



Employee Networks / Affinity Groups & Their Impact on a Company's Diversity Efforts
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INTRODUCTION

With changing demographics in the marketplace, diversity offers many challenges to employers. In the wake of these changes a new paradigm has emerged that places the focus of workplace diversity on integration and learning.¹ Today, leading companies see workplace diversity as an important organizational strategy that focuses on human capital and connects with talent management, knowledge development, leadership development and company branding.²

Texas Instruments (TI) has a lot to offer potential employees. But a few years ago, the recruitment staff at the Fortune 200 semiconductor company ran into a challenge: An engineer the company was interested in hiring was reluctant to join TI because she feared the Dallas location would not be welcoming to an Indian woman.

Fortunately, the company was prepared to address her concerns. At the request of recruiters, representatives of TI's Indian Diversity Initiative, a network of Indian-American employees, spoke with the candidate and shared their experiences. "When she heard about the Indian network, it was key in her making her decision," says Terry Howard, diversity director.

For companies with employee network groups like TI's, such an experience is not unusual. Employee network groups provide a variety of benefits to employers as well as employees. Such groups offer employers opportunities to recruit and retain more-diverse talent and to gain broader perspectives on company practices and products. Also, members' broad cultural experiences can help a company increase its global awareness and extend its reach in the marketplace.

But companies that tap the resources of employee network groups are still in the minority: *The 2005 Workplace Diversity Practices Survey Report* by the Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM) showed that only 29 percent of surveyed companies support employee network groups. Diversity experts say the other 71 percent are missing a great opportunity—and that even companies with affinity groups may not be maximizing their potential. "Employee networks have been completely underutilized in a lot of organizations," says Mauricio Velásquez, president and chief executive officer of The Diversity Training Group, a diversity training and consulting firm based in Herndon, Va. Ninety percent of Fortune 500 companies have, or will soon have, employee network or affinity groups.³

DIVERSITY NETWORKING

Each diversity network has members with a common characteristic, such as ethnicity, race, sexual orientation or gender (e.g., Gay and Lesbian Employees, Asian Associations, Indian Subcontinent Networks, Women's Interactive Networks, etc). The overall purpose of diversity networks is to foster inclusion and productivity. Leaders of diversity networks play a key role in the organization as cultural change agents and trailblazers in workplace diversity. Diversity networks are evolving from providing informal networking opportunities to becoming business partners in support of the company's mission.

¹ **Making differences matter: A new paradigm for managing diversity.** Thomas, D. A., & Ely, R. J. (2002). Harvard Business Online, www.hbsp.harvard.edu.

² **Talent management value imperatives: Strategies for execution.** Morton, L. (2005). New York: The Conference Board.

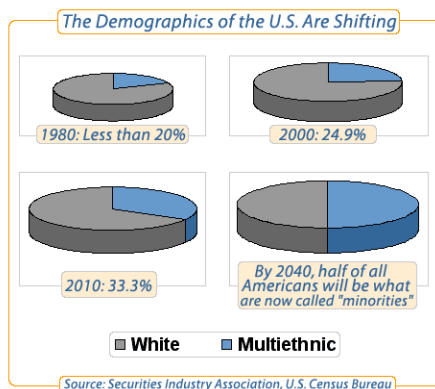
³ **Employee Networks and Affinity Groups**, Diversity Best Practices

While the first networks were formed in the late 1970s and early 1980s and usually were focused on race and gender, such groups today are likely to be recognized for delivering bottom-line benefits. Diversity professionals say employee networks are critical for any company pursuing “reduced costs associated with turnover, absenteeism and low productivity,” an “improved bottom line” and “increased organizational competitiveness,” the top reasons for launching diversity initiatives, according to the SHRM report.

SHIFTING DEMOGRAPHICS⁴

Corporations look for business competencies - strategies that bring in increased profits and metrics that prove the necessity to expand the emphasis on multiculturalism. Those strategies start in the workforce, with the recruitment and retention of diverse employees. Recruiting experts say the top candidates will work for companies that aggressively recruit now - through programs for multiethnic students, affiliations with multicultural organizations, and active campaigns on job sites aimed at diverse candidates.

