

Disability Affinity Groups



JBC is pleased to share with you Dr. Robert S. Rudney's findings* on the advantages of Disability Affinity groups. In this 4-page piece, Dr. Rudney, a Senior Advisor with the United States Air Force, goes in-depth to share knowledge on what Disability Affinity Groups may offer members as well as organizations, and gives examples of these Disability Affinity Groups in Action.

**The opinions expressed here are entirely those of the author and do not represent the views of the Air Force.*

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Affinity Groups for Employees with Disabilities

Objective: To share knowledge on what Disability Affinity Groups may offer members as well as organizations, and give examples of these Disability Affinity Groups in Action.

Employees with disabilities are increasingly recognizing the value of forming affinity groups to represent their interests with their employer and to promote disability education and outreach within the organization's culture. For their part, employers are welcoming the creation of disability affinity groups (AKA employee resource groups or networks) as part of their diversity commitment and also as marketing mechanisms for improving products and services to customers with disabilities.

Women and minorities, in particular African Americans, have had considerable success utilizing their affinity groups to climb the corporate ladder. Employees with disabilities can benefit as well in terms of professional growth and leadership development resulting in promotion opportunities.

The affinity group connection can be vital in the on-boarding process for new employees with disabilities. Even with their accommodations in place, these employees may need assistance and advice in navigating buildings and websites and understanding corporate policies and procedures. Experienced members of affinity groups often establish formal or informal mentoring relationships with new hires. Perhaps more importantly in today's economic climate, disability affinity groups can provide their members with job retention strategies and internal networking contacts for those seeking to transition internally because of impending layoffs.

Affinity groups also serve a social role, both in terms of meeting fellow employees and celebrating diversity. The Disability Forum at Booz Allen Hamilton annually hosts a guest speaker program for the July 26th ADA Anniversary. Past speakers have included John Hockenberry and Bonnie St. John. The Disability Forum has also partnered with

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the Parents Forum on a program on special education resources and with the Armed Services Forum on an outreach effort to veterans with disabilities. The idea is to embed disability events and activities in the larger universe of corporate diversity programs and integrate disability within the corporate culture.

Employers can also utilize affinity group networks to explain policy changes or to request feedback on policy initiatives under consideration. Affinity groups have advised employers on accommodation policies and implementation, as well as sensitivity and awareness training. Members of the affinity group can reflect the preferences of the disabled customer base regarding the company’s products and services. Best Buy’s Include affinity group was instrumental in convincing the company to provide an in-store closed-captioning option for its home theater promotions to appeal to prospective customers with hearing impairments.

Externally, a disability affinity group can operate as an effective recruitment tool to bring qualified job applicants with disabilities into the organization. Networking is the way 60 percent of jobs are found, but, for mobility, communications, or simple self-confidence reasons, people with disabilities often have a hard time networking. At the same time, disability employment groups and rehabilitation providers need to do a better job of identifying and linking up with internal affinity groups at an employer site.

Finally, an affinity group can provide vital feedback on the marketing and development of corporate products and services. Hewlett Packard’s Employee Resource Group has contributed significantly to the usability of new products and the incorporation of universal design features. Moreover, this employee group has played an important role in the success of the corporate business offering in Federal Section 508 compliance that requires all information technology purchased by the Federal Government to meet specific accessibility standards. Similarly, Ford Employees Dealing with disAbility (FEDA) reviews new car designs for accessibility. As a consequence, both Hewlett Packard and Ford – like many other employers – have realized a return on investment by supporting an affinity group for its employees with disabilities.

A nationwide virtual network of disability affinity groups would be extremely helpful in exchanging organizational experiences and best practices. Such a network could be run through the US Business Leadership Network, which could put together an online directory and hold networking meetings at its annual conference. Another possible outlet is the National and Affinity Leadership Congress (www.nalc.diversitybestpractices.com), whose annual conference brings together leaders of all diversity affinity groups from across the country. It is important for disability affinity groups to interact with one another, to trade strategies across industries and geographies, and to find out what works for women and minority groups.

Here is an incomplete list of disability affinity groups* operating at major employers.

Company	Affinity Group	Acronym
3M	Disability Advisory Committee	
Aetna	AetnaAbilities	
AT&T	IDEAL Business Resource Group	
AOL	AOL People Living and Working with Disability	APLAWD
Best Buy	Include	

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Boeing	Ability Awareness Association	
Booz Allen Hamilton	Disability Forum	
Charles Schwab	Promoting Education and Acceptance of Physically Challenged Employees	PACE
Chubb Insurance	disAbilities in the Workplace Network	DAWN
Cisco Systems	Cisco Disability Awareness Network	
Ernst & Young	Access Abilities	
Fannie Mae	Employee Disability Awareness Group	
Ford	Ford Employees Dealing with disability	FEDA
GM	People with Disabilities Affinity Group	
Google	Capability Council on Disability	
Hewlett Packard	Employee Resource Group	
Intel	Diverse Abilities Network	IDAN
JP Morgan Chase	Employees with Disabilities Diversity Council	
Kaiser Permanente	Persons with Disabilities ERG	
Kodak	Empower	
KPMG	Disability Forum	
Medtronic	Awareness Benefitting Leadership and Employees about Disabilities	ABLED
Merck	Disability Advisory Council	
Microsoft	Deaf and Hard of Hearing at Microsoft	MSADD
Microsoft	Visually Impaired Persons in MS	MSVIP
OSRAM Sylvania	Advocates for People with Disabilities	

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Pepsi Co	EnAble	
Principal Financial Group	Disability Employee Resource Group	
Procter & Gamble	People with Disabilities Task Force	
Prudential Financial	Able and Disabled Associates Partnering Together	ADAPT
Raytheon	Persons with Disabilities Employee Resource Group	
SC Johnson	Abilities First Business Council	
Sodexo	Sodexo Organization for Disabilities Resources	SOAR
State Farm	Employee Resource Group	PWD
State Street	Disability Awareness Alliance	
UNISYS	Employee Network for Disabled Workers	
Verizon	Disabilities Issues Awareness Leaders	DIAL

*Other groups are welcome to contact us.

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