

LGBTQ+ Employee Resource Groups – Why They Matter and How to Start One!

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Abstract

Employee resource groups are growing in popularity as organizations decide to invest time and resources into promoting diversity and inclusion. In particular, these groups for the LGBTQ+ community are becoming more common, as companies are understanding the importance of showing visible allyship through LGBTQ+ supportive policies and healthcare benefits. Research indicates that both the existence of LGBTQ+ supportive policies and these resource groups correlate with increased productivity and profitability. This paper explores the purpose of employee resource groups as well as data specific to LGBTQ+ policies and groups. Employees deserve a place to work where they are free of discrimination, and an LGBTQ+ resource group is one way to help reach that goal. The practical application provides guidance on starting an LGBTQ+ Employee Resource Group, leveraging the research and real-world examples.

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LGBTQ+ Employee Resource Groups – Why they matter and how to start one!

Employee resource groups (ERGs), also known as affinity groups, networking groups, or business resource groups, were created to provide a sense of community to those who did not fit the traditional corporate stereotypes (Welbourne et al., 2017). One of the first ever ERGs recorded began as an effort to increase diversity and inclusion at the Xerox company, after the then-CEO had an enlightening conversation with minority employees regarding the racism they were subjected to in the 1960s. Now, many large corporations offer these groups to benefit both the employees and the business, and 66% of Fortune 100 companies in the United States list ERGs on their websites (Glassman & Glassman, 2017). ERGs can be created for employees of a specific race, religion, or ethnicity, and other common ERGs are for women, veterans, parents, certain age groups, or for members of the LGBTQ+ Community and its allies. Affinity groups supporting Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, and/or + are being established at companies all over America and may be the most common new type of ERG to start today (L. Grajczyk, personal communication, June 24, 2020). The plus sign is used to note that the acronym at times includes LGBTQIA+ to represent those identifying as intersex or asexual, as well as a variety of other terms including pansexual, genderqueer, non-binary, gender non-conforming, or more (Gold, 2018).

The purpose of this document is to review research available on ERGs, specifically for LGBTQ+ networks and groups, in order to demonstrate the business case for the creation of groups that promote diversity, inclusion, and equity. A positive diversity climate exists in companies that makes efforts to support and include minority employee, and this is correlated with increased job satisfaction, employee engagement, organizational commitment, and better performance outcomes (Holmes et al., 2020). In addition, issues and problems specific to the

LGBTQ+ community will be discussed, as these problems can be unknown to individuals with few or no connections to the queer community at large. The sometimes invisible stigma can affect an individual's ability to feel comfortable being themselves at work (Trau, 2015). The good news is that organizations are continuing to adopt policies that are both supportive and inclusive of their LGBTQ+ employees such as diversity training and transgender-inclusive healthcare policies (Pichler et al., 2017).

Specifically, this review will look at how both LGBTQ+ inclusive practices and ERGs can increase perceived organizational support, productivity, and satisfaction, and can also be correlated with better financial performance (Pichler et al., 2017; Trau, 2015; Webster et al., 2018). In addition, a summary of best practices and lessons learned will be shared in efforts to provide real world examples of how companies have successfully started their own ERGs. A world where everyone is safe to be themselves at work is a world that can be built through education and a willingness to learn how others view the world. Diverse minds produce better results, and organizations today must ensure they are actively retaining and recruiting people from all backgrounds (Eyre, 2019).

Diversity and Inclusion of the LGBTQ+ Community

Why Diversity Matters

Diversity itself has multiple benefits to organizations, as it is important to understand the needs of the workforce (Dutton, 2018). Increasing support to potentially marginalized employees is expected to reduce employee absenteeism, discrimination, and litigation within organizations (Glassman & Glassman, 2017). Diversity can pertain to differences based on race, gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, religion, or many other social and cultural shared identities. Unfortunately, diversity itself is not typically enough to create an environment that is inclusive,

meaning that diverse individuals are welcomed and included (Liswood, 2010). One way to examine an organization's level of support for marginalized groups or for inclusivity within the workplace is to examine the diversity climate (Trau, 2015). Diversity climate is the degree to which an organization supports fair human resource policies, and is able to include, or socially integrate minority employees (Holmes et al., 2020). Research on diversity climate (Trau, 2015) indicates that organizations which have a positive diversity climate have higher levels of inclusion and lower levels of discrimination, while employees from minority groups who worked in a negative diversity climate may experience discrimination or be excluded socially.

In a meta-analysis of studies with quantitative data on diversity climate and organizational outcomes, Holmes and colleagues (2020) found that a positive diversity climate was positively correlated with job satisfaction, employee engagement, organizational commitment, and performance outcomes, while being negatively related to employee withdrawal. Their sample included data from 94 studies, and it was noted that diversity climate had a larger impact on employee attitudes than it did over performance scores. The data shows that having an environment that is both diverse and inclusive provides organizational benefits in addition to individual benefits to employees (Holmes et al., 2020).

In Trau's (2015) research, perceived discrimination was described as what a person feels when they are experiencing discrimination due to their social identity, and thus, a negative discriminatory climate would imply that all people who shared their social identity demographics are at risk for discrimination. People who work in negative discriminatory climates may experience negative stigma associated with their racial, gender, cultural, or social identity. Trau's research (2015) looked at how discriminatory climate perceptions affected both social relationships and organizational outcomes. In addition, Trau (2015) found that a

nondiscriminatory climate was positively correlated with psychosocial support from work colleagues. Moreover, since employees are more likely to perform better when they feel supported by their colleagues, a nondiscriminatory climate could also increase their productivity and job satisfaction (Liswood, 2010).

Diversity and inclusion are considered to be benefits for the greater good of society, and this is supported by the Corporate Social Responsibility Theory (CSR). This theory promotes the duty of those in businesses to ensure that their actions and decisions are in line with what is considered to be desirable to the societal values and objectives (Pichler et al., 2018). A limit to CSR is that it must change and evolve to ensure it is indicative of the ever-shifting beliefs of what society in general determines as responsible or good. While progress has been made in creating more equal opportunities for members of the LGBTQ+ community, there is still discrimination and stigma associated with individual gender and sexual identity choices, and a lack of open inclusivity (Hammond, 2018). This is evident in some organizations where LGBTQ+ supportive policies are still considered controversial. Regardless, current research cited by Pichler and colleagues (2018) suggested that the support of the LGBTQ+ community is not just important to those within it, but is also becoming increasingly important to heterosexual allies as well. In addition, Pichler and colleagues' research (2018), which will be discussed in more detail below, also showed a positive relationship between inclusive policies and improved profitability, value, and productivity.