The retention of multicultural employees is another vital strategy, one of increasing concern to the nation’s corporate leaders. Losing an employee costs about four times that worker’s salary; losing a worker with ties to a multicultural community costs even more in terms of missed opportunity. Network or affinity groups, mentoring programs and work/life policies build employee loyalty and a growing commitment to the company’s business goals.



TOP 50 COMPANIES FOR DIVERSITY: A COMMON THREAD⁵

Many of this year's Top 50 companies identified network / affinity groups as important to the business. Just as diversity no longer is considered a soft subject, gone are the days when these groups were considered little more than social-networking groups. Now, they are recognized business tools, with members increasing their company's community standing via volunteerism, helping recruitment efforts through positive word of mouth and giving input on multicultural-marketing campaigns.

⁴ **The Business Case for Diversity**, Diversity Inc.

⁵ **"A Top-Down Approach: The 2006 Top 50 Companies for Diversity"**, DiversityInc. || July 10, 2006

Abbott, No. 8 on The 2006 DiversityInc Top 50 Companies for Diversity list, turned to one of its employee networks, Women Leaders in Action, to pilot a new companywide mentoring program. William Lee, director of corporate diversity, met with group chairpersons every quarter to make sure their activities were aligned with the company's business goals. Each of Abbott's groups has at least one senior-level executive responsible for it; they make sure the groups' activities are helping the business stay successful.

At BellSouth, affinity group members "come together because they have an interest in their own personal growth and development and, at the same time, have a keen interest in the success of the organization," BellSouth's vice president and chief diversity officer, Valencia Adams says.

While each group operates autonomously and has its own set of initiatives, BellSouth has a companywide council comprised of leaders of the six affinity groups. They come together with members of the Office of Diversity in part to share plans and look for opportunities to work together on projects.

ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE

It is important to keep in mind that employee networks might be organized and operate for a period of time before management knows about it. Just because management does not officially recognize a particular employee network, does not mean the network does not exist. Many well-established groups are still self-organized.

Different organizations have different requirements for establishing official or corporate sponsored employee networks. At AT&T, for example, prospective groups must prove their value to the business before they can be recognized and supported by management. In each case, they must present a business plan to management for formal recognition and support. At 3M, part of the criteria for group formation is the stipulation that the groups cannot serve as advocates for individual employees or promote a specific cause and/or event because the company already has formal procedures for handling such issues.

In general, however, organizations considering the establishment of networks ask for some basic information from the group's organizers, including the following:

- A mission statement or statement of purpose.
- Goals, both short-term and long-term. What does the group plan to achieve?
- How will the group accomplish those goals? What is the timetable?
- What type of financial commitment from the company, if any, will be needed?
- How will the group operate? Will it have designated leaders? Who is eligible for membership?
- How does the group's mission/purpose compare against the corporation's core values?

Membership in diversity networks should be voluntary and varies in size; averaging about 25-50 and up, depending upon the group and the location. The typical structure of a diversity network has two leaders and a minimum of two people per committee. As Nadia Younes at Amgen points out, "diversity network leaders are committed to seeing their groups succeed and, like other good leaders, are recognizing the need for succession planning and developing a strong bench."

In most companies, executives volunteer to sponsor diversity networks. This process formally acknowledges the diversity networks and provides additional education to executives about workplace diversity. They work with the groups to understand and help champion their efforts throughout the organization. They also provide and engage in informal and mutual mentoring. Executive sponsors educate the groups on how to link their goals and efforts to the business to ensure success. In turn, executive sponsors also gain insight into the perspectives and business issues of interest to diversity networks.

Diversity networks are usually funded from the corporate diversity budget. The budget for each group varies, depending on the business link. Groups receive funding to support educational offerings, community outreach and networking events as well as to host reward and recognition events for their members. For example, projects for community outreach may require additional funds, and the Corporate Community Investments group will often partner with the groups to sponsor events.

Diversity networks are often organized in ways that provide expertise for various company initiatives such as recruitment and retention; education and development; community outreach; and communication and networking.

Below are some noted examples of how they contribute to the organization.

