative from each participating country, while remaining balanced in terms of gender, professional background, community knowledge and independence.

## INDEPENDENCE

The project team should coordinate logistics, prepare documentation, moderate meetings and write protocols. It should not influence jury decisions and should not hold voting rights. Sponsors and applicants must not be able to influence outcomes.

## CONFLICT OF INTEREST

Jury members must declare any affiliations with applicants before evaluation begins. A conflict of interest may exist if a jury member works for an applicant, has worked for them recently, has personal or financial ties, is involved in a competing company, or has any other relationship that could affect impartiality.

- ★ Jury members should review the full list of applicants before scoring.
- ★ Conflicts must be declared in writing.
- ★ Jury members must recuse themselves from scoring conflicting applications.
- ★ Multiple conflicts may require replacing a jury member or adapting the allocation of applications.

## CONFIDENTIALITY

Applications may include sensitive information about employees, discrimination cases, internal policies or organisational challenges. Jury members should sign a confidentiality agreement and must not disclose application content outside the evaluation process.

# COMMUNICATION AND OUTREACH

Communication is key for a successful application process and credible award visibility. It should begin before the call opens and continue after the ceremony.

## BEFORE THE CALL

★ Develop key messages explaining why the award matters.

★ Prepare a dedicated website or landing page with rules, criteria, deadlines and FAQs.

★ Create a communication calendar for LinkedIn, newsletters, press and partner networks.

★ Prepare visual assets for the call, jury announcement and ceremony.

## DURING THE APPLICATION PHASE

★ Publish reminders and practical guidance.

★ Host information sessions or webinars.

★ Personally contact organisations with strong inclusion practices.

★ Encourage first-time applicants and explain that the award is also a learning process.

## AFTER THE CEREMONY

★ Publish winners and finalists with approved logos and descriptions.

★ Share photos, videos and quotes from the ceremony.

★ Prepare a press release and social media package for winners.

★ Highlight best practices without disclosing confidential application data.

Direct outreach is often more effective than passive communication alone. Many organisations may hesitate to participate because they are uncertain whether their work is “good enough,” fear public criticism, or lack experience with LGBTQIA+ awards. Trust-based communication can significantly increase participation and improve the quality of submissions.

# CASE STUDY 3
# EDGE ITALY INCLUSIVE COMPANIES

Within the WISE project, Associazione EDGE in Italy introduced company awards as an extension of its existing Role Models approach. The methodology used for the company awards was directly inspired by the Role Models selection framework. Just as the Role Models programme identified individuals capable of inspiring social and cultural change through leadership and visibility, the company recognition process aimed to identify organisations capable of generating positive impact through inclusive policies, workplace culture and concrete DEI practices.

Companies were evaluated not only for symbolic support of LGBTQIA+ inclusion, but for their ability to transform Diversity & Inclusion into a real driver of wellbeing, innovation, talent valorisation and competitiveness.

In December 2025, during EDGE's charity events in Rome and Milan, six companies were recognised as "Inclusive Companies" alongside eleven Italian LGBTQIA+ Role Models. The awards highlighted organisations that had demonstrated a strong commitment to creating inclusive work environments, supporting LGBTQIA+ employees and promoting equality within corporate culture and professional development.

The introduction of the company awards strengthened the strategic vision of WISE by connecting individual role modelling with institutional and organisational responsibility. EDGE emphasised that inclusive workplaces cannot rely only on visible LGBTQIA+ leaders. They also require companies capable of embedding inclusion into governance, communication, human resources and workplace culture.

The 2025 edition marked an important transition from a programme centred primarily on inspirational visibility toward a broader systemic approach to workplace inclusion. Through the recognition of both individuals and companies, WISE aimed to create a more integrated ecosystem in which professionals, allies and organisations collectively contribute to advancing LGBTQIA+ equality across Europe.

# PARTNERSHIPS, SPONSORSHIP AND STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT

A sustainable award structure requires strategic partnerships and financial support. Partners and sponsors can contribute financial resources, venues, catering, communication support, visibility materials, expertise or access to networks.

## POTENTIAL PARTNERS

- ★ Companies with credible DEI strategies
- ★ National LGBTQIA+ organisations
- ★ Chambers of commerce
- ★ Ministries and public institutions
- ★ Pride organisations
- ★ Media partners
- ★ Trade unions and workplace networks

## SPONSOR VISIBILITY AND SAFEGUARDS

Sponsors can receive visibility, invitations, networking opportunities and association with the award's values. However, sponsorship must never influence the jury process. Sponsoring companies may remain eligible to participate only if neutrality is ensured and communicated transparently.