LGBTQ+ Issues in the workplace

Up until June 15, 2020, there were no specific federal protections for LGBTQ+ employees (Saxe, 2020). On June 15, the U.S. Supreme Court's ruled in 3 cases related to LGBTQ+ rights (*Harris Funeral Homes, Inc. v. EEOC*, 2020; *Aimee Stephens, Altitude Express*,

Inc. v. Zarda, 2020; & *Bostock v. Clayton County*, 2020; Esseks, 2020). The justices declared that the existing federal law prohibiting discrimination on the basis of sex in the workplace, Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, applied to discrimination due to sexual orientation and/or gender identity. Prior to the ruling, in many states, it was legal to fire someone or not hire someone because of their sexual orientation and gender identity (SOGI) without legal recourse. Before this important and lifechanging ruling by the Supreme Court, negative public relations in the aftermath of discrimination to an individual for SOGI was more of a risk than fines or lawsuits (Webster et al., 2018). As a result, many individuals did not feel comfortable giving any indication that they were not heterosexual for fear of retaliation (Burn, 2018). In some cases, individuals would move or work across state lines as each state had their own laws regarding discrimination as it related to SOGI. Others would base their job search on more urban locations that were considered to be more gay-friendly and accepting (Hammond, 2018).

Invisible Stigma

For some LGBTQ+ employees in the workplace, they find it “easier” to simply not mention the name of their same sex partner in order not to out themselves at work (Pichler et al., 2017). It is not uncommon for individuals who identify as LGBTQ+ to look for mention of an affirming ERG at an organization as a sign of whether it is okay to be gay there (Aritonovich, 2020). Given that SOGI status is not immediately visible to others, the stigma is one that is invisible, as a person’s choice to disclose their sexual orientation and gender identity can determine whether or not they will experience discrimination (Trau, 2015). The invisible stigma of heteronormativity and the male/female gender binary in the workplace is found in several areas of an organization, from hiring application forms, healthcare policies, bathrooms, benefits, to even water cooler conversations regarding home and family life (Martinez et al., 2017). This

can cause employees to feel that they are not safe to share parts of themselves, as they constantly have to assess if it is safe to mention anything that could be a revealing detail of their sexuality. For some, they simply do not reveal any identifying details, which also prevents them from gaining acceptance from those that will be affirming of their disclosure and subsequently offer support. Navigating which person is a safe person to disclose to can be an issue in itself, but there are ideas and suggestions in the practical analysis section of this paper that can enable allies to make themselves visible.

Living as LGBTQ+ in 2020

There has recently been a rapid expansion of both rights for and visibility of LGBTQ+ community (Hammond, 2018). From 2002 to 2013, there was a 17% increase in the percentage of Fortune 500 companies that had nondiscrimination policies to protect their LGBTQ+ workers (Pichler et al., 2018). Unfortunately, those who are unfamiliar with members of the LGBTQ+ community are sometimes unaware of the discrimination their colleagues have faced and continue to face (Cooper, 2018). For example, gay and lesbian job candidates are more likely to be perceived to be less of a “fit” than heterosexual job candidates, and therefore, their sexuality can affect their ability to be both hired and promoted (Pichler & Homes, 2017). The research by Pichler and Holmes (2017) also found that beliefs of the controllability of sexual orientation also led to negative biases against people who are not heterosexual.

The stigma theory formed by Pichler and Homes (2017) relates to the belief that individuals who are seen as “abnormal” are more likely to be rejected socially. This rejection is likely to impact people by increasing their stress levels, and in turn, their psychological strain (Webster et al., 2018). Additional evidence of discrimination and bias is demonstrated by the fact

that members of the LGBTQ+ community statistically make less money than their heterosexual peers across similar job roles (Burn, 2018).

Many senior leaders cannot imagine not being able to mention the name of their significant other, or the fact that rainbow bumper stickers can illicit vandalism, slurs, and hate in many areas of the United States. One director at a large global corporation who publicly trades on the New York Stock Exchange was shocked when they learned from a direct report that people regularly and repeatedly experienced homophobia in their life (Anonymous Informant 1, personal communication, July 2019). This individual was surprised to learn that queer individuals regularly check organizations before applying to make sure they will be accepted. Increased awareness of the discrimination faced by LGBTQ+ individuals would likely lead to better working conditions, and it is the responsibility of organizational leaders to educate themselves on the experiences of the people they are leading (Brown, 2018).

Research by Trau (2015) sought to learn more about the experience of individuals in the workplace and had 1,179 professionally employed lesbians and gay men from around the globe participate in an online survey to understand the impact of developmental networks, support, and job attitudes of employees with an invisible stigma. Trau's (2015) hypothesis was that the "perception of a nondiscriminatory climate" would be positively correlated with both developing an organizational network, and "disclosure of invisible stigmatized identity" was supported by his research (p. 356). Individuals who felt safe enough to disclose their sexual orientation were also more likely to perceive support on a psychosocial level.

Pichler and colleagues (2018) performed an analysis on a large dataset collected by a company dedicated to researching the effects of environmental, social, governance, and financial factors when making business decisions (MSCI, 2020). MSCI data is organized into categories

of community, corporate governance, employee relations, environment, human rights, and product, which contains information for thousands of firms. After discarding observations that lacked sufficient data to be included in the analysis, 4,619 firm-year observations representing 1,347 firms were included in Pichler and colleagues' dataset. LGBT policies considered to be notably progressive were selected as the key unifying variable in the study, as the researchers wanted to understand the difference between organizations with LGBTQ+ supportive policies versus those lacking inclusive policies (Pichler et al., 2018).

Firm value was one of the possible outcomes variables in Pichler and colleagues' (2018) research, and it was calculated using an equation of assets less equity plus the fiscal year end closing price multiplied by common shares outstanding, all divided by assets. Factor productivity was calculated using net sales, total property, plant, and equipment, less depreciation and the number of employees. Employee productivity was measured by net sales divided by number of employees. Finally, profitability was measured using a standard return on assets calculation of operating income less depreciation divided by total assets.