- The communication and networking committees partner with Internal Communications to develop a corporate diversity communication plan (e.g., building the diversity portal, writing brochures, developing networking events, and contributing ideas for marketing and educational campaigns).
- The recruitment and retention committees meet with HR staffing professionals so that HR can provide a "knowledge transfer" to diversity networks, learn about what makes a great hire and find out about key hard-to-fill postings. Network committee members refer candidates, are often active in their alumni associations and mentor incoming interns and talent to help onboard and retain talent.
- Network members usually act as "ambassadors." For example, while meeting over lunch with a candidate, they might provide information about the community. Diversity network members partner with HR to help attract and welcome candidates, and their involvement helps seal the deal on attracting qualified applicants. These networks also help welcome and mentor new recruits once they are hired.

These practices reveal a unique approach to the business value of diversity networks, such as finding ways to integrate and retain talent throughout the employment lifecycle.

DIVERSITY NETWORK IMPACT: MEASURING THE ROI

With an expanding focus on diversity, defining what success looks like and measuring this success becomes increasingly important. For the diversity networks / affinity groups, their success metrics are helping them chart the course and deliver results that are connected to company values and aspirations. Defining the desired outcomes of various diversity network activities and offerings and measuring how well these expectations are met help the groups connect what they are doing to a company's core values. Success metrics, such as the number of community hours volunteered, GPA impact on students being mentored by network members, numbers and costs for staff members attending network-sponsored business forums, etc., also instill a sense of pride and accomplishment for both the members and the company.

At Ford and at technology giant Hewlett-Packard (HP), employee resource group members attend college job fairs and professional organization events with company recruiters to connect with diverse candidates. Affinity groups at Eli Lilly put together information about the community for the recruitment staff. "If someone comes in for a plant visit, we will provide them with the material so they can see just how diverse Indianapolis really is," says McMillan. Ford has 10 employee resource groups: Ford African Ancestry Network; Ford Hispanic Network Group; Gays, Lesbians, Bisexual & Transgendered Employees; Middle Eastern Community @ Ford; Ford Asian Indian Association; Ford Chinese Association; Ford Employees Dealing With DisAbilities; Ford Interfaith Network; Professional Women's Network; and Ford Parenting Network.

To retain those diverse recruits, companies need to make sure they are fulfilling their diversity promises. Affinity groups can aid in this effort as well, by providing valuable feedback on initiatives. At Sonnenschein Nath & Rosenthal LLP, a law firm with 700 employees in offices around the world, the gay and lesbian attorneys association (GALA) reviewed the firm's diversity materials and pointed out inconsistencies—noting, for example, that sexual orientation was not mentioned on the diversity page of the firm's web site. "We wanted to make it very clear that, particularly for recruiting, the firm was gay-and-lesbian-friendly as opposed to tolerant," says Farrington Yates, a partner at Sonnenschein's New York office and co-chair of GALA.

Similarly, network groups can provide feedback on internal policies that are important to their constituencies. For example, a group for parents at Sonnenschein broached topics such as emergency day care, part-time work schedules and extended parental leave benefits. This type of give-and-take opens the lines of communication and demonstrates to all employees that the commitment to diversity is real. "People that feel listened to have a vested interest in staying and seeing it through," says Velásquez.

Diversity experts say such efforts pay off by helping to create a collaborative, inspired atmosphere. "When you have the diversity in the organization, everyone is allowed to come to the table and participate," says Sidalia Reed, vice president of global inclusion and diversity at HP. "That breeds creativity and innovation. That's what really makes diversity a successful value proposition."

REFLECTING THE MARKETPLACE

Organizations want to attract and retain a diverse workforce not just because it's the right thing to do but also because employees who mirror the marketplace put companies at a competitive advantage. "We need to understand diverse buying needs," says Allison Trawick, a manager in Ford Motor Co.'s corporate diversity and work/life. "We look to all employees to help us build that kind of environment."

Affinity groups can boost organizational competitiveness by providing valuable insight into the needs and wants of certain segments of the marketplace. "Look at them not just as employees but as potential customers," says Velásquez. "Allow them to comment on the organization completely, not just on HR issues. Ask them about how you market, how you sell, in addition to how you promote and how you hire. It's really quite ingenious—you can hire a marketing company to put together a focus group for you, or you can do it yourself."

