

# Employee resource groups — where to get started

Employers are always looking for ways to improve workplace inclusivity and employee engagement. One diversity & inclusion tool that is often overlooked is employee resource groups.

Creating employee resource groups within your organization is a great way to provide a forum for employees from different backgrounds or experiences to discuss issues that affect them within the workplace or in their careers. A recent [Salesforce survey](#) found that employee resource groups successfully boost company culture and support companies' inclusion efforts. Find out how to get started with employee resource groups in your own company.

## What are employee resource groups?

Employee resource groups (ERGs) also sometimes referred to as affinity groups, are employee-lead groups that bring together employees based on shared identities, interests, or experiences. They are meant to provide a supportive environment where employees can come together to discuss unique challenges that they face in the workforce, provide mentorship or leadership development support to one another, and advocate for themselves.

## What is the benefit of employee resource groups?

Employee resource groups foster a more inclusive workplace and provide a number of benefits, such as:

### Improving employee engagement

ERGs can improve morale by fostering stronger relationships between employees and providing a sense of belonging to those in underrepresented groups. Having positive relationships with coworkers has been shown to improve retention. [1 in 6 employees](#) reports that they are less likely to leave a company if they have workplace friendships.

Once you've established ERGs within your company, they are also a great tool for onboarding. Starting a new job is stressful and it can take a while for new hires to feel like they fit in with the company and its culture. Joining an employee resource group can help new employees establish a sense of community early on and provide them with an extra resource to ask questions or seek mentorship.

### Facilitating career development

These groups also help facilitate career development for their members. Finding the right mentor can make a huge difference in an individual's career trajectory. Many people find that they feel more motivated by and connected to mentors with similar backgrounds or experiences.

### Providing better visibility around workplace issues

Lastly, employee resource groups help employers address workplace issues. It is in the best interest of

employers to create a safe and inclusive culture and promptly address any harassment or discrimination issues. Through coming together and sharing their experiences as members of a specific community or demographic, ERG members often identify systematic or recurring issues within the workplace.

People tend to be more comfortable bringing issues to the attention of the company as a group rather than as individuals. For example, an employee may write off an inappropriate comment or joke from a supervisor if they believe it's a one-off issue. However, if they learn that several people have experienced microaggressions or sexual harassment from that supervisor they will likely report the issue to HR. Similarly, someone may not want to request something like a gender-neutral bathroom just for themselves, but if they learn that several others also would like one they may be more willing to voice their concern.

Through this process company leaders can learn how to create a better employee experience for everyone, while also protecting themselves from lawsuits or EEOC complaints. After all, you can't fix issues that you don't know are there.

## **Common types of employee resource groups**

Employee resource groups are often formed as diversity groups meant to support a specific demographic, but they can be used for a wide variety of purposes.

### **Employee resource groups based on race or ethnicity**

One of the most common types of employee resource groups is race or ethnicity diversity groups. Large diverse organizations will often want to start a wide variety of ERGs for different individual ethnicities or cultures from throughout the world. Smaller organizations may only have enough representation to create broader groups based on race such as a Hispanic employee resource, Asian employee resource group, and black employee resource group.

### **Religious affiliation employee resource groups**

Many workplaces have employee resource groups for members of different religions. This can be particularly beneficial for frequently under-represented religions such as Islam, Judaism, Buddhism, or Hinduism. Often religious practices, holidays, and dietary guidelines of these religions are overlooked in American workplaces, so religion-based employee resource groups can be useful in advocating for better accommodations and generally improving cultural awareness in the workplace.

It does help to have an executive sponsor or member of the leadership team involved in faith-based employee resource groups to make sure that the purpose of the group is clearly maintained and that everyone feels respected. Religion is a sensitive topic for many people and is a topic that can bring out strong passionate opinions.

Employee resource groups should center around shared experiences, advocacy, and professional development. They are generally not the right forum for debates on different interpretations of religious texts or different ways of practicing a certain religion. They should also be geared towards people currently practicing the religion rather than introducing new people to the belief system. Providing education to others on holidays or practices for the purpose of cultural awareness or improving religious accommodations should be allowed though.

### **LGBTQ+ employee resource groups**

It is common to start employee resource groups for employees with shared experiences related to sexual orientation or gender identity. A lot of work and school-based LGBTQ+ affinity groups do open the group up more readily to allies than other diversity groups normally would. This is intentionally done to allow people to

check out the group without having to come out publicly. It also provides a safe space for people that may currently be questioning or exploring their sexual orientation or gender identity.