In 1996, the percentage of firms with LGBTQ+ supportive policies was 4% in the 94 firms measured (Pichler et al., 2018). In 2009 this percentage jumped to 21% of 656 organizations analyzed by Pichler and colleagues (2018). Overall, the data showed that LGBTQ+ supportive corporate policies were positively correlated with firm value, factor productivity, and profitability. Pichler and colleagues (2018) also noted that the association with increased productivity and having LGBTQ+ supportive policies may be due to the fact that already financially secure organizations have more financial resources to invest in said policies. However, Pichler and colleagues (2018) suggests a possible cause and effect relationship, where the adoption of policies could be the driver of a change in financial performance.

Even after the Supreme Court ruling declared that the existing Title VII protection of sex discrimination applied to discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation or gender identity, the ERG of a Fortune 500 company headquartered in the Midwest was still addressing complaints related to religious arguments against supporting an LGBTQ+ group (Anonymous Informant 2, personal communication, August 19, 2020). Unlike ERGs related to race or for the advancement of women, LGBTQ+ ERGs often have to fight negative bias and their members' right to exist and be seen at work as themselves (Webster et al., 2018). Hammond (2018) reported changing jobs due to repeated negative bias, microaggressions, and outright discrimination. In another example, at one corporate cultural event involving multiple ERGs from the same company, attendees arrived to find that the LGBTQ+ group's booth had been vandalized, while no other booths had been touched (Green, 2018).

Though organizations have been tasked with creating LGBTQ+ inclusive policies and procedures, these policies are only able to be effective to the extent to which they are respected and enforced (Webster et al., 2018). The good news is that employees now are able to file discrimination claims related to perceived discrimination of their SOGI and are increasingly intolerant of unfair treatment in the workplace (Saxe, 2020). However, despite a near global transformation of the legislation in the areas of SOGI, there is still much work to be done to allow LGBTQ+ individuals to be completely accepted in the workplace (Colgan, 2012).

Regrettably, it is also important to remember that even within the LGBTQ+ community, there is at times racism, transphobia, and disagreements on issues, such as the proper acronym or label to identify individuals who are heterosexual (Kleintop, 2019). Non-white individuals of the LGBTQ+ population experience both racism and homophobia, and it is another barrier to them feeling comfortable being out at work (Hammond, 2018). This intersectionality of diversity leads

to individuals potentially being stigmatized for both visible and invisible social identities (Trau, 2015).

Though transgender individuals report increased job satisfaction when they can be open about their gender identity, this does not decrease the discrimination they face in the workplace (Martinez et al., 2017). The unemployment rate for individuals who identify as transgender is three times the national average. To create a truly inclusive workplace, all people should be welcome to show up as themselves, regardless of their gender identity, sexuality, race, or religion (Welbourne et al., 2017). Creating further exclusion within the LGBTQ+ community would only detract from the goals to support equality, fairness, and non-discrimination in the workplace.

Benefits of LGBTQ+ Inclusion

LGBTQ+ Employees and Organizational Support

Recall that Trau (2015) conducted a study that looked at organizational support and discovered that that higher levels of psychosocial support were positively correlated with nondiscriminatory climates. Perceived organizational support theory is the concept that people tend to form judgements on how much their employer cares for them and their physical and emotional well-being, and how much the employer values their contribution (Pichler et al. 2017). Pichler and colleagues (2017) proposed an integrated model combining perceived organizational support (POS) and organizational justice theories to develop a conceptual model of both individual and organizational outcomes that come from having LGBTQ+ supportive policies for all workers, regardless of their sexual orientation. Higher levels of POS suggest that employees will have more positive attitudes towards their employer. The hypotheses examined by Pichler et al. (2017) further revealed that firms with LGBTQ+ supportive policies also experienced increased productivity as well as increased financial performance.

In the furtherance of that productivity and organizational success, managers, HR staff, and peer leaders act as agents of the organization, and their perceptions and beliefs will likely affect the level of support an individual feels from their job. These social relationships play an integral part in forming an individual's perspective on organizational support (Trau, 2015). In accordance with this theory, employees who feel a level of concern for their well-being are more likely to translate that into increased employee productivity.

Related to POS, perceived organizational justice is the level of fairness an individual feels at their place of employment. Pichler and colleagues (2018) theorized that LGBTQ+ supportive policies would be positively correlated to POS for all employees, and also that perceptions of organizational justice would be directly related to POS. This is an area where future research is needed to determine how the effects of policies and actions benefiting a subset of employees relate to the greater population.

Organizational Outcomes Related to LGBTQ+ Workplace Support

In order to measure the organizational outcomes related to support of LGBTQ+ policies and displays of support at work, Webster and colleagues (2018) developed a study to examine how the support impacted organizational outcomes such as work attitudes, psychological strain, disclosure, and discrimination. Their review of 27 studies included data from LGBTQ+ employees working in the United States that met their criteria of including statistics, or the data itself that could be used to calculate correlation between variables. All of the studies included in the analysis reported a relationship between workplace support and one or more of the organizational outcomes listed above. Their metadata analysis included variables of work attitudes, formal policies and practices, a LGBTQ+ supportive climate, supportive relationships, psychological strain, disclosure, and perceived discrimination.

Webster and colleagues (2018) performed an analysis of workplace attitudes related to job satisfaction and organizational commitment which revealed that organizations with more supportive LGBTQ+ policies tended to have more positive work attitudes. These inclusive policies also lead to an increased likelihood that individuals will feel comfortable disclosing their sexual orientation at work. This identity management strategy of choosing to disclose comes at the cost of revealing an invisible stigma, which could potentially lead to rejection, positive outcomes, or anything in between (Martinez et al., 2017). Perceived discrimination and psychological strain were also analyzed in the context of organizational support, and there was a strong inverse relationship with decreased levels of strain and discrimination in workplaces with more supportive policies. The largest positive impact on workplace attitudes and the wellbeing of LGBTQ+ individuals was supportive workplace relationships (Webster et al., 2018).