Ford has been a pioneer in this area. The Professional Women's Network has weighed in on seat height. The Ford Parenting Network was asked to review minivan designs. Ford Employees Dealing with Disabilities review designs for accessibility issues. The advertising and product development departments regularly invite the employee resource groups to share their thoughts on advertising campaigns or new designs. "Understanding our customers' buying desires and tendencies is critical to our success," says Trawick.

Other companies report similar interaction: Eli Lilly's corporate communications department asked members of various affinity groups for their opinions on a series of external marketing pieces. And at HP, employees with disabilities have done accessibility testing on a number of new products.

Efforts such as those make employees feel valued and demonstrate that diversity awareness is an integral part of the business.

Ford has also tapped its employee resource groups as an ad hoc sales force by encouraging members to promote the company's Friends and Neighbors discount program.

Affinity groups can also bridge gaps between affiliates and potential customers around the globe. According to Howard, TI's Japanese Diversity Initiative has helped with translation services for clients, and the Chinese and Korean employee resource groups have worked together to help identify a list of suppliers in Asia.

All three Asian groups also worked together to create a culture-based training program for TI employees who interact with Asian partners. At Eli Lilly, members of the Chinese affinity group welcome colleagues from Lilly's Chinese affiliate whenever they come to Indianapolis. "They don't stay in a hotel; they stay with a member of the affinity group," McMillan says.

OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES

As part of a company's increasing focus on diversity, the company will need to consider both the internal and external roles of workplace diversity. To effectively utilize the competitive advantages of workplace diversity, understanding and awareness of diversity will require additional internal support in the organization.

Expansion and growth of diversity networks have a number of challenges and opportunities. As diversity networks move from being networking groups to business resource groups, they build credibility within the organization. Such transitions do not occur overnight, however. There is also the question of how best to maintain and grow the diversity networks in a sustainable, scaleable way. Initiatives are encouraged to be developed and implemented by diversity networks, rather than coming from the corporate Diversity Council. To be successful and sustain their membership, diversity networks must feel that they have a positive impact, no matter where they are located.

At some organizations, the existence of employee networks is not always as beneficial. Although the cost to administer and maintain the networks is usually minimal, there is sometimes backlash from other employees who do not agree that such groups benefit the organization. Also, the existence of such groups sometimes is the catalyst for internal divisiveness and for concern that they may take on the traits of unions. When forming and defining the purpose of such groups, HR professionals should be careful to ensure that the employer is not liable for engaging in unfair labor practices under the National Labor Relations Act. Also, some employees would prefer not to be involved or associated with such networks.

LEGAL ISSUES

As the U.S. Supreme Court recognized in *Grutter v. Bollinger*, 539 U.S. 306, 330 (2003): "Major American businesses have made it clear that skills needed in today's global marketplace can only be developed through exposure to diverse peoples, culture, ideas, and viewpoints."

Forming and maintaining employee networking / affinity groups must be done within the confines of federal and state antidiscrimination and labor laws. Employers must not discriminate unlawfully in terms of the categories of employees they permit to form affinity groups, and they must take care not to negotiate with any group in a manner that might violate federal labor law.

What these two admonitions precisely mean is not altogether clear. Affinity groups have been around for decades, but very little labor or employment case law specifically addresses their fundamental legality, or definitively limits management's discretion as to what groups to allow, who may participate and what the groups may do. Nevertheless, some basic principles of both employment law and labor law help establish certain boundaries and provide guideposts for organizations that are creating or administering such groups.

But first, one must consider the threshold question of what it means for an employer to "recognize" or otherwise support an affinity group.

An employer may support an affinity group by granting it use of one or more of the following resources:

- **Company premises.** A company may recognize or endorse a group by allowing it to meet in a company conference room or other common area.

- **Company time.** Some employers compensate employees—hourly and salaried—for the time they spend in group meetings or for related administrative time, such as time spent planning a meeting.
- **Company facilities.** Affinity groups often are allowed use of the employer's e-mail server, bulletin boards, photocopiers, hard mail distribution channels, paper and other supplies.

