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# Affinity Networks: Building Organizations Stronger than Their Parts

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Best Practices from the  
**Network of Executive Women**  
Consumer Products and Retail Industry

THIRD IN A SERIES



# Affinity networks: New insights and productivity from within

**T**oday's increasingly diverse workforces have given rise to a new dynamic in employee relations, and affinity networks are playing a big role in ensuring that companies meet the needs of the organization.

Johnson & Johnson, a recognized leader in diversity management, defines affinity networks as “voluntary, employee-driven groups that are organized around a...shared interest or dimension.” There are many kinds. At J&J they include the African American Leadership Council, Community of Asians Association, the Gay & Lesbian Organization for Business and Leadership, the Hispanic Organization for Leadership and Achievement, the South Asian Professional Network & Association and the Women's Leadership Initiative.<sup>1</sup> Other companies have affinity groups focused on issues like age, veteran status, community involvement, parenting and disability concerns.

Affinity networks for women are among the most popular. Two-thirds of companies responding to a NEW survey have women's affinity networks at their organizations. Many have specialized women affinity networks, including groups for senior management women, women in sales, and women of color.<sup>2</sup>

Affinity networks are an increasing part of the corporate landscape, and it's easy to see why. They require little investment except time and understanding, and provide a multitude of benefits in return. Affinity groups help recruitment and retention; increase morale; provide insights into diverse markets; build bridges to outside communities; reduce grievances and litigation; and empower employees. Affinity groups build bonds between network members and the larger organization

and improve coordination among network members themselves. Whatever their focus, they share a common mission: building bridges to create an organization stronger than the sum of its parts.

## STILL IN INFANCY

While affinity networks are on the rise, companies with such groups are still in the minority. The 2005 Workplace Diversity Practices Survey Report by the Society for Human Resource Management reports that only 29 percent of companies surveyed have employee

networks. And even firms with affinity groups “may not be maximizing their full potential,” experts say.<sup>3</sup>

Dwight Judge has watched the development of affinity networks in the consumer products industry from the beginning. The associate director of Global Customer Business Development for Procter & Gamble was a founding member of one of the

first P&G formal affinity groups, which was started in 1987 by 15 African-American employees in the company's Houston region.<sup>4</sup>

“Affinity groups have been around the industry for years, but they were informal. It wasn't until the late 80's when we first became formal.” The turning point in that first P&G affinity network, Judge recalls, came when the organization started inviting senior-level managers to sit in on the group's meetings. “Once we started enrolling senior managers in the process, we moved from a lack of understanding to understanding, and the affinity groups started to take root.”

Today Procter & Gamble has a broad network of regional affinity networks. An average of 200-plus employees participate in each regional P&G women's

**“Affinity networks share a common mission: Building bridges”**

affinity network, Judge estimates, while regional people of color affinity groups attract an average of 30 or 40 employees each.

## HUGE PAYBACK

Judge says affinity networks help Procter & Gamble retain key executives, providing the company with a huge payback.<sup>4</sup>

Affinity networks are also a boon for recruitment efforts, “providing a built-in comfort zone for diverse new hires,” according to *Human Resource* magazine. “Candidates get the feeling that they can come here and immediately have a group of people they have a lot in common with,” says Nancy McMillan, associate consultant for workforce partnering at Indianapolis-based pharmaceutical company Eli Lilly, which supports eight affinity groups.

Affinity groups also play a direct role in recruitment. Affinity network members from Ford attend college job fairs and professional organization events with company recruiters to help the automobile maker connect with diverse candidates.<sup>3</sup>

Affinity groups can boost organizational competitiveness by providing valuable insight into the needs and wants of certain segments of the marketplace. “Look at them not just as employees but as potential customers,” says Velasquez. “Allow them to comment on the organization completely, not just on HR issues. Ask them about how you market.”

Ford, which supports 10 employee resource groups, has been a pioneer in this area. Its affinity networks are like built-in focus groups — with the added benefit that they understand your business.

One benefit P&G derives from its affinity networks is multicultural outreach. “Our people have insights into the local multicultural communities where we live, work and sell,” Judge says.<sup>4</sup>

Retailers as well as manufacturers have

embraced the concept. At Safeway, more than three thousand employees are members of company affinity networks, according to Chris Nenoff, the supermarket chain’s human resources manager for diversity and inclusion. Safeway has women’s affinity networks at its corporate office and 10 regional offices, plus African American, Asian, Hispanic and LGBT groups.

“The benefits of affinity groups are attracting and retaining a talented workforce that reflects the communities in which we do business [and] increasing sales and customer loyalty by better understanding the needs and desires of a diverse customer base,” Nenoff says.<sup>5</sup>

## ON THE AGENDA

Affinity networks tackle tough workplace issues. Topics addressed by women’s networks in NEW’s

survey include work/family balance, recruitment and retention, leadership, mentoring and networking, skill development, relationship building, diversity goals, empowerment, and providing a women’s perspective on company issues.<sup>2</sup>

In addition to providing a forum for discussion, affinity groups reduce the sense of isolation by offering

opportunities to network, learn what’s going on in the company and provide training and development opportunities to new and veteran managers alike.

Affinity networks vary widely in structure. But formal or informal, largely independent or closely tied to management, affinity networks are business units performing important company work, not social clubs, advocates say.

Many groups meet on company time and some provide minutes to management. Some networks meet quarterly, many meet monthly and one group in NEW’s survey met every other week.

