

Employee Resource Groups Connect Workers to their Companies

By Holly Culhane, Contributing Columnist



With Kern County's unemployment rate hovering around 15 percent, on the surface there seems to be plenty of applicants for every open job. As a result, some short-sighted employer might be tempted to believe workers are "a dime a dozen."

Employers might be tempted to think that if they have employees dissatisfied with working conditions it's no big deal since unemployed replacement workers will be lining up with job applications.

But it's not that simple. Hiring skilled, hard-working employees is challenging, costly work in itself. And once a company has made what they think is a "good hire," it can be challenging to keep the new employee on the payroll.

A company's bottom line is dependent on its employees' productivity and quality of work. A workforce that churns – with staff constantly arriving and leaving – is less productive and more costly. Hiring and training new employees can cost more than retaining the good workers you now have.

In a study published in the July edition of the *Journal of Applied Psychology*, Wendy Boswell, a business professor at Texas A&M University, noted that the more employees feel "connected" to their companies, the less likely they will be to leave.

The decision to leave a job is a complicated process, Boswell's study found. How attached an employee is to the current environment – or how "embedded" – is a critical factor.

"Embedded" became a popular term during the Iraq war, when U.S. military units invited news reporters to go along on combat missions. The media got a front row seat to the action. In return, the military hoped to instill in the news media a feeling of "belonging" with the troops and the mission.

The same concept applies to "embedded" workers. Companies develop programs and strategies for making their employees feel they belong, they are empowered, and that they are "too connected" to leave. These programs are used for both recruiting and retaining top workers.

Take, for example, Google, the Internet giant that is midway into what is expected to be its biggest hiring year. Google's "employee resource groups" are considered the cornerstone of its workplace culture.

With nearly 30,000 employees, Google has 19 "employee resource groups," -- employee-initiated groups that receive the company's financial support and represent cultural and ethnic diversity, as well as professional interests. In addition, there are thousands of "special interest groups" that range from gardening to wine tasting.

The idea is to make employees feel connected – with each other and with the company. The more connected workers are, the less likely they will be to leave and the more productive they'll become. And with competition fierce in the Silicon Valley for tech workers, Google and its competitors have set a high priority on hiring and retaining workers.

But a company does not have to be as big as Google to benefit from having employee resource groups in its workforce.

The concept has been around for about three decades, with the original purpose being to support diversity in the workplace. The use of these groups has greatly expanded to include promoting the “connectivity” that Professor Boswell referred to in her recent study, as well as to enhance problem-solving within a company.

Also known as “employee network groups” and “affinity groups,” these units flourish in many companies – large and small – but are not always welcomed. Some managers regard these groups as potentially causing division among workers and “rebellion” in the ranks.

However, an employee's need for community, or to identify with specific core issues will