Whatever the nature or scope of the employer's support, it should all be reflected in a written company policy or guidelines to avoid employees' claims of favoritism and to promote transparency in creating and operating affinity groups.

The Reach of Title VII And Similar Laws

Companies considering formation of affinity groups—particularly of racial or ethnic minority groups—often ask: "Will we have to recognize a 'whites-only' group? What about a 'white males' group?"

The law, together with common sense, provides some helpful answers to those questions. Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and similar state laws prohibit employment discrimination on the basis of race, color, sex, religion and national origin.

It is true that Title VII and similar laws protect whites as well as blacks, men as well as women. Which means that if a company permits the formation of a women's affinity group, it most likely would violate Title VII if it refused to sanction a men's affinity group.

However, a company policy permitting a whites-only or a blacks-only group also would likely violate Title VII—even if the employer supported the groups merely by allowing them to meet on company property. Maintaining segregated workplace eating facilities is a classic example of discrimination in "other terms, conditions, or privileges of employment" in violation of Title VII. It follows, then, that Title VII probably prohibits establishing employer-supported groups that expressly exclude members of protected classifications.

Thus, to avoid legal liability, not to mention unproductive divisiveness among employee groups, the prudent employer will adopt an affinity groups policy that requires all employer-supported groups to be open to all employees—regardless of their race, gender or other characteristic—who support the group's mission. That requirement would apply to a group focused on the concerns of black employees just as it would to a women's group.

Many large companies have found that simply having a policy that requires affinity groups to be inclusive avoids the issue of having non-minority employees seek approval for an affinity group.

In a different vein, employers also must be mindful of their duty to investigate harassment complaints or other discrimination claims that may surface during an affinity group meeting. If management is unaware of such complaints against non-supervisory employees, then no duty to investigate or otherwise act arises. But if HR or representatives of management are present, they should encourage the employee to pursue the complaint through the employer's usual channels.

Otherwise, the employer will be considered "on notice" of the complaint and may be liable if it fails to investigate or take other responsive action.

Where Does It End?

Legal challenges to affinity groups are most likely to arise when a company recognizes some group or groups but then refuses to recognize another. Does that mean an employer that forms one affinity group is obliged to support affinity groups addressing concerns of employees in any and all protected categories? Are employers better off supporting none?

An employer's decision to support no affinity groups is probably defensible: It treats all groups alike. That decision is not necessarily in the employer's best interests from an employee relations and claim prevention standpoint, however. Unresolved issues and unmet needs among diverse employee groups may well surface in ways involving greater legal or business risk to the employer than would establishing guidelines for affinity group approval. Possibilities include discrimination charges, union organizing attempts, and high turnover among minority and female employees.

But Where to Draw the Line?

The leading case in the field, *Moranski v. General Motors Corp.*, 433 F.3d 537 (7th Cir. 2005), gives some clues as to how employers lawfully can limit the formation of new affinity groups. In that case, the 7th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals (whose decisions are binding in Illinois, Indiana and Wisconsin) held that General Motors (GM) did not violate Title VII's prohibition against religious discrimination when it refused to approve a proposed Christian employee network. GM complied with federal law in that it treated all groups with religious positions equally.

GM started its formalized affinity groups program in 1999. According to the facts as presented in the 7th Circuit's opinion, the program was intended to make diverse employee constituencies feel more welcomed and valued at GM, to remove barriers to employee productivity, and to increase market share and customer support in diverse market segments.

Under the company's affinity groups guidelines, a group had to register and to offer voluntary membership to all current full-time employees who shared the group's goals. The guidelines expressly provided that a group could not "promote or advocate particular religious or political positions."

Recognized groups included those for persons of African ancestry, Hispanics, Asians, Indians, persons of Chinese ancestry, persons with disabilities, women, gays and lesbians, and veterans.

The plaintiff, John Moranski, was a born-again Christian who submitted an application on behalf of a proposed "GM Christian Employee Network." As proposed, the group would not promote a particular church or denomination. GM denied Moranski's proposal under the terms of its guidelines.