At Johnson & Johnson each proposed affinity group “must develop a formal group structure, which includes the creation of a written charter, clear mission

**“Our people have insights into the multicultural communities where we live, work and sell”**

statement and group policy. Once that is accomplished, the group must appoint a group chair, steering committee and find an executive management advisor to help guide the development of the group. Next, the group must define its proposed key activities, which may include, but not be limited to, professional development, workplace enhancement and community involvement. Finally, the group must identify the expected benefits of the group's proposed key activities.”<sup>1</sup>

Safeway's affinity groups are part of the company's Diversity Initiative Strategy, and are linked to the firm's Diversity Advisory Boards. “Each network group has a member of senior management in leadership of the group and an advisor from Human Resources,” Nenoff reports.<sup>5</sup>

Almost all affinity networks get substantial support from their companies, according to respondents to NEW's affinity network survey. This includes a place to meet and money for such expenses as training programs, supplies, travel and refreshments.<sup>2</sup> At Johnson & Johnson, affinity networks have internal websites to help disseminate news and information of interest to employees and affinity group members.

## OPEN DOORS

Affinity networks are not private clubs. At Johnson & Johnson, “every affinity organization must be open to any and all employees regardless of age, gender, race, religion, national origin, physical ability, sexual orientation, thinking style, background and all other attributes that make each person unique.”<sup>1</sup>

Respondents to NEW's affinity survey echo this advice. Among their other suggestions: Have clarity about your mission; set ground rules up front; enlist the support of majority managers; and ensure your work is business-oriented (*for more tips, see page 5*).

The negative fears that some executives have about affinity groups are largely misplaced. Some companies fear they may turn into “gripe sessions,” but experience shows that affinity groups work to relieve such pressures, not create them.

Others worry that having sponsored one affinity network, they will be forced to provide forums for any group that requests them, no matter how controversial. But the U.S. 7th Circuit Court recently ruled in favor of General Motors, which prohibits certain affinity groups as a matter of policy. The bottom line: When it comes to affinity networks, all similar groups should be treated equally, but all classes of groups do not have to be included.<sup>6</sup>

Affinity networks are not just for women and minorities. One of the affinity networks Judge is most proud of is P&G's New Hire Affinity Group. “I can't begin to tell you the value that senior leadership gets from this group. It offers a view of what the next generation of diversity look like.” The group has been so successful that there is now a Procter & Gamble New Hire *Alumni* Group, whose members have three to six years experience at the company.<sup>4</sup>

As workplace barriers drop away, the work of affinity groups is shifting from employee issues to business issues. Affinity networks are growing up and taking their place in the mainstream of corporate life.

That's as it should be, says Judge. “We truly live in a multicultural society. If you look at what the consumer base will look like 20 or 30 years from now, a CEO has to ask, ‘How can I keep my organization motivated to go to work?’ More important, ‘How do I increase sales and how do I increase shareholder value?’ A diverse organization will outperform every time.” ■

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## SOURCES

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# Top tips for affinity networks

Compiled by the Network of Executive Women, Consumer Products and Retail Industry

**1. Engage management.** Affinity networks need the support of senior management in order to be effective.

**2. Cast a wide net.** Don't just focus on headquarters, create regional networks and affinity groups at far-flung field offices. Isolated or home-based employees can be conferenced in.

**3. Recruit passionate people.** Affinity networks should be composed of volunteers — and enthusiastic ones at that!

**4. Be targeted.** Identify your network's purpose and goals and set strategies to accomplish them.

**5. Get a sponsor.** Enlist an understanding advisor or sponsor from senior management who can represent your group to management and carry messages the other way.

**6. Start small.** It is better to focus on tasks that can be accomplished. Once

you have a few successes, the team can work their way up to more ambitious goals.

## The benefits of affinity groups

Affinity groups have many benefits. Here are a few:

- *Help recruitment and retention*
- *Reduce costs of replacing key executives*
- *Aid training and development*
- *Improve morale*
- *Build links to women and minority markets*
- *Provide fresh ideas*
- *Improve internal communications*
- *Provide a "feedback mechanism" to corporations on key opportunities*
- *Help discover "hidden" talent*
- *Promote advancement of women and minorities*
- *Provide mechanism for community involvement*
- *Promote understanding and bring company closer together*

**7. Connect with other networks.** The purpose of affinity networks is to eliminate barriers and isolation. Create alliances with other affinity networks to increase your knowledge and influence.

**8. Be open.** If you want to open doors, you have to extend the favor to others.

**9. Measure your progress.** Benchmark your network's accomplishments against stated goals. If you are falling short, redouble your efforts or recalibrate your priorities.

**10. Communicate.** Announce meetings throughout the company and welcome new members. Share accomplishments and insights.

**11. Collaborate effectively.** Create a positive approach with management to ensure that plans are win-win.

# Creating unity from diversity – and leveraging its benefits

**M**any companies have a strong commitment to diversity. Affinity groups provide valuable insight to each company on the needs of each group.

Affinity groups offer a host of invaluable benefits: Increased recruitment and retention; insights into multicultural markets; better productivity; improved corporate communications; better community relations; and a more committed workforce.

Affinity networks leverage the power of diversity to achieve your company's strategic business goals. But they can't do it without your help. If you have affinity networks, listen to them. Enlist their help in recruitment and retention, marketing and product development.

If you don't have affinity networks, help get them started. The process is simple, say NEW members who have been there: Select a senior management champion; develop and share the business case with management; create appropriate networks for your company; identify and target areas to focus on; develop ground rules; listen and learn. You'll be surprised at the ideas and insights a properly supervised and supported affinity network will provide.

For more information on how to start and grow affinity networks in your business, visit our website, [NEWonline.org](http://NEWonline.org), or contact our Executive Director, Joan Toth, [jtoth@newonline.org](mailto:jtoth@newonline.org), telephone (312) 373-5682.

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