

Guide

ERGs: A Vital Resource in Times of Disruption and Crisis

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HOT TOPIC RESOURCE GUIDE

ERGs: A Vital Resource in Times of Disruption and Crisis

Employee Resource Groups are a vital part of many organizations' diversity and inclusion strategy. Over the years, we have seen them progress from social networks to professional development networks and in recent years to business impact networks. ERGs contribute to their organizations across all priority areas including business impact, community engagement, recruitment and advancement efforts and workplace culture. In times of major disruption, ERGs can be a valuable tool in continuing to support your day to day operations while at the same time mobilizing to respond to crisis whether it be internal or external.

ERGs Can Provide Essential Feedback, Input And Drive Business

ERGs can be leveraged to solve for the challenges presented by disruption, particularly when it comes to engaging diverse talent. ERGs can be extremely valuable in not only generating new ideas for the business, but providing safe spaces for listening and learning.

ERGs can gather input from their members and survey employees around topics of concern by developing and leading discussion forums across lines of business, region and dimensions of diversity.

- **How are their constituents coping? What challenges or anxieties have they faced? What support could be helpful?**
- **Are there particular needs that need to be addressed?**
- **Highlight and share successes of how the organization and the individual have responded to the disruption- what has worked really well? What positive outcomes have they seen as a result?**

ERGs are Connected to the Community and Build Business Relationships

Today's global companies are intrinsically connected to the consumers they serve, the people they employ, and the communities in which they operate. As the number of diverse stakeholders grows, so does the need to incorporate new voices and different perspectives into the business strategy. Accordingly, organizations have been focused on aligning ERGs with their CSR strategies. Forward thinking organizations are identifying opportunities to accomplish CSR goals by capitalizing on their ERGs that offer the resources, capabilities and skill sets, especially to offer in-kind donations of time and expertise. Doing so offers many benefits including:

- **Lending authenticity and credibility to the CSR narrative.**
- **Expanding skill sets and visibility of ERG members for career development**
- **Engaging employees in purpose-driven work which leads to higher retention rates**
- **Strengthens relationships with community leaders and organizations in the markets you serve**

Driving business and creating new entryways into new diverse markets is another way ERGs have been leveraged widely by their organizations. Horizon Blue Cross Blue Shield New Jersey is one organization whose ERGs worked to create new business revenue generation by offering insights and innovative services (which can also be done virtually) resulting in the increase of new Hispanic members contributing to a rise in overall membership from 10,000 to 30,000 members. During times of disruption, consider how you can leverage ERGs to reach out to your customers and clients to build connections and relationships even further. Tap into

your ERGs to brainstorm ways in which they can help make an impact during times of disruption and crisis. For example, they could:

- **offer translation services** to help by translating critical information related to a current emergency situation or other disruption
- **reach out** to local chambers of commerce to see if local small businesses need assistance
- **sponsor/conduct virtual focus groups** (Employee Voice Sessions SM) to understand what challenges and anxieties communities are facing and to understand how organizations can help?
- **mobilize and reach out** to partner with other ERGs within your company or with other companies to pool resources
- **serve as social media ambassadors** (e.g. share their experiences and speak directly to customers and communities through social media and other community-based forums.)
- **serve as “quality assurance agents”** to test and experiment with non-traditional CSR initiatives that are skills-based and virtual
- **develop videos and testimonials** to share what the company is doing to support employees and communities during this time

Employee Voice SessionsSM (EVS) are virtual focus groups that capture detailed insights that traditional focus groups don't. It is a cutting edge employee listening tool that captures the “voice of the employee” at scale, combining the power of focus groups, quantitative surveys, and interview methodologies. Participants engage virtually and anonymously in a safe and solutions-oriented group experience, moderated by experts guiding participants through a series of qualitative and quantitative questions derived from best practice research on workplace culture and inclusion. Employee Voice Sessions allow organizations to capture employee perspectives and gain deeper understanding of the current company culture. For more information contact info@cultureatwork.com.

- **identify under-served communities and populations** that may be disproportionately impacted by a virtual, socially distant world and offer to close those gaps by, for example, reaching out to senior citizen homes to set up facetime chats to keep them company or offering virtual entertainment, lessons in technology or help navigate through critical and credible information.

NEXT PRACTICES

Best Buy's Supporting Advances in Generational Empowerment (SAGE) partners with local community centers to provide technology training and education for individuals who may not know how to use technology to access information and stay in touch with family members and other important communication channels.

Toyota's Technical Center African American Collabora-

tive (TTC-AAC) successfully mobilized a water donation drive that provided clean water for the citizens of Flint, MI. TTC-AAC was able to secure an agreement to fund a combined corporate donation along with team member matching funds in the amount of \$100K for the Foundation to the Flint Child Health & Development Fund. Within three weeks, TTC-AAC planned and implemented the initiative that resulted in cross-collaboration with

community organizations, citizens, employees and other BRGs (business resource groups) for the collection and delivery of more than 500 cases and containers of water to Flint.

Horizon Blue Cross/Blue Shield's Latin American Cultural Organization (LACO) worked with the company's salesforce to launch a toll free helpline for Hispanic consumers and patients. The help line is staffed with

bilingual representatives from Hola Doctor who are trained to answer questions related to healthcare law and guide them through the process of acquiring health insurance. LACO members translated messages into the most commonly used Spanish dialect and tested the system to ensure it worked as intended. LACO also assisted in ensuring the company's website was accessible and that content was accurate and informative.

ERGs Foster Engagement and a Sense Of Belonging

Times of crises result in high stress and anxiety. During these times, organizations face particular risk among our top talent, and particularly top diverse talent. Overlay that challenge with the new virtual workplace, where decreased personal connections can impact relationship capital and a connection to our workplaces.

[This is particularly true for women and people of color who lack access to sponsorship, mentorship and career path opportunities.](#)

Organizations should place special emphasis on motivators that will help retain our greatest assets, particularly non-monetary. (In times of major disruption, it is challenging to motivate monetarily as revenues and expenses will likely be scrutinized). There are many ways ERGs can play a critical role in fostering engagement and retention.

- [Create virtual peer mentoring circles](#)
- [Establish reverse mentorships](#) between ERG leaders/ members virtually mentoring executives to give leaders insight to what's happening boots-on-the-ground or upskill leaders in virtual technology
- **Charge ERG leaders** as communication ambassadors to help share your messages, creating a more personal touch to the message
- **Utilize your ERGs to work with their members** to establish career plans. Where do they see themselves next, what are actionable steps to help them get there?
- **Offer virtual career development sessions**, especially on upcoming and future skill sets such as data analytics and AI. In Diversity Best Practices recent insight paper [“A New Decade: Trends Impacting D&I”](#), we highlight some examples of how some companies are strengthening their talent pipelines by upskilling their employees.
- **Create space for fun!** It is important to provide opportunities for your employees to connect with each other beyond their normal day to day work tasks, especially in challenging times. ERGs can organize virtual social meet ups whether it be a virtual book club or something less formal like “meeting” for coffee for 15-30 minutes in the morning to check in with each other.

ERGs at **Guidewell** play a lead role in planning for, organizing and convening employee discussion sessions. Although GuideWell’s executives, including the CEO, are very involved in the forums, serving as sponsors, facilitators and panelists, employee community groups gather input from employees around the topics to be addressed, lead the discussions, and serve as panel members. To prepare for sessions, ERGs talk to their members and survey the workforce to identify issues and concerns. The information collected is used to frame a set of questions to get the conversation started. Sessions are kicked off with a message from the CEO, and a panel of senior leaders and ERG members initiate and advance the conversation and field questions from the audience. Sessions are open to all employees.

Managing The Basics of Virtual ERGs

In some cases, a crisis or disruption in our communities or organizations may result in many more employees needing to work remotely than is the norm. Creating guidelines for the ways ERGs function virtually will be essential to ensure that they can continue their work.

ERGs can establish regular meeting times to keep members engaged and involved in D&I work. Provide ERGs with the tech support to help them ideate and connect. Start by convening ERG leaders and chapter heads to create consistent protocols across the organization. Establish guidelines to ensure all are included and the teams are accountable for producing results.

- **Establish a regular cadence of meetings.** Creating stability and predictability can go a long way in easing anxiety and stress.
- **Determine which is the best technology to use** for these meetings and test the technology.
- **Create accountability.** Provide high level objectives for the first few meetings
 - **Meeting 1:** How are you all doing? Establish ground rules (e.g. one person at a time speaks, someone records notes, “muting yourself” rules, introducing yourself before you speak, ensure everyone has the chance to speak)
 - **Meeting 2:** What can we do to stay engaged? What can we do to support each other
 - **Meeting 3:** What can we do to support the business? Our communities?

Clorox’s Virtual ERG, ORBIT was created to better connect employees, teach people how to work together virtually and help Clorox adapt its HR and IT strategies for these workforce changes. For example, ORBIT partnered with IT to test new video conferencing and collaboration software. The group developed training materials and held 100+ WebEx trainings to drive adoption around the world. When Clorox was creating a new manager training series, ORBIT worked with HR to select virtual managers for the design committee. As a result, the new manager training supports the needs of remote manager/direct report relationships.

Lastly, establish social contracts, both in work teams and with ERGs. Employees may be asked to change the way they work in fundamental ways, likely with an increase in responsibilities. How do we get everything done? From a diversity and inclusion perspective, this disruption has a disproportionate impact on women, caregivers and people of color (who are a large majority of healthcare, hourly, and low-wage earners). Social contracts are explicit agreements on how teams will work together, make decisions, interact with each other, share info and support one another. Leverage ERGs to facilitate these conversations, to take a moment to identify needs and create transparency. Taking the time to discuss these will provide greater understanding, trust, and loyalty.

- **Are there non-negotiable hours** when we are available or not? (Off hours/on hours?)
- **Are there ways** to manage work shifts differently?
- **How** can we recalibrate workload demands on a team?
- **Do we need to clarify**, shift accountability for work, projects to help preserve work-family boundaries?
- **How do we make time** for de-stressing?
- **How will we recognize** and appreciate each other?
- **Will we have standard, set meetings** to manage the changes?

Success will require a culture of trust, reciprocity, encouragement, and accountability. ERGs can be an influential and significant factor in achieving cohesion and connection across your workforce and your communities. Diversity Best Practices provides multiple resources and access to ERG related content and insights.

For more information or to become a member of Diversity Best Practices, contact Donnice.Peterson@diversitybestpractices.com

Additional resources

[Corporate Social Responsibility and D&I: A Critical Partnership](#)

[A New Decade: Trends Impacting Diversity and Inclusion](#)

[Reverse Mentoring Tips and Best Practices](#)

[The Four Factors Keeping Women from the Top in Corporate America](#)

[How Peer Coaching Can Make Work Less Lonely](#)