



At the **NALC (Network and Affinity Leadership Congress) Webinar** event on June 24, 2009, Jennifer Brown Consulting (JBC) facilitated an in-depth discussion about the ways that Employee Resource Groups (ERGs) can engage members. ERG success is often judged by its membership — both the sheer number of employees who participate on a regular basis, as well as the way the ERG involves the larger workplace community, and this event provided companies with a place to gather, share tips and techniques for what has worked in their cultures, and give an inside view into the challenges they are facing.

*Topic: “Engaging Network/Affinity Group Membership”
Corporate Participants: Ernst & Young, ING, ESPN
Facilitated by: Jennifer Brown Consulting & Diversity Best Practices*

Macro Findings

One important way to generate member engagement is to clearly define the “WIIFM”, or What’s In It For Me, for the employee and for the business. The most forward-thinking companies are now creating a two-pronged business case focused on the WIIFM for both individuals and organizations that:

1. Socially Engage Employees – by bringing employees together in a social capacity to network, share ideas, and gain support as a “minority” or special interest group, based on identity.
2. Deliver Business Impact – by delivering business performance improvement to the company at large through unique, innovative, inclusive and diverse perspectives.

Contributing to the webinar were three ERG industry leaders who discussed ERG member engagement from their perspectives:

Growth Stage	Company	Perspective
Initial Kick Off	ESPN	Discussed success factors necessary for getting new ERG off the ground
Continued Engagement	ING	Presented unique ways to engage ERG membership
Business Alignment	Ernst & Young (E&Y)	Highlighted Success factors in deploying an ERG as part of overall business strategy

Each of these companies found unique ways to develop inspiring messages that spread excitement about joining the networks. From this discussion, four key themes emerged. Below we describe each theme and provide concrete examples from leading companies. For companies at every stage of the ERG



lifecycle, these discussion points will provide key learnings and tips or ideas that can be immediately applied.

Theme 1: Structure = Success

Originally, ERGs in many companies functioned as informal social networks. Over time, as many ERGs have aligned themselves closer to business objectives, and begun to grow in size and stature, there has been a growing need for committees, roles, and administrative structures to be put in place.

ERGs are now at a turning point – where business alignment and mature structures are becoming imperative. For instance, at E&Y’s LGBT ERG “bEYond”, the group’s activities and their link to inclusion and diversity goals are tightly woven into E&Y’s strategic firm drivers, “People, Quality and Growth.” Therefore, individual performance reviews include metrics on people development; active participation in ERG activities is one way of fulfilling this goal.

ESPN created a “Business Proposal Template” for all newly-forming ERGs. In last year’s launch, each group needed to submit this template when applying for official ERG status. The proposal made sure that any ERGs are closely aligned with overall business strategy. Group leaders self-selected, and the selection process was open to any self-motivated employee. Key elements of the proposal included:

- Mission and Vision Statement
- Goals and Objectives
- Explanation of how the ERG aligns and connects with the integrated company diversity strategy
- Proposed events and activities
- Membership numbers – upon launch, and projected
- Official leader nomination
- Executive Champion selection (chosen from a “short-list” of executive employees who have been specially trained for this role)



The offices of Diversity, Work-Life and Employee Relations at ESPN reviewed all submissions and made a final decision on company-sponsored ERGs. Upon acceptance, all ERGs were assigned an HR liaison, who provides HR support. In addition, all elected ERG leaders and senior executive champions were reviewed and vetted by the HR department, to ensure they were in an appropriate capacity and had maintained adequate job performance metrics before assuming the role.

Theme 2: Motivation is Vital...Excite Your Employees About ERGs

All companies want to maximize participation in ERGs – they want employees hearing messages on inclusion and diversity; they want to capture unique and innovative ideas; and they need more hands to simply get the work done. Yet some companies struggle to get employees engaged. Here is what our participating companies are doing to increase participation.



Armed with the goal to have more employees attend monthly ERG meetings, ING decided to utilize systematic and forward-thinking approaches to meetings. In order to increase participation, ING utilized:

- Advanced Scheduling: By creating a standard, predictable time, date and place for meetings, they increased the likelihood of attendance (“3rd Thursday at 3” - i.e. they scheduled all meetings on the 3rd Thursday of each month at 3pm EST).
- Technology and Virtual Participation: In using video conference capabilities, they were able to include the 13 national chapters in meetings, and to better include virtual employees in meetings.
- Cross-ERG Partnerships: ING found that these partnerships enabled cross-functional networking, increased budget for individual events, and both economies of scale and high-quality references when securing speakers for events.
- Member Networking: Through hosting professional “speed dating”-type events, the ERGs enabled employees to meet a wide array of people across network groups, not only building individual career and mentor networks, but increasing the likelihood of cross-ERG partnerships in the future.