A dominance analysis calculated by Webster and colleagues (2018) was developed to show the correlation coefficients in the variables of organizational support as it related to work attitudes, psychological strain, disclosure, or discrimination. The data showed that 26% of the explained variance in work attitudes of LGBTQ+ workers was related to workplace support. The supportive workplace environment impacted disclosure and discrimination the most, then next it affected psychological strain and workplace attitudes. The study suggested that it is not enough to merely have supportive policies and diversity and inclusion programs, because it is the perception of support that will matter more to LGBTQ+ employees.

When employees of an organization feel comfortable with being themselves, they will be more likely to have an increase in workplace satisfaction and productivity (Liswood, 2010). The results of the multiple studies documented above show a clear benefit for individuals and organizations in creating an inclusive workplace. Policies supporting LGBTQ+ employees

provide benefits to individuals outside their own community as well and are correlated with positive business results (Pichler et al., 2018). One way companies can demonstrate visible support for LGBTQ+ individuals in the workplace is through the creation of Employee Resource Groups.

Employee Resource Groups and Benefits

Social Identity Theory as the Unifying Lens to Study ERGs

A goal of any Employee Resource Group (ERG) should be to welcome those who self-identify with that group (Welbourne et al., 2017). The Social Identity Theory is relevant in understanding how people perceive and determine who is welcome in the group. Social Identity Theory (SIT) is the concept that a person identifies themselves based on their group membership. While there are dozens of types of ERGs and thousands of these groups in the United States, there is a dearth of research related to the impact that these collectives of people provide to individuals and organizations. Despite the increasing number of ERGs, the amount of papers published on the topic has remained steady, which Welbourne and colleagues (2017) noted. SIT relates to processes of social categorization, social comparison, and social identification. How much a person within an ERG identifies with that particular collective will depend on their individual mental health and self-esteem, as well as their status in the group, and the group itself. The most extensive diversity climate theoretical framework, the Interactional Model of Cultural Diversity (IMCD) is grounded in SIT (Holmes et al., 2020).

When the environment triggers a threat to one's social identity, this affects both self-view and clouds perceptions of the environment itself (Trau, 2015). SIT itself suggest that people utilize stereotypes and categorizations of behaviors in order to understand them. Glassman and Glassman (2017) used the SIT to describe one concern that creating ERGs can lead to division

among coworkers of members and non-members, and this can potentially cause a business problem if there is a strong in-group/out-group mentality. One way to partially mitigate this in LGBTQ+ supportive ERGs is to open membership to both LGBTQ+ participants and their allies in the organization (Aritonovich, 2020). While SIT suggests that individuals will vary in their strength of identification, some researchers have noted that those who are ERG members can experience increased identification with the organization itself when compared to similar colleagues who are not involved in ERGs (Welbourne et al., 2017).

Welbourne and colleagues (2017) theorized that because ERGs are inside an organization, membership in an ERG will likely create a dual social identity – one as an employee of the company and one within the group. In addition, the strength of a group and its effectiveness will be positively correlated with the strength of individual employees. By creating an ERG, corporations show outward support for its members and in turn, their uniqueness and diverse identities, which can be a reason why companies still face controversy over LGBTQ+ affinity groups. Unfortunately, there are many people in the United States that still believe they have a right to denigrate, disparage, or even dictate another's sexual preferences or gender identity, and invalidate their very right to exist as themselves.

In addition, those who belonged to ERGs also experienced higher levels of job satisfaction (Welbourne, et al., 2018). ERGs themselves have been known to decrease employee turnover of its members, in addition to increasing productivity, and generating more effective marketing and innovation (Green, 2018). There is empirical evidence that these groups can actually boost employee performance as well as a multitude of specific instances where ERGs have succeeded to bring about actual change in the workplace (Glassman & Glassman, 2017). For example, Glassman and Glassman (2017) wrote that Texas Instruments noted that their

ERGs increased the recruitment efforts in those people who socially identified with one or more of their affinity groups.

History of ERGs & ERGs Today

The first ERGs started in the 1960s, as corporations began to take notice of the racism that their employees were experiencing (Welbourne et al., 2017). This was one of the first times that the individual needs of the employees aligned with the corporate strategic business goals, and the then-CEO of the Xerox Corporation supported a Black caucus to improve employee race relations. Over the next several decades, organizations all over the world began to support employee-led groups to assist in the inclusion of diverse employees. These groups are sometimes called affinity groups, employee networks, business resource groups, communities of practice, and more (Dutton, 2018; Welbourne et al., 2017). As Dutton (2018) stated, “ERGs are communities brought together by social identity characteristics, including race, ethnicity, and sexual orientation” (p. 20). While there are a variety of purposes for ERGs and affinity groups, this review will focus on identity-based groups. When analyzing ERG presences within Fortune 100 companies, it was revealed that Asian, African American, Latino, LGBT, and Women affinity groups existed in 80% of the organizations studied (Glassman & Glassman, 2017). Moreover, ERGs that supported veterans or people with disabilities were present in a little over half of the organizations.

At a high level, the top reasons for creating an ERG are to reduce costs associated with turnover, absenteeism, and low productivity, and thereby increase profitability (Glassman & Glassman, 2017). Preventing the marginalization of certain groups of employees is a bonus, as these groups can serve as an “organizational smoke detector” (p. 105). If an ERG is tied to the organizational benefits, it is likely to have increased funding and visibility (Welbourne &

McLaughlin, 2013). In order to gain support from senior management to allocate budgets for ERGs, it is imperative that the groups provide a positive return on investment and demonstrate their worth (Diversity Primer, 2009). Numerous individual and organizational benefits of ERGs have been identified.

Individual Benefits to ERGs

There are a multitude of individual benefits to joining an ERG, including networking, development, socialization, and more (Welbourne & McLaughlin, 2013). ERGs can also provide a safe space for innovation to occur, as individuals are more likely to share their unconventional ideas with those like them than unlike them (Green, 2018). One individual that Green (2018) interviewed for her research described the African American resource group he was a part of as similar to a backyard court that he could utilize in order to perfect pitches before going prime time. In other words, these affinity groups allow for its members to gain valuable experience, advice, and feedback which allowed them to develop their skills in a low risk setting. ERGs can also educate members on any cultural differences between members of the group and what is considered normal for the majority of the workforce. Ideally, these groups should provide support to both individuals and the organization.

