

Fostering Disability-Inclusive Workplaces Through Employee Resource Groups

Employee Resource Groups (ERGs) are considered an exemplary practice that businesses can leverage to foster a culture of inclusion. This fact sheet explores how ERGs can benefit employees and employers alike.

What is an ERG?

Employee Resource Groups (ERGs) are internal organizational structures within individual businesses designed to address the unique needs and issues of today's diverse workforce. Also known as Affinity Groups or Business Resource Groups (BRGs), they are found in 90 percent of Fortune 500 companies and are gaining additional business support across the country. These groups offer employees an opportunity to network, address common issues and concerns, and receive support from those who share similar backgrounds, experiences or interests.

How do companies typically approach ERGs—particularly those related to disability?

While ERGs are usually open to all who wish to participate, they are often created for a variety of groups with common interests, including military veterans, African Americans, Latinos, LGBT individuals, women and individuals with disabilities. In the case of people with disabilities, there are four common types of ERGs—employees who are born with or who have acquired disabilities, maturing employees with age-related disabilities, veterans with service-connected disabilities, and employees who have children with disabilities or are caregivers to adults with disabilities. Some companies choose to create a separate ERG for each group, noting that employees in each of the situations typically have very different concerns.

How can disability-related ERGs benefit employees and employers?

ERGs are beneficial for a variety of reasons, including the following:

- ➔ **ERGs can promote self-disclosure by people with disabilities.** Many employers—including federal contractors meeting responsibilities under Section 503 of the Rehabilitation Act—are seeking ways to create a workplace culture in which people feel safe to self-identify as people with disabilities. In a 2013 survey conducted by Cornell University's Employment and Disability Institute and the American Association of People with Disabilities (AAPD), 26.1 percent of respondents indicated that the existence of an ERG was a very important factor in their decision to self-disclose.
- ➔ **ERGs can assist in the recruitment and retention of employees with disabilities.** ERGs clearly demonstrate an employer's commitment to a diverse workforce and can position them as an "employer of choice" for employees with disabilities. As such, job candidates with disabilities may feel more comfortable accepting a job offer from such employers since they know their needs will be understood. (In the case of federal contractors covered by Section 503 of the Rehabilitation Act, these applicants may also be more likely to self-disclose when invited at the pre-offer stage.) Once they're on the job, ERGs can be a valuable resource to new hires with disabilities, because members can serve as mentors, offering advice on everything from how to navigate the building to career development.

- ➔ **ERGs boost productivity.** ERGs signify a commitment to inclusion, and research indicates that the sheer perception of inclusion in the workplace impacts employee job satisfaction, commitment and productivity. Those employees who participate in an ERG tend to be engaged, loyal employees who feel connected and committed to organizational strategy.
- ➔ **ERGs can promote and educate staff on disability-related issues.** ERGs are excellent sources of advice on issues related to workplace supports, such as accommodations, accessible technology, physical accessibility and how the overall work environment suits employees with disabilities. ERGs can also help their companies develop disability etiquette and awareness training for staff.
- ➔ **ERGs can help companies improve their products and reach new customers.** Disability-related ERGs can assist their businesses in tapping the power of the disability market, which by some estimates is the largest minority group in the U.S. Members can provide valuable feedback on the development of products and services tailored to people with disabilities, and act as “brand ambassadors” to the communities they represent.
- ➔ **ERGs can support important projects and initiatives.** People with disabilities are well equipped to help their employers identify key factors to consider as they manage company operations. For example, disability ERGs have helped companies ensure that their emergency preparedness plans are fully inclusive, and that they’re meeting the needs of aging workers who want to stay on the job as long as possible.

Where can employers learn more about exemplary ERG practices?

For employers wanting to learn more, AskEARN.org features a helpful resource called the *Toolkit for Establishing and Maintaining Successful Employee Resource Groups*. This resource helps employers understand the benefits of ERGs and the steps involved in establishing or enhancing one. It is available at www.askearn.org/refdesk/Inclusive_Workplaces/Employee_Resource_Groups/Private_ERGs.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT:

This fact sheet is based on the issue brief *Using Employee Resource Groups to Create an Inclusive and Productive Workplace for Individuals with Disabilities* written by Social Dynamics LLC. The project was funded by the Office of Disability Employment Policy, U.S. Department of Labor.