## GOVERNANCE SAFEGUARD

Separate sponsorship management from jury decision-making. Sponsorship should support the award infrastructure, not influence the outcome.

# PREPARING THE AWARDS CEREMONY

The award ceremony is both a recognition event and a strategic visibility opportunity. It should reflect professionalism, inclusion, diversity, celebration and community visibility.

## CORE ELEMENTS

- ★ Venue selection and accessibility
- ★ Catering and hospitality
- ★ Technical equipment
- ★ Photography and videography
- ★ Stage management and script
- ★ Branding, PowerPoint presentations and winner visuals
- ★ Music, artistic interventions or community performances
- ★ Goodie bags, sponsor visibility and information material
- ★ Seating plan, VIP protocol, security, and media coordination

## PROGRAMME STRUCTURE

| Segment | Purpose |
|---|---|
| Welcome reception | Create a warm and professional entry point for networking. |
| Opening remarks | Frame the award, thank partners and explain why LGBTQIA+ inclusion matters. |
| Evidence or keynote segment | Present data, research or lived experience to underline urgency. |
| Award categories | Introduce each category, nominees and winners. |
| Winner statements | Allow selected representatives to share short reflections. |
| Community or artistic element | Celebrate LGBTQIA+ culture and keep the ceremony dynamic. |
| Networking | Create space for companies, community organisations and stakeholders to connect. |

## ACCESSIBILITY AND INCLUSION

An LGBTQIA+ Inclusion Award should itself model the standards it promotes. This means accessible venues, inclusive registration forms, pronoun badges, gender-neutral facilities where possible, sign language interpretation if budget allows, and careful moderation language.

# CASE STUDY 4
# SPAIN - REDI TOP LÍDERES LGBTI+




In Spain, REDI – the Spanish business network for LGBTQIA+ diversity and inclusion – provides an example of a recognition process that combines visibility, corporate inclusion and role model representation. Through the "Top Líderes LGBTI+" initiative, organised in collaboration with Actualidad Económica / Unidad Editorial, REDI recognises professionals, allies, entrepreneurs and companies that actively contribute to LGBTQIA+ inclusion in the corporate sector.

The Spanish model is not only focused on companies as institutions, but also on the people who drive change from within. The 2026 edition includes several categories: LGBTQIA+ leadership, LGBTQIA+ drivers of change, allies, LGBTQIA+ entrepreneurs and inclusive companies. This broad category structure allows the process to recognise different forms of impact: senior leadership, internal engagement, allyship, entrepreneurship and organisational policy development.

For companies, the process requires applicants to provide structured information about their organisation, including the number of employees in Spain, years of business activity, years of implementation of LGBTQIA+ diversity policies and whether investment in LGBTQIA+ diversity has been maintained or increased. Applicants are also asked to explain their motivation, describe concrete actions and tangible results, provide examples of external recognition and submit additional supporting material.

This approach shows the importance of combining visibility with evidence. Companies are not only asked to state that they are inclusive; they are asked to demonstrate what they have implemented, how long the work has been taking place and what results have been achieved. The possibility to submit additional material, such as presentations, corporate websites, media coverage or other documentation, strengthens the evidence base and supports a more informed review.

The Spanish example also highlights the importance of preparation. REDI makes the application questions available in advance because the online form cannot be saved once started. This is a practical accessibility measure: it allows applicants to prepare their answers, gather internal information and coordinate with relevant departments before submitting. It also improves the quality of applications and reduces the risk of incomplete or rushed submissions.

The selection process includes an independent jury composed of professionals from the corporate and LGBTQIA+ diversity field. This strengthens the credibility of the recognition, especially because applications may include sensitive information, public visibility and reputational benefits for companies. The process also includes clear timelines, from the opening of applications to the deadline, jury evaluation and publication of the final list.

The REDI case study demonstrates that an LGBTQIA+ inclusion recognition process can be both visible and structured. It creates public role models, strengthens corporate accountability and encourages companies to reflect on their internal policies, resources and impact. For other countries or networks, this model offers valuable inspiration for combining personal leadership, company recognition, transparent criteria and a professional submission process.

## ADDITIONAL NOTE: INDIVIDUAL SELECTION BY NATIONAL NETWORKS

In some national contexts, companies may not apply through an open public call but may instead be selected individually by the responsible national LGBTQIA+ business network or partner organisation. For example, L'Autre Cercle in France and Berufsverband VK in Germany selected companies individually based on their knowledge of the national corporate landscape, existing engagement and relevance to the inclusion process.