Cultural affinity groups allow a place to discuss various norms between culture. For example, a member of an Asian American group stated that a common topic of discussion in their ERG is the difference in meeting culture between Asian and American companies (Green, 2018). In her book, *The Loudest Duck*, Liswood (2010) explained that Americans have grown up hearing the saying “the squeaky wheel gets the grease”. Therefore, those who grew up in America are more likely to speak up in meetings because it is associated with positive attention. However, for those who were raised in Asia, they are more familiar with the phrase “the loudest

duck gets shot” and correlate speaking up with negative attention or even death. These cultural differences may seem small, but can grow and fester in negative ways if they are not addressed (Brown, 2018).

Networking opportunities, as well as mentorships, are other benefits that an ERG might offer to its members (Green, 2018). An advantage of ERGs is they typically bring together members from a variety of age groups, job departments, and careers (Welbourne et al, 2017). By providing opportunities for individuals to meet colleagues they would not otherwise run into, relationships between prospective mentors are more likely to occur organically, instead of originating through an assigned mentor program. Mentors can be invaluable to employees as they provide guidance, advice, and perspective in a non-supervisory relationship (Rumens, 2011). Some ERGs take part in community outreach or volunteer for causes relevant to the community of practice. When highlighted on a company website, ERGs can act as a recruiting tool to help prospective employees determine if they would fit in at the workplace (Glassman & Glassman, 2017).

Other benefits of ERGs include the ability to embed employee development within the groups itself. This employee development can be accomplished by individuals through holding leadership positions within the ERG, as well as to help build bridges between different departments or company locations (Green, 2018). At her study of six social identity-based ERGs in one global corporation, Green (2018) found that these groups provided informal learning and development opportunities to their members. For example, by planning an event for the ERG, an employee could gain additional experience in planning, budgeting, organizing, and coordinating logistics.

The presence of an ERG suggested that the organization supported an equitable work climate and therefore, would assist in meeting strategic goals towards creating a diverse and inclusive workforce (Green, 2018). For LGBTQ+ employees, the presence of an ERG provides a visible signal of a company that is openly affirming of their social identity. As Trau (2015) noted, higher levels of psychosocial support were positively correlated with a nondiscriminatory climate, which suggested that an LGBTQ+ individual would perceive higher levels of organizational support in a company that had open support of LGBTQ+ people.

Organizational Benefits of ERGs

There are many organizational benefits of ERGs, as they are a popular way for organizations to help ensure that they are creating a diverse and inclusive environment (Green, 2018). The hypothesis examined by Pichler and colleagues (2018) revealed that firms with LGBTQ+ supportive policies also experienced increased productivity as well as increased financial performance. Since an ERG for LGBTQ+ would be an example of an LGBTQ+ supportive policy, this could correlate with higher profits and profitability. Using the Corporate Social Responsibility theory discussed earlier, organizations should make an effort to ensure that they are meeting the needs of all of employees, customers, and society at large (Pichler et al., 2018). Some companies use their ERG members to participate in focus groups regarding consumer behavior to better target the external market, like Ford did when they requested input from the parenting ERG on minivan designs (Glassman & Glassman, 2017). The buying power of the LGBTQ+ individuals is estimated to be hundreds of billions of dollars; leveraging internal feedback on concepts and content can provide important insight into relevant customer needs and desires. Other organizations utilize their ERGs to provide education to their human resource departments on issues specific to their social identity. Many ERGs offer some sort of ally or

diversity training in addition to cultural, educational, or other learning opportunities for their non-member colleagues (Green, 2018).

Some ERGs participate in cultural appreciation events where they share food and customs of their shared identity with the workforce at large (Green, 2018). At the company Green (2018) studied, the Asian American resource group members would reach out to new hires and make sure they knew where the Asian grocery stores were located. Other cultural activities ERGs hosted included lunches, panels, and guest speakers to share historical and current information on their social identity.

Another benefit of growing numbers of ERGs for the LGBTQ+ community is their ability to advise business leaders and human resource groups on sensitive topics related to employees' sexual orientation or gender identity (Glassman & Glassman, 2017). For example, as part of the Ohio Diversity Council's LGBTQ+ Unity Summit in 2020, several speakers shared how their ERGs helped to create gender neutral bathrooms in their workplace. LGBTQ+ ERGs can also be a resource to ensure that employee benefits are trans-inclusive and nondiscriminatory. Ally trainings, such as LGBTQ+ 101, serve as educational seminars that many ERGs for the LGBTQ+ have hosted or shared with their colleagues to share definitions about what an LGBTQ+ ally is and how allyship can help their coworkers and the LGBTQ+ people in their lives. For example, several companies at the 2020 Unity Summit mentioned how their ERGs were a huge resource to the parents of children who were gay, transgender, or questioning their sexual orientation or gender identity.

Summary

Organizations today must go beyond diversity and ensure that all employees are included and receive equitable treatment (Webster et al., 2018). Diversity without inclusion leads to high

turnover rates as individuals seem to be brought on board because of their unique viewpoints only to be shown the door for espousing those innovative ideas (Liswood, 2010). People who are allowed to freely share their unique gifts and talents at work are both happier and more productive (Brown, 2018).

Employee Resource Groups are uniquely positioned to bridge the needs of minority employees and ensure that their voice is heard by senior management (Glassman & Glassman, 2017). When done well, ERGs can increase the recruitment and retention of individuals from a wide variety of backgrounds. The 2009 recession did not slow the generation of ERGs, and with the low cost and high interest in diversity and inclusion initiatives, there is little reason to think that the 2020 pandemic would prevent more companies from starting these groups (Welbourne & McLaughlin, 2013). Theoretically, both organizational and society change can be instigated by the creation and evolution of ERGs (Welbourne et. al., 2017).

The numbers of ERGs within organizations is growing, as companies have an increased motivation to show support for their minority employees (Dutton, 2018). Public displays of inclusion the first step in creating a welcome environment (Hammond, 2018). While there is little quantitative data on how ERGs can statistically increase recruitment and retention, there are clear increases in the perception of support and job satisfaction (Webster et al., 2018). Increasing inclusion can improve organizational culture and offer new learning and developmental opportunities for all employees, beyond the members of the ERG (Green, 2018). Successful ERGs typically create annual goals, including those that can be measured, such as increasing membership in the group, holding a certain number of events, or conducting fundraising efforts for charitable causes the organization already supports (Glassman & Glassman, 2017). While stockholders may argue that ERGs do little for the company's bottom line, the groups' mere

existence shows support for minorities, which could be considered a crucial “societal goal” as Glassman and Glassman (2017) stated. Since LGBTQ+ ERGs would indicate that a company has LGBTQ+ supportive policies, this could extend to increased value, productivity, and profitability as shown in the study by Pichler and colleagues (2018).