Moranski filed suit in federal court in Indianapolis, claiming that GM had discriminated against him on the basis of religion. GM moved to dismiss the case, and the court granted GM's motion, ruling that GM had treated Moranski no worse

than any other employee of any other faith. The court specifically rejected Moranski's position that once GM had opened the door to secular affinity groups, it could not close the door to faith-based groups without violating Title VII.

On appeal, the 7th Circuit agreed with the district court that GM had not discriminated "because of" Moranski's religion. It treated all employees the same, regardless of their religious views; employees with any religious position could join any other recognized group, but no employee could join a group based on religion.

The 7th Circuit reasoned that Moranski's "logic would mean that a company would violate Title VII if it recognized an affinity group on the basis of religion but not sex, or granted status to a group on the basis of sex but not to one based on ethnicity. Yet even Moranski concedes Title VII law does not stretch this far."

Does Moranski mean that employers across the country are free to bar affinity groups on the basis of religious position? By no means. For one thing, the 7th Circuit is just one of 12 federal appellate circuits (including the D.C. Circuit), so neither its ruling nor its reasoning in Moranski is the law of the land. It's possible that other circuits would rule differently should a similar case make it that far.

It is clear from the opinion, however, that employers cannot pick and choose among religious groups. Once an employer recognizes a Christian (or Jewish or Muslim) group, it cannot draw the line and say one or two or three is enough.

It also bears remembering that courts have long held atheism to be a religion for purposes of Title VII. See, for example, *Young v. Southwestern Sav. & Loan Ass'n*, 509 F.2d 140 (5th Cir. 1975). Thus, Title VII's prohibition against religious discrimination requires employers to tolerate those who lack faith, or who firmly believe that faith is unfounded. If an employer approves affinity groups associated with any particular religious position, it probably would have to allow a group espousing atheist or agnostic beliefs.

Employers that wish to disallow religion-related groups—be they religious or irreligious—but to further reduce their legal risk outside the 7th Circuit might word their policies to exclude all groups that "promote or advocate particular belief system positions" as opposed to "religious positions." That might seem to be a distinction without a difference, but to some courts it might make a difference.

More Line-Drawing

Let's assume that an employer chooses to permit race-based and national-origin-based affinity groups, but not gender-based affinity groups. It has approved multiple race and national origin groups and has never withheld approval from any.

A female employee seeks approval for a women's group, but the employer refuses on the basis of its policy. The woman files suit claiming sex discrimination under Title VII.

The 7th Circuit, under Moranski, might say there is no sex discrimination as long as the employer has not authorized a men's affinity group. But suppose the Moranski analysis doesn't hold up in other jurisdictions. Is there any other way for the employer to defend its actions?

Just as in any disparate-treatment discrimination case, an employer might articulate an ostensibly lawful reason—limited conference room space, for example—for refusing to recognize gender-based groups.

If the employer claimed that allowing gender-based groups to meet would interfere with its legitimate business needs—such as conducting meetings with customers—the question then would be whether the employer’s explanation is but a pretext for unlawful discrimination.

Perhaps the example seems absurd, but it’s not altogether unrealistic. The employer in the hypothetical, however, might be hard-pressed to explain why it could allow eight or nine other groups to meet but not one more.

The problem of limited conference room space seemingly could be overcome by creative scheduling, using other common areas space for meetings or both. Nevertheless, the employer might retort that, if true, its reason need not be creative or even reasonable; it only needs to be nondiscriminatory.

Such is the stuff of which lawsuits are made.

Impact of Federal Labor Law

Employers in all 50 states need to recognize the possibility that an affinity group might be held to violate the National Labor Relations Act (NLRA).

The NLRA, which applies to union-represented and nonunion employees alike, makes it an unfair labor practice for an employer to “dominate or interfere with the foundation or administration of any labor organization or contribute financial or other support.”

The NLRA defines “labor organization” broadly, encompassing “any organization of any kind ... in which the employees participate and which exists for the purpose, in whole or in part, of dealing with employers concerning grievances, labor disputes, wages, rates of pay, hours of employment, or conditions of work.”

Whether an affinity group violates the NLRA ultimately turns on whether the group in question “deals with” the employer in such a way that the group constitutes a “labor organization.”

What Does All This Mean?