This approach can be useful when the award process is still being developed, when timelines are limited or when national partners have strong expertise and direct insight into companies' LGBTQIA+ inclusion work. However, even where companies are selected individually, the process should still be transparent internally. Selection should be based on clear criteria, documented reasoning and, where possible, comparable information. This helps ensure fairness and prevents the perception that recognition is based only on personal networks or visibility.

# FINAL CASE STUDY
# EUROPEAN INCLUSION AWARD PROCESS




The European Inclusion Award process provides an example of how national approaches can be brought together into a shared European framework. Unlike purely national awards, the European process requires comparability across different legal, cultural and organisational contexts. Companies may operate in countries with different levels of LGBTQIA+ legal protection, different workplace cultures and different levels of public visibility. A European methodology must therefore be structured enough to ensure fairness, but flexible enough to reflect national realities.

The process was based on a common criteria framework inspired by existing good practice, including the Meritus methodology. The criteria focused on core areas of LGBTQIA+ inclusion such as strategy, organisational responsibility, dealing with discrimination, benefits, communication, people management, suppliers, community engagement and further development. This ensured that companies were evaluated not only on visibility or public communication, but on the depth and sustainability of their inclusion work.

A key element of the European process was the involvement of an international jury. The jury brought together different perspectives, professional backgrounds and national experiences. This was essential because LGBTQIA+ inclusion cannot be assessed only from one national viewpoint. An international jury can better understand different legal environments, compare submissions across countries and identify both common standards and context-specific achievements.

The European process also shows why time is needed for a fair review. Submissions must be checked, read, compared and discussed. Jury members need enough time to understand the evidence provided, assess the quality of implementation and consider the impact of the measures. This is especially important when companies come from different countries and may use different terminology, documentation styles or organisational structures.

Transparency is central to the credibility of such a European process. Participating companies need to know how they are selected or nominated, which criteria are used, who reviews the applications and how conflicts of interest are handled. Clear communication about the timeline, the role of national partners, the review phase and the final decision-making process helps build trust among applicants, jury members and LGBTQIA+ communities.

The European Inclusion Award process demonstrates that recognition can be more than a symbolic award. If designed carefully, it can become a tool for learning, benchmarking and cross-border exchange. It allows companies to reflect on their own structures, compare approaches with peers in other countries and contribute to a broader European conversation on LGBTQIA+ workplace inclusion.

# LESSONS LEARNED FROM THE EUROPEAN PROCESS

The European award process provided important insights into what works well and what should be improved in future editions.

## WHAT WORKED WELL

- ★ The organisation of the jury process, including meetings and prepared materials.
- ★ A friendly and constructive atmosphere among motivated people.
- ★ The opportunity for jury members to contribute to a European award process.
- ★ The use of local knowledge to interpret national contexts and organisational realities.
- ★ The connection between national experiences and a shared European framework.

## WHAT SHOULD BE IMPROVED

- ★ The evaluation process was more time-consuming than initially estimated.
- ★ Missing or insufficiently detailed evaluation criteria led to differences in scoring approaches.
- ★ Some company applications did not answer all relevant questions, making comparison more difficult.
- ★ Future editions should include clearer scoring guidance, mandatory answer fields and a calibration meeting.
- ★ The workload for jury members should be communicated more realistically from the beginning.

## IMPROVEMENT RECOMMENDATION

Build a jury handbook that includes the criteria catalogue, scoring descriptions, conflict-of-interest rules, confidentiality obligations, timeline, contact persons and sample scoring cases.

# DO'S, DON'TS AND STRATEGIC RECOMMENDATIONS

## DO

- ★ Start planning early and build long-term structures.
- ★ Define the purpose, categories and eligibility criteria before launching the call.
- ★ Use a transparent criteria catalogue and standardised questionnaire.
- ★ Provide clear evaluation guidance to jury members.
- ★ Separate operational project management from jury decision-making.
- ★ Protect confidentiality and obtain consent for public communication.
- ★ Integrate accessibility from the beginning.
- ★ Use the award to collect and share best practices, not only to announce winners.

## DON'T

- ★ Do not underestimate the workload for application management, jury coordination and communication.
- ★ Do not focus exclusively on large corporations; smaller organisations can create highly impactful inclusion practices.
- ★ Do not treat accessibility as an afterthought.
- ★ Do not copy methodologies without adapting them to national legislation and cultural realities.
- ★ Do not allow sponsors or project staff to influence jury outcomes.
- ★ Do not publish sensitive information from applications without explicit consent.
- ★ not confuse symbolic Pride visibility with structural inclusion.