Practical Application

When, Where, and Why to Start an ERG

There is no firm rule on when to start an ERG, but if it is something that employees within a company have been openly discussing, there may be enough interest to start a small group (A. Leu, personal communication, July 1, 2020). Every company is different, but in many cases, a supportive senior leader is required in order to have the conversations with the executive leadership team and human resources on budgeting and funding an ERG (Dutton, 2018). Some organizations have a formal process for the creation and execution of affinity groups while other businesses have a more flexible informal process that can, for example, start with information gathering meetings.

As mentioned previously, LGBTQ+ groups are unlike affinity groups for women, racial or cultural minorities, people with disabilities, or veterans, as there can be an increased stigma as well as an invisible stigma of self-identifying as a part of the group (Webster et al. 2018), and until recently there were no federal protections for LGBTQ+ employees (Saxe, 2020). While the recommended steps below are specific to LGBTQ+ ERGs, the framework can be modified to fit other types of affinity groups. The best plan will be one targeted to the needs of the specific group and organization that the ERG will serve (Leu, 2020).

At one global corporation headquartered in Ohio, the path to an LGBTQ+ ERG began with interest in coordinating a group to march in the local PRIDE parade in 2018 (B. Winters,

personal communication, September 11, 2020). That turned into company's only openly gay male and his non-heterosexual female teammate being invited to attend an LGBTQ+ conference in 2019, where, immediately after the meeting on the way to the parking lot, they discussed if they would ever be able to have an ERG of their own. Both were involved in a larger LGBTQ+ community through non-profit organizations and volunteerism and were able to leverage their knowledge in multiple conversations with human resource representatives regarding creation of an ERG and what it might look like at their organization. Now, 16 months later, along with their executive sponsor, they are preparing to present an ERG rollout plan for consideration by organizational decision makers (B. Winters, personal communication, September 23, 2020).

In another example, a midwestern U.S. company with over 50,000 employees tasked two known members of the LGBTQ+ community and an ally with "figuring out" how to start a LGBTQ+ ERG, and they first reached out to their external network colleagues to see what had worked at other organizations (Anonymous Informant 3, personal communication, August 19, 2020). Since LGBTQ+ acceptance can vary from state to state and city to village, it is advisable that persons interested in starting new ERGs reach out to existing groups that are already helping the LGBTQ+ community for relevant advice and guidance. Another option is to reach out to the National Diversity Council and get in touch with local council representatives to help guide the ERG creation process.

In Leu's (2020) recent seminar at the Ohio Diversity Council's LGBTQ+ Virtual Unity Summit in June, the recommended first step for an individual who wants to start an ERG is to first find one to four colleagues who can be the initial leadership team to assess interest. Starting an affinity group is a team effort and helps to ensure sustainability of the ERG. Ideally, this team would be diverse and include LGBTQ+ representation. This team should first assess if the

organization supports the establishment of one or more ERGs. Are there any mergers or acquisitions that might change the leadership? Do people who identify as LGBTQ+ feel safe to publicly announce their membership in the ERG? For example, just because an environment is not openly hostile, it does not mean that individuals do not experience micro-aggressions or derogatory comments passed off as jokes, which could influence their decision to publicly identify as being part of an LGBTQ+ ERG (Green, 2018).

Even in regions where there are robust LGBTQ+ ERGs in the office settings, these same corporations may struggle with rolling out these groups in factory or manufacturing locations outside the corporate office. The leadership should define who the group should include and understand that, in most groups, allies to the LGBTQ+ become a large portion of members and provide both acceptance and support to their colleagues (Aritonovich, 2020). Inviting allies is one way to allow individuals to join the ERG without revealing personal information if they do not feel comfortable disclosing their invisible stigmatized identity (Trau, 2015). For some people, revealing their SOGI could be a barrier that would otherwise prevent them from joining the group.

The next important step in creating an ERG is to find a sponsor (Miano, 2017). The sponsor should be a senior leader in the organization or a high-ranking member of human resources that can advocate for the group and has the authority to persuade buy-in from other senior leaders and executives. If a sponsor is not readily available, start with human resources as they may be able to assist in finding an appropriate sponsor. As stated earlier, the business benefits, both to individuals inside the ERG as well as the organization at large, must be conveyed in order to gain support to start any ERG (Welbourne et al., 2017). The sponsor needs to be a person who can help lead organizational support of the group and demonstrate

willingness to support a positive diversity climate. This person should also be willing to occasionally come to meetings and be an active and visible presence in the group (Prosci, 2020). The executive sponsor may need to be educated on the unique struggles of the LGBTQ+ community (Cooper, 2018), but should be willing and able to advocate for the Employee Resource Group with their peers, colleagues, and the organization at large.

Define the What and How of the ERG

With the support of a small leadership team, it is important to define what the ERG will do (Leu, 2020). Is it a group that just has occasional happy hours? Will there be monthly meetings? What does the ERG hope to accomplish? What are the benefits to the organization? How will being in the ERG benefit its working members? What should the group be named? The name of the group is important for the group's branding and how it will be presented within the organization. However, the name could be controversial if there is a lack of unity or questionable diversity climate. For example, one midwestern public university originally wanted the word "queer" in its name but found that it turned off allies and those who remember the historically negative connotation of the word.

What?

Typically, the central purpose of an ERG is to build a network of employees who are under-represented at work, as there is a "general lack of awareness and knowledge about diversity issues" in most corporations (Dutton, 2018, p. 2). Green (2018) identified that many of the ERGs were a resource to the company's HR and leadership on issues related to race and inclusion as well as hosted events for non-member colleagues. Through formal and informal activities, ERGs can grow in size and membership. For example, a popular event many LGBTQ+

ERGs support is some form of ally training, pronoun training, or unconscious bias training for the larger organization as a way to educate their peers, colleagues, management, and leadership.

