

DIVERSITY & INCLUSION

BUILDING EMPLOYEE RESOURCE GROUPS & DRIVING CHANGE



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Creating employee resource groups (ERGs) is an approach you can use to build a more inclusive environment and address diversity and inclusion in a more holistic, community-based way. ERGs, also known as affinity groups, have emerged in the workplace as a standard component of diversity and inclusion initiatives. In fact, according to a report from Bentley University, nearly 90% of all Fortune 500 companies have ERGs.

For many organizations, the benefits of ERGs have evolved from their primary intent – to provide a forum in which members of an organization who share common interests, issues or concerns can meet to address those issues – into multifaceted benefits that influence an organization’s strategic diversity and inclusion efforts in recruitment, retention, mentoring, leadership development, marketing, customer relations and return on investment.

WHAT IS AN EMPLOYEE RESOURCE GROUP?

The first employee resource groups were initially workplace affinity groups created in response to racial strife during the civil rights era. In 1964, Joseph Wilson, the former CEO of Xerox, developed the concept following race riots in Rochester, N.Y. Wilson and his African-American employees designed and launched the National Black Employees Caucus in 1970 to address racial tension and the issue of workplace discrimination.

Modern ERG programs are the enduring legacy of the courageous efforts of Mr. Wilson and his colleagues. In its most basic form, an ERG is an employee identity or experience-based group that helps employees within an organization build community and share a common cause.

ERGs are generally based upon building or strengthening community in order to provide support and contribute to personal and professional development in the workplace. And, while most ERGs are volunteer-based, some companies support organizers with a percentage of paid time off or other recognition, including leadership development opportunities.



What is the purpose of an ERG program?

While each ERG must define its purpose and goal, there are some commonalities. For instance, ERG programs:



- Create an open forum for employees who share a common identity to meet and support one another in building their community and sense of belonging
- Empower these groups by offering them financial or organizational support, as well as access to decision-makers
- Facilitate a clear line of communication from ERGs to leadership in order to voice concerns and solve problems
- Seek to advance a respectful and inclusive company culture
- Provide a resource for leadership regarding employee and community issues, needs and policies

What does an ERG look like?

Likewise, ERGs come in a variety of forms. Some of the more popular options include:

Diversity groups that foster a sense of belonging among employees who are part of a minority group in the organization

Volunteer programs in which employees can support charities and other volunteer initiatives

Affinity clubs in which employees with similar interests have an opportunity to socialize

Professional development groups that provide employees with the opportunity to share knowledge from other departments

THE VALUE OF EMPLOYEE RESOURCE GROUPS

ERGs deliver value to organizations and their workforces in multiple ways. Specifically, they build a sense of community and belonging for employees by connecting people in a social and professional way and encouraging interaction between employees.

What's more, according to a report from SHRM, 90% of companies examined said that ERGs helped make new hires more comfortable during the onboarding

process, and 70% of organizations relied on ERGs to build a workforce to reflect the demographics of their customer base.

Moreover, ERGs empower employees by giving each group a collective voice to speak with decision-makers and management. Groups are also empowered to assemble and voice concerns as a community. And, ERGs support learning and development by offering formal and informal leadership opportunities and creating visibility for employees who are active.



Meanwhile, ERGs also provide a resource for leadership and decision-makers regarding staff/community issues, needs and policies. They also offer their expertise and experiences to improve equality and equity within the company. Plus, ERGs can also be an asset in business decisions to make better, more inclusive products and services.

Lastly, ERGs can also support retention. That's because employees are likely to stay with the company longer if they have built or are part of a strong community within the company and feel heard.

CREATING AN EMPLOYEE RESOURCE GROUP

However, it can be difficult to know where to begin if you or other employees within your organization would like to start an ERG. So, below, we've outlined

the steps you can take to get your ERG off the ground.

Align Your ERG with Your Organization's Broader Objectives

In order for your ERG to be successful, your purpose should be tied to your organization's overall mission and values. For example, is your organization focused on giving back to your community? Or, is your goal to build a more diverse workforce?

Either way, choose a topic around diversity and inclusion for your ERG that aligns with your company's overall goals. Then, consider writing a mission statement for your ERG that touches on your organization's core values. Showing how your ERG advances the organization's overall strategy will help earn support from other areas of the company.

Secure Executive Support

Executive support for your ERG is essential for continued success. To gain buy-in, find executive or C-suite sponsors who are personally committed to diversity and inclusion or social influence initiatives. Keep in mind that executives are busy and often focused on metrics; so, it may be helpful to come with talking points and data that showcase how an ERG will have a positive effect on your organization.

Make sure HR leaders are invested, as well, as you'll need their support to share ERGs during the new hire onboarding process and in promotional materials for the ERG.

Build Your ERG Team

Before launching the ERG, establish a communication plan and identify benchmarks for success, including long-term goals and potential challenges. Next, recruit colleagues willing to take on a leadership role, such as committing to a monthly meeting or making time to plan and execute events. Then, find other like-minded coworkers who are passionate about supporting your ERG; it's just as important to have members who are willing to participate and spread the word as it is to have leaders and planners.

Deploy Your ERG Program

A strong communications plan is a major component of an employee resource group's success strategy. Begin by creating a simple presentation that outlines the ERG's goals, events and ideas for participation. To that end, leverage your organization's marketing team and use your company's brand standards to create a logo for the ERG that ties it directly to the organization. This is an effective way to clearly communicate that your ERG is supported by leadership and is an important initiative.

Then, equipped with your members and materials, generate excitement for the ERG by hosting a company event. For instance, hosting a happy hour (virtually now, of course, due to COVID-19) is a great way to introduce your ERG's mission, lay out future events and recruit attendees to grow your group's core membership.

HOW YOUR ORGANIZATION CAN SUPPORT YOUR ERG

Although your ERG may receive budgetary and organizational support, your company should not dictate which groups should form, who should join each group or what influence the groups should have. Rather, those decisions should be made by the group, whereas the organization can provide tools to work toward and measure that success. This could include charter documentation; a purpose workshop; road-mapping templates and exercises; budget tracking tools; support in setting and tracking objectives and key results; a platform for communication with their group and potential members; visibility within the organization; and meetings with senior leadership.

A sense of belonging and inclusion in the workplace is important to empower employees and help them bring their whole self to work. As such, building a strong network or community is an essential important step in creating this sense of belonging.

Finally, in order to truly empower and support ERGs, it's important to give the members the autonomy to define: the scope of their group; membership eligibility; and, most important, what success means to them.