## STRATEGIC REFLECTION

An LGBTQIA+ Inclusion Award should not be understood solely as a ceremonial event. When implemented strategically, it can become a platform for visibility, a driver for organisational change, a mechanism for accountability and a catalyst for long-term inclusion development. The most sustainable award structures combine professionalism, transparency, accessibility, independent governance, stakeholder engagement and strong community involvement.

# TEMPLATES AND CHECKLISTS

## PROJECT PLANNING CHECKLIST

- ☐ Project team established
- ☐ Budget drafted
- ☐ Award purpose defined
- ☐ Categories approved
- ☐ Criteria catalogue adapted
- ☐ Application platform prepared
- ☐ Jury recruited
- ☐ Conflict-of-interest process prepared
- ☐ Communication calendar drafted
- ☐ Sponsor package developed
- ☐ Ceremony venue secured
- ☐ Accessibility plan checked
- ☐ Post-event reporting plan prepared

## APPLICATION CHECKLIST FOR COMPANIES

- ☐ Completed questionnaire
- ☐ Written strategy or policy documents
- ☐ Examples of concrete measures
- ☐ Evidence of internal communication or training
- ☐ Evidence of reporting or anti-discrimination mechanisms
- ☐ Information on responsible persons or structures
- ☐ Examples of community cooperation
- ☐ Optional employee feedback or testimonials
- ☐ Logo and communication consent form

## JURY CHECKLIST

- ☐ Jury members confirmed
- ☐ Confidentiality agreement signed
- ☐ Conflict-of-interest form signed
- ☐ Applications distributed securely
- ☐ Scoring sheet provided
- ☐ Evaluation guide provided
- ☐ Calibration meeting held
- ☐ Individual scores submitted
- ☐ Final jury meeting documented
- ☐ Decision summary prepared

## COMMUNICATION CHECKLIST

- ☐ Website section published
- ☐ Call for applications announced
- ☐ Partner networks activated
- ☐ LinkedIn campaign prepared
- ☐ Press release drafted
- ☐ Info session hosted
- ☐ Shortlisted companies briefed
- ☐ Winner communication approved
- ☐ Photos and videos prepared for publication
- ☐ Post-event press release distributed

# CONCLUSION

This toolkit provides a practical and inclusive framework for implementing LGBTQIA+ Inclusion Awards at national and European level. By adapting the successful Meritus model to a broader European context, organisations can foster visibility, accountability and progress in LGBTQIA+ inclusion across sectors and countries.

The awards should not only highlight and reward outstanding commitment. They should also encourage more organisations to actively improve their policies, structures and cultures. In doing so, they send a strong message that inclusion is a key factor for innovation, employee wellbeing, talent retention and long-term organisational success.

Today, this work is more important than ever. The EPBN-WISE microaggressions research shows that many LGBTQIA+ employees still experience non-inclusive workplace environments despite formal progress. Awards can help make inclusion visible, measurable and actionable. They can turn good intentions into standards, standards into accountability, and accountability into better workplaces for LGBTQIA+ people across Europe.

# SOURCE AND EVIDENCE BASE

This draft toolkit consolidates material from the EPBN-WISE Role Models Toolkit structure, the LGBTQIA+ Inclusion Award methodology draft, the Austrian Meritus model references contained in the draft, jury feedback from the European award process, EDGE Italy input on Inclusive Companies, and the EPBN-WISE press release on the European survey on microaggressions, language and wellbeing in the workplace for LGBTQIA+ people.

The press release data used in this toolkit includes the 63% finding on perceived non-inclusive workplaces due to microaggressions and non-inclusive language, the five-country scope of the research, and the emphasis that formal policies alone are insufficient without everyday inclusive culture, language and accountability.

# THE EUROPEAN PRIDE BUSINESS NETWORK: DRIVING MEASURABLE LGBTQIA+ WORKPLACE INCLUSION

EUROPEAN PRIDE BUSINESS NETWORK



Founded in 2022, the European Pride Business Network (EPBN) is a politically independent umbrella organization that brings together national and regional LGBTIQ+ professional associations from across Europe. EPBN works to advance workplace equality, foster inclusive business environments, and promote the economic empowerment of LGBTIQ+ individuals. Today, the network unites 28 member organizations across 24 European countries, forming a strong and growing alliance committed to driving sustainable change through visibility, advocacy, and collaboration.

Have questions, feedback, or ideas? Whether you're a professional, organization, or partner, we'd love to hear from you at info@epbn.eu

Discover our work and impact at www.epbn.eu.