Customized Solutions at ESPN: Diversity leaders at ESPN were intent on creating ERGs that were driven by the needs of the employees, not cookie-cutter approaches from other companies or top-down driven initiatives speaking only to the needs of senior leadership. ESPN, in partnership with JBC, commissioned a series of internal focus groups designed to assess “cultural readiness, and appetite, for these groups to exist, as well as inspire those in the focus groups to assume leadership roles in the launching of the groups. This project examined the issues that multiple groups face, including: Gen X, Gen Y, Women, Asian, GLBT, Latino, African-American, and Mixed-Gender groups. JBC then provided an executive summary to diversity leadership, giving the employees a “collective voice” so their needs would be met in the ERG process launch and structural decisions.

Theme 3: Metrics – What Gets Measured Gets Done

There are a myriad of ways to measure the success of an ERG initiative, from counting the number of people who attend meetings (a concrete measurement) to how much overall culture has changed (a very abstract phenomenon). By measuring and reporting the impact of ERG initiatives in concrete ways, we can encourage employees at all levels to get involved, take leadership positions, drive real business value and see real culture change – it shows them that ERGs have intrinsic value in the business.

First off, create a benchmark – count current levels of participation, and then track change over time (per month; per year; etc.). Companies can also metricize the following:

- The number of people who show up to ERG-sponsored events
- How many events an ERG hosts per year
- The number of ERG members and non-members who attend events
- The number of external awards an ERG receives in one year
- The number of external people who attend an event that a company sponsors, hosts or presents at (this metric captures the number of external people who hear company messaging on inclusion and diversity)



- The number of active vs. passive participants – as defined by the number of people who are on the mailing list (passive participant) as opposed to the number of people who sign up to help develop and execute events (active participants)



ING counts ERG membership per month in three distinct ways:

- ✓ The total number of ERG members, per group
- ✓ The number of new ERG members who sign up
- ✓ The number of ERG members who have left the organization

By creating detailed metrics in this way, ING captures an accurate level of turnover for the group, taking company attrition into account.

At ESPN, ERG membership has grown since the ERG initiatives were rolled out across the company. At pre-inception, there were over 200 interested employees in ERGs (in 2008); 6 months later, in June

of 2009, there were over 700 members of one or more ERGs, after the kick-off multicultural fair. This is a spectacular 350% increase in membership.

Theme 4: No One Is an Island...Create Bridges

Companies often struggle with linking ERG group members across offices and across individual ERG groups. Employees in larger offices, headquarters, or more liberal geographies benefit from diversity initiatives, whereas people in smaller offices may not hear messages, participate fully, or experience culture change. Here is what our participating companies did to engage group members across offices:

- ESPN's African American network has engaged PULSE, the African-American ERG at Disney, their parent company. This provided the new ESPN group with idea-sharing from the well-established Disney ERG.
 - Key Question: Are there any other ERGs you can partner with? At clients; within another division, etc? Think creatively here.
- Create links with virtual team members – they need not only opportunities for social networking within the company, but they can also be great resources for meeting business objectives.
 - Advice: Think creatively about technology-based ways to engage virtual team members. Are there opportunities for video conferences, webinars, and even simple things like clear and consistent emails? All of these methods help the virtual team member feel engaged in ERG work, and they encourage employees to contribute more to the team.

JBC Event Profile



Summary

In short, although every company culture has assets ERGs can capitalize on, as well as particular challenges that must be navigated, most if not all companies realize the incredible value of ERGs as they strive to remain competitive in an increasingly diverse competitive landscape. We hope this report enables ERG members, leaders, and executive supporters to choose the best approach for their environment, to ensure rapid ERG adoption, membership development, and business impact.

Editorial Note

If you or your company has a best practice to share, please contact us at info@jenniferbrownconsulting.com, so we can feature your story in our upcoming reports.

Jennifer Brown Consulting

A New York City-based consultancy, Jennifer Brown Consulting (JBC) is committed to helping talent at all levels redefine leadership for the future. The company's expert facilitation, coaching, workshops, seminars, and best practice research and documentation are designed to turn talent networks into business pipelines and sources of innovation to solve the most pressing business problems facing employers today. JBC is known for its work with Employee Resource Groups, and was first to market with an ERG product suite that builds the future potential of these groups through a concrete coaching and development process. JBC collaborates with companies from many industries; clients include Booz Allen Hamilton, Credit Suisse, The New York Times, Cisco, ESPN, Chubb, and many others. JBC is the thought partner for Diversity Best Practices' first-ever regional NALC, "NALC West", on October 20, 2009 in San Francisco, and is also proud to be certified as a diverse supplier by both the WBE and the NGLCC. For more information, visit the firm at www.jenniferbrownconsulting.com.