Education on preferred pronouns and why they matter is another example of training that might be provided by members of an ERG in order to honor the gender identity of employees as well as customers (Diaz, 2020). For both transgender and non-binary individuals, being referred by their correct pronoun can be an important part of their self-identity and ability to feel accepted in the workplace (Martinez et al., 2017). People that do not identify as either a man or woman may not feel comfortable using she/her/hers or he/he/his pronouns and prefer they/them/theirs (Tobia, 2016). Explaining the importance of respecting an individual's right to self-identify their own gender identity in the workplace has been an area where LGBTQ+ advocacy organizations have played a crucial role in shaping the inclusive policies and benefits for employees in the United States. The small leadership group should work together on a proposed rollout plan that includes a mission statement, group goals, estimated budget needs, and suggested next steps (Leu, 2020).

How?

Many organizations will require some type of ERG charter or documentation that includes the goals for the group (Glassman & Glassman, 2017). This is typically required prior to the small group soliciting new members or receiving funding from the business for the ERG. Larger companies may have formal templates that must be completed in order for a specific ERG or affinity group to be recognized by the organization. Employee Resource Group charter templates are available online through internet search and a sample is included in the Appendix (Miano, 2017). Regardless of the template, it is important for the small group to put a plan

together specific to their organization, which includes potential events and activities that the group can host or join, as well as specific benefits to the members of the ERG.

To increase the likelihood that the group will be approved to move forward, clear organizational benefits should be identified and documented in the charter (Miano, 2017). Once the group comes to a consensus, details should be reviewed with the executive sponsor for feedback and buy-in. The executive sponsor is critical to gain support for the ERG at the leadership level and it is imperative that they are comfortable with the proposal and are able to discuss high-level details with their peers and colleagues (B. Winters, personal communication, September 21, 2020). After the charter is ready, the plan will need to be shared with the leadership either directly by the sponsor or through existing departments such as HR, Employee Wellness, Diversity Units, etc. (Leu, 2020). Ensure that recommended next steps are included because if the ERG is approved to move forward, recruiting and marketing will need to soon follow.

And Go!

Depending on the culture and organization, the next steps could vary. However, announcing the new LGBTQ+ Employee Resource Group is crucial to recruiting members (Leu, 2020). Virtual events may be required if employees are in different locations or are unable to meet in person. There may be a portion of employees that need education on why an ERG is needed since they may think that if they are not gay, they cannot be a part of the group. Some groups have been able to gain traction by offering ally trainings first and then having information gathering sessions for those interested in forming what becomes the ERG.

Employee resource groups should attempt to meet at least once a quarter, if not more frequently based on the availability and desire of its members (Glassman & Glassman, 2017).

It is important for the members of the new ERG to have input into the activities and agenda; additional brainstorming sessions are recommended so that more ideas can be brought to the table (Leu, 2020). Marching in Pride parades is a popular activity for many LGBTQ+ groups and ERG members should discuss what community events should be attended. It might even be helpful to have guest speakers at a meeting from an ERG at another local company to offer candid feedback and advice. Leadership roles should be defined and expanded beyond the small group to create some structure on length of terms and the requirements of serving in a leadership position (Miano, 2017).

One ERG succeeded in creating visible support for the LGBTQ+ community by providing free rainbow apparel and items that could be publicly displayed by nameplates outside of their offices and cubicles (Leu, 2020). The rainbow items had to be ordered multiple times as once the stickers started appearing and employees understood the purpose, they were eager to show that they accepted their LGBTQ+ colleagues. Another ERG garnered a population where the 50% of the group were allies by sharing tips on being a better ally in the workplace, which included wearing rainbow or pronoun pins and adding preferred pronouns in email signatures (Aritonovich, 2020). These are both great examples of LGBTQ+ supportive policies and groups welcoming diverse individuals and increasing inclusion felt in the workplace.

Onward and Upward

By requiring ERGs to have charters that are annually renewed, a business can ensure that there is a meaningful purpose and function to the group (Glassman & Glassman, 2017). The ERG members should be meeting at least quarterly and reviewing the mission statement and goals on an annual basis to make sure that they are still aligned with the needs of the organization and individual participants. Leadership of the ERG should be rotated between

members to ensure continuity as employees come and go in the organization. The ERG may choose to have elections for leadership positions or take volunteers depending on the group maturity. This will enable new members to continue learning developmental skills as they participate in activities and planning of the events (Green, 2018). Since LGBTQ+ rights could be potentially affected by politics and legislation (Saxe, 2020), it is critical for the ERG leaders to be aware of the diversity climate experienced by their workers (Trau, 2015). As the needs of the organization and the diversity climate evolve, so may the mission and purpose of the ERG (Green, 2018). This is natural as the needs of the core members change and progress. One day, there may no longer be as strong of a need for an LGBTQ+ ERG if minds and hearts of people are opened to truly welcome and include diverse employees in the workplace. Since ERGs provide value even when they are not utilized to change employee attitude, these groups are likely to still hold a valuable place in organizations in the future.

Personal Reflection

Personally, as a queer white ciswoman, I celebrate that the first PRIDE was a riot and celebrate the black transgender women who spoke out against injustice (ACLU, 2020). I acknowledge my privileges and believe that I must use my platforms to speak out on injustice not only in our communities but also in our workplace. While some companies already have multiple ERGs, others are just starting with their first ever ERG. My own company, which is located in the Northwest Ohio, is hoping to start their own LGBTQ+ Group for members of the community and allies within my organization. The Human Resource team asked me to help lead the creation of this group and has given me a goal to create a template that can be used to build out future ERGs down the road for other groups of employees, as we work to create a more diverse and inclusive organization. My teammate and I worked on refining our plan with our

executive sponsor and HR as mentioned in the Practical Analysis. Since he recently moved to a different organization where they also asked him to help lead LGBTQ+ inclusivity efforts, I will be leading the efforts with a small leadership team at my company.

Through this review of the available literature, combined with my experience of working with Equality Toledo, the Ohio Diversity Council, and the Northwest Ohio LGBTQ+ Business Coalition, I hope to provide resources to those who have been tasked with creating an ERG, learning more about ERGs, or just want to know more about the struggles of being LGBTQ+ in the workplace. The discussed research studies have provided evidence for the fact that both LGBTQ+ supportive policies (Pichler et al, 2018) and employee resources groups (Green, 2018) are tied to organizational benefits. Increasing inclusion and decreasing discrimination is not only the right thing to promote from a corporate social responsibility standpoint, but also enables employees to be their authentic selves in the workplace.

