

LGBTIQ+ Employee Resource Groups: Benefits, Challenges and Opportunities

Symposium organized by Jojanneke van der Toorn, Eva Jaspers, Chenhao Zhou, Kshitij Mor and Paula Hoffmann, in collaboration with Academia@WorkplacePride.

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While organizational attention to the topics of workplace equality and inclusion has increased, some social groups are still disadvantaged. To support Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Intersex, and Queer (LGBTIQ+) employees at work, many organizations have LGBTIQ+ employee resource groups (ERGs). These groups are uniquely placed to provide a safe space for LGBTIQ+ employees, facilitate alliances between these employees and their ally colleagues, and advocate for structural changes in the organization. The evidence base on LGBTIQ+ ERGs remains limited and partial, however, leaving a large knowledge gap on how networks function and their capacity to improve the experiences of LGBTIQ+ employees at work.

In this symposium, Prof. Anna Einarsdottir (University of York) and Prof. Jojanneke van der Toorn (Leiden University) shared insights from their recent research on the topic, discussing the promises and pitfalls of LGBTIQ+ ERGs and how they can be most effective. A panel including LGBTIQ+ ERG representatives and HR professionals reflected on the findings, shared insights from practice, and discussed how ERGs can contribute to LGBTIQ+ workplace inclusion.

Have LGBTIQ+ employee resource groups (ERGs) been derailed?

In her provocatively entitled talk, Prof. Einarsdottir presented some of the key findings of a major Economic and Social Research Council funded mixed method study into LGBTIQ+ employee resource groups with the National Health Service in the UK, exploring issues around resource group membership, inclusion, how employee resource groups operate and pressure on these groups to evidence impact. The research findings were based on qualitative and quantitative data collected among the NHS trusts, including survey data from 4237 employees, 66 interviews, 120 video messages, 45 observations of network meetings, 9 case studies, and 126 trust level responses. While the networks were marketed as 'LGBTQI+', this obscured the reality of the member composition. Einarsdottir identified two major challenges. Firstly, the LGBTQI+ ERGs tended to involve a large number of Allies, which can be a double-edged sword. In many of the ERGs, the LGBTQI+ members were outnumbered by cisgender heterosexual allies, which can hinder the goals of inclusion, creating a safe space and community – that the network is trying to achieve. For example, more heterosexual cisgender participants than LGBTQI+ participants agreed with the statements '*staff network increase the visibility of LGBTQI+ people (62.5% vs. 54.1%)*', '*I feel like 'part of the family' at this organisation (60% vs. 51%)*', and '*LGBTQI+ networks protect you against negative behaviour (93% vs. 78%)*.' Secondly, the Trust's LGBTQI+ ERGs tended not to be representative of the LGBTQI+ communities they aim to serve. The ERGs appeared to be dominated by gay men and, to a lesser extent, lesbian women, who were usually white, and in

managerial positions. People who identified as anything other than gay or lesbian were ‘othered’ by the discourses used within the meetings. Einarsdottir furthermore concluded that the purpose of LGBTIQ+ networks often seems unclear. She argued that the role of employee resource groups has shifted from supporting LGBT+ employees to championing a broader organizational agenda on equality, diversity and inclusion. Asking different questions should go a long way in increasing the positive impact of ERGs on the working lives and wellbeing of LGBTIQ+ employees. For example, instead of asking why people join the ERG, we should ask why they leave, and instead of asking what ERGs do, we should ask who benefits from their activities.

Top down or bottom up? Strategies to assess the needs of LGBTIQ+ employees.

Prof. van der Toorn continued the conversation by presenting her latest research on organizational strategies to assess the needs of LGBTIQ+ employees. LGBTIQ+ employees continue to face unique challenges at work, with their voices often being unheard or even silenced. While organizations put great effort into creating more inclusive workplaces, it is unclear whether and to what extent they succeed in catering to the diversity of people encompassed by the LGBTIQ+ acronym. Little attention, both in research and in practice, seems to be paid to those community members with intersecting marginalized identities (for example, queer employees of color). With an interdisciplinary team of researchers, van der Toorn explored what strategies are used in organizations to assess the workplace experiences and needs of employees and whether and to what extent these strategies are likely to reach and represent diverse LGBTIQ+ employees. She found that the HR-professionals and ERG representatives interviewed were well intended to assess and address the needs of LGBTIQ+ employees but that their strategies for doing so are rather passive and that they do not fully consider the diversity within the group that they are trying to reach. From the interviews, multiple barriers were identified that impede the efforts of professionals in more actively assessing and addressing the needs of LGBTIQ+ employees in organizations. Practical barriers may include a lack of time and resources to take action, or limited managerial support and technological restrictions. Socio-cultural barriers may include a heteronormative work climate and the normalization of discriminative remarks. And assumption-driven barriers include misconceptions and biases, such as the assumption that the GDPR prohibits asking employees about their sexual orientation and gender identity on internal surveys or that employees would be reluctant to share this information. Follow-up research by van der Toorn indicates that Dutch employees may be more willing to share his type of information than HR professionals think, suggesting the importance of dialogue on the matter. Instead of assuming that people are not going to want to share certain data, organizations need to involve their employees in these decisions. Van der Toorn and team developed a [poster campaign](#) to help organizations start these conversations.

Getting down to business: Maximizing the benefits of LGBTIQ+ employee resource group

In the panel discussion, moderated by Kshitij Mor, Linn ten Haaf (HR Director at Unilever), Erik Poolman (Chair of the Shine Network at PwC), and David Pollard (Executive Director at Workplace Pride) reflected on the presented research. Poolman and ten Haaf recognized the struggle of trying to reach all employees through the ERGs and to ensure that all different communities at the organization feel represented and experience belonging at the company.

Both stressed the importance of data collection to assess employee needs and identify group-based inequalities, as was the focus of van der Toorn's talk. The conversation then moved to the involvement of upper management and leadership in ERGs and diversity initiatives. Pollard highlighted the importance of leadership support for the success of an ERG, noting that while it is important that ERGs are initiated and maintained by employees, they are not sustainable without the explicit support from leadership. The panelists echoed similar sentiments about how leadership needs to authentically want to be more diverse and inclusive and actively participate in conversations with employees to achieve this goal. The panelists discussed best practices from their organizations, including transition leave and policies in support of rainbow families, which can majorly impact the life of LGBTQI+ employees. Additionally, through open dialogue with employees, organizations learn about the conflicting needs of different groups – it is incredibly important to take an intersectional approach as you don't want to alienate one group to accommodate another. Encouraging conversations between employee networks is one promising avenue of doing same. The panel session and symposium was concluded by van der Toorn, thanking Workplace Pride, the speakers and panelists, and the PhDs involved in organizing it, and was followed by a networking session with all present in the academy building courtyard.