Affinity groups must not negotiate with the employer; that is, they must not make proposals to management involving employment terms and conditions, which management then could accept or reject, or to which management could make a counterproposal.

Affinity groups, however, would not be considered labor organizations if they are more properly characterized as “brainstorming” or “information-sharing” entities. This would make them analogous to the classic example of the suggestion box—a place where management solicits and receives multiple ideas but remains free to adopt or ignore any, and refrains from formalized give and take, or negotiation.

Consider positioning affinity groups as brainstorming or information-sharing entities by making it clear that management will consider multiple—even inconsistent—approaches to an issue of concern, but it will not entertain a group’s formalized proposal or set of proposals presented to management.

If an affinity group is a work team performing management functions, it would not be a labor organization under the NLRA.

Accordingly, groups focusing on productivity, teamwork, customer relations or public image (as opposed to work hours, pay issues, promotions or work assignments) are more likely outside the NLRA’s scope.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The development and expansion of workplace diversity initiatives require time, patience and buy-in of senior management. Below are recommendations for HR professionals learning about diversity as well as for those with experience in workplace diversity.

- For HR professionals exploring workplace diversity initiatives in small-sized to medium-sized organizations, the establishment of formal diversity networks may not be the place to begin. However, informal networking among employees can be encouraged through focus group meetings to explore concerns and interests of employees—such as brown-bag lunch sessions, a focus group series and/or the establishment of diversity committees.
- HR professionals are encouraged to network at diversity conferences and programs to learn what challenges their colleagues have experienced regarding workplace diversity and to discuss possible avenues of action or solutions that may be viable at one's company.
- Based on the company's organizational goals and objectives, HR professionals should determine what measures/metrics around workplace diversity would best provide business value.
- Volunteering to participate in educational forums is another beneficial way to learn about various diversity initiatives. Organizations such as Catalyst or The Conference Board, for example, seek companies to share experiences for their studies and discussion groups on topics such as workplace diversity, talent management and leadership development.
- Subscription to professional magazines, journals and other resources, such as Diversity Central and DiversityInc. provide valuable information about best practices in workplace diversity. Contacting organizations highlighted on Fortune's and Diversity Inc.'s "Top 50 Companies for Diversity" list provides additional networking opportunities to learn of challenges and solutions of various diversity initiatives.

Principles of Networks and Affinity Groups⁶

- **Objective:** Provide developmental support to affinity group members to assist their professional growth and their contribution to business objectives.
- **Philosophy:** Adopt a “no-blame/nothing to hide” philosophy to support the group's strategies and activities. This philosophy requires both the membership and the corporation to take full responsibility for finding mutually beneficial solutions.
- **Mission Statement:** Develop a short, straightforward, business-oriented statement about why the group exists. State every goal in terms that serve both the membership and the company. Update goals annually as the organization’s needs change.
- **Structure:** Ensure cross-functional and cross-level membership. Build group consensus for decision-making. Expect hard work. Show no tolerance for personal agendas.
- **Leadership Selection:** Elect leaders based on their capacity to focus on the greater good of the whole enterprise. Select those with records of high-level job performance over time, and reputations for objectivity, fairness, and basic good judgment.
- **Executive Support:** Seek the backing of the president/CEO for the philosophy and goals of the group. Schedule regular meetings with key stakeholders to keep them apprised of the group’s work and to keep the group informed on core business issues.
- **Visibility:** Share information about major initiatives, concerns and recommendations. Publish group results. Demonstrate support for other affinity group efforts. Participate in program initiatives of the business such as new product launches.
- **Membership Eligibility:** Make membership voluntary. Make eligibility to join/attend meetings non-exclusive to the affinity group, though the agenda should remain targeted.
- **Efficacy:** Establish specific, goal-oriented agenda items for each meeting. Require regular attendance at meetings and active involvement in group work. Determine the frequency of meetings by the nature of the group’s objectives.
- **Funding:** Share the investment in time and expense. Business-related and public relations activities can be sponsored by the company, volunteer efforts can be shared, and social events can be sponsored by the membership.

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⁶ **Employee Networks and Affinity Groups**, Diversity Best Practices