In LGBTQ+ employee resource groups and supportive policies, there may be some who might argue that they dislike seeing their workplace getting involved in sociocultural issues or do not understand why sexual orientation and gender identity is something that they have to worry about at their jobs. As Brown (2018) would say, that is the definition of privilege as it does not take into account the experiences of those who have experienced discrimination because of their SOGI. Those who are members of the LGBTQ+ community, who have to choose on a regular basis whether or not to reveal their invisible stigma, do not have that ability (Martinez et al., 2017). If you have never been subjected to homophobic derogatory comments, you may be unaware that these are still common in our world today where some homosexual couples even fear holding hands in public, not knowing how they will be perceived publicly. Imagine wanting to grab your significant other's hands but not being able to because you could be subjected to

hateful slurs. I am not okay with this and hope that others would share my point of view. I want all of my friends, acquaintances, colleagues, or anyone who knows me to feel safe sharing with me their pronouns, partners' names, or that their child is transitioning without them being afraid of negative comments or judgments.

We all deserve to feel safe and be ourselves at work, and I want to live in a world where that is possible. Leaders must be capable of having tough conversations about the potential discrimination their employees experience and allow their employees to share their perspectives on issues that deeply affect them such as race, religion, gender, gender identity, and sexual orientation (Brown, 2018). Ignoring these issues is callous at best and can be harmful to those who are affected by racism, sexism, homophobia, or other types of discrimination on a regular basis. LGBTQ+ people exist and we have a right to be ourselves in the workplace just like everyone else. In the wise words of the late Ruth Bader Ginsburg, "Fight for the things you care about. But do it in a way that will lead others to join you" (Vagianos, 2015).

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Appendix

Employee Resource Groups (ERG) Charter Template

Developed by Nishat Akhter (Miano, 2017)

Purpose

Diversity is vital for *<Company Name>* ability to grow and innovate in such a fast-changing environment. Employee Resource Groups (ERGs) are an integral component of *<Company Name>* commitment to help us drive change in diversity and inclusion.

It allows us to capitalize on the extraordinary resources of *<Company Name>* employees. Best practices from other organizations indicate that when ERGs are established, employees become more engaged in identifying ways to leverage diversity and increase inclusion. ERGs support *<Company Name>* commitment to promoting diversity and inclusion, as well as employees' professional development.

ERG – Employee Resource Groups

ERGs are employee led, self-directed voluntary groups that offer opportunities to network internally, to attract a diverse employee base, to provide the inclusion of ideas and solutions, and to create opportunities for mentoring and career development.

ERG Examples

- Women in the workforce
- Veterans
- Multi-Cultural
- LGBTQ+
- Working parents
- Single parents

Employees who join ERGs can

- Serve as champions for diversity and inclusion at *<Company Name>* and help identify opportunities for us to become more inclusive.
- Identify best practices throughout the organization and get those communicated as broadly as possible for others to consider using.

Objectives

- Support global diversity and inclusion and serve as a resource when needed
- Share knowledge, raise cultural awareness and act as a bridge across cultural issues – improving *<Company Name>* cultural competence
- Work as an employee support system providing education, personal growth, information, and

- idea sharing
- Help with recruitment and retention efforts when possible
- Support managerial effectiveness, leadership development, and communication with employees
- Bring new ideas to management
- Work to enhance civic engagement and strengthen *<Company Name>* links to, and image in, the community
- Share best practices and learnings with other ERGs
- Remain neutral on political, religious, and ideological issues, both inside and outside *<Company Name>*
- Comply with all policies, guidelines, and rules

Resource Groups do not

- Engage in any activity that is inconsistent with *<Company Name>* mission or values
- Exclude employees from participating in meetings or activities
- Advocate for or take a position that could be considered exclusive
- Engage in discriminatory conduct on any basis
- Promote political, religious, or ideological views, agendas or causes
- Engage in political activities, make political or legislative endorsements, or promote candidates for public office maybe clarify group vs individual (individuals can pursue political activities outside of company)
- Engage in fundraising activities, either internally or externally, without advance approval
- Make direct charitable donations

Membership

ERGs are open to all employees on a voluntary basis.

How to start an ERG

Groups seeking official recognition as an ERG should submit the following information to *<Identified Company Email Alias>*

- Proposed name of the group
- A mission statement demonstrating how the group will support its members and *<Company Name>* commitment to diversity & inclusion
- The names of at least five employees seeking to establish this group

Key Roles & Responsibilities:

ERG Advisor

A VP or above supporter and advocate for the group who provides strategic guidance and serves as a liaison to other leaders and HR. He/She should mentor and guide the ERG members in their efforts to create a dynamic, inclusive workplace.

ERG Chairperson

The overall lead for the ERG who manages the group and is responsible for communications, activities, and frequency of meetings. Resource Groups will meet quarterly at a minimum.

ERG Bookkeeper

ERG member who will be responsible for managing the annual budget. The bookkeeper is responsible to provide accounting of their expenses to HR at the end of the fiscal year.

Organizational Support

Each group will have an annual budget of *<pre-defined amount>*, funded by HR/General Fund, at the beginning of each fiscal year (or pro-rated based on when in the budget year the group is established). The ERG will provide an accounting of their expenses to HR at the end of the fiscal year. Unused funds cannot be rolled over to the following year. The budget is intended to support ERG activities in all offices.

<Company Name> reserves the right to dissolve an Employee Resource Group if the leadership of the group requests that the group be dissolved, or if the group is found to be out of compliance with *<Company Name>* guidelines, other policies or rules.

How, specifically, can an ERG support employees' professional development?

There are many ways this could occur. Examples include:

- By inviting speakers to ERG meetings based on member interest
- By using their annual *<pre-defined amount>* budget to conduct educational seminars based on member interest
- By assuming leadership roles on the ERG
- By identifying colleagues who could serve as informal mentors

ERG KPIs

Specific Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) should be established for each ERG to measure effectiveness of the of the group.

Potential KPIs

- Growth in number of members year over year (Y/Y)
- Number of initiatives held annually

What if I have a question about ERGs?

You can email *<Identified Company Email Alias>* at any time.