### **Employee resource groups for people with disabilities**

Navigating disabilities or chronic health conditions in the workplace can be a challenging and lonely experience. Getting the right disability accommodations can also be a difficult process to navigate. As such, disability support groups can be a great resource in the workplace. These ERGs also serve a meaningful business purpose as they can help employees find ways to improve their performance and better communicate their needs in regard to ADA accommodations.

### **Employee resource groups for women**

Creating an employee resource group for women and other non-men (such as nonbinary and gender non-conforming employees) is a popular option, particularly for companies operating in traditionally male-dominated fields. Women's groups are great for mentorship and professional growth.

### **Employee resource groups for working parents**

Balancing a career and parenting can be challenging and exhausting. Working parents have had an especially tough few years due to the coronavirus pandemic disrupting parents' and kids' routines with online school. Creating an employee resource group for parents provides a place for parents of all genders to vent, share tips, and advocate on workplace issues such as flexible work options that largely impact employees with children.

### **Age-based employee resource groups**

Young professionals groups are quite popular. Gen Z and Zillennials tend to have different attitudes and ideas around work, so it can be nice to provide them with a space to network and discuss different work issues. Older employees also face unique challenges (and often age discrimination) within the workplace and can also benefit from having a dedicated employee resource group.

### **Volunteer or advocacy groups**

While employee resource groups were originally targeted mostly towards demographic groups, volunteer or advocacy-based groups are also becoming increasingly common. One particularly popular version of this is climate advocacy or sustainability-focused resource groups.

This is a great one to consider starting as it's a great way to get employees involved with your organization's sustainability goals or initiatives. Employees may even be able to suggest new ways to reduce waste in the workplace or make the company's activities greener. When these suggestions come from passionate employees rather than leadership, other employees may also heed the suggestions more.

The same can be true for local initiatives or volunteering. Employee-led food or donation drives will often have better results. Bringing your workplace together for a good cause can be great for morale and for your community.

### **How to start employee resource groups**

One thing that companies need to keep in mind is that employee resource groups are meant to be voluntary and employee-lead. As such, it's important to include employees in the process of starting new employee resource groups within the company. Sometimes the suggestion to start employee resource groups will even come from employees rather than leadership.

Here is how to start employee resource groups in your workplace by involving your staff and the leadership team.

## **Consider your employee population**

When introducing employee resource groups to your company, it is important to consider the current employee population. Smaller businesses in particular may not have enough people from common ERG demographics or interest areas to support an active employee resource group.

A good way to find out what ERGs your employees would be interested in is to add a question on your next employee engagement survey asking for ERG suggestions. You can also create a survey or inbox for suggestions and share it through a company-wide email or at an all-staff meeting.

Asking for feedback is the best way to find out what groups will be the best fit for your organization. Looking at demographic data seems like a viable source for ERG ideas, but it's often not the best indicator of what groups people will actually want to participate in. Some employees simply don't like to join employee groups. Others may not feel comfortable discussing or sharing certain personal identities or affiliations in the workplace. If your business is in an area with high levels of hostility towards certain groups, people may also have safety concerns.

## **Get leadership involved**

Once the survey is complete, the leadership can review these ideas and see who would be willing to help start and lead each group. The employee resource groups should be employee-lead and not overly hierarchical, but having a member of the leadership or management team involved can be helpful. A senior manager will often be able to facilitate and provide better career development support to the group members and obtain greater visibility for any initiatives or requests made by the group.

However, leadership participation should feel natural, so allow leaders to get involved in ERGs that they fit into rather than forcing it. Allies are often welcome in employee resource groups, but they should be there to learn and support not try to lead.

## **Introduce the first set of ERGs**

Once you have the first set of ERGs chosen and have appointed executive sponsors or members of the leadership and HR team to help out, it's time to make an announcement. Let all employees know what groups have been formed, how to get involved, and when they will meet.

Keep in mind that you should not invite individual employees to specific groups unless that employee has already expressed interest in a specific type of employee resource group. Present all of the options to the whole team and allow people to get involved as they wish. Well-intended invitations can make people uncomfortable as ERGs often revolve around race, sexual orientation, ability status, and religious affiliation. All of these identities and identifiers can be very personal.

After the first ERGs have been established, allow employees to suggest and build their own employee-led groups to expand the roster. It can help to assign an HR team member or diversity and inclusion coordinator as the contact person for approving and coordinating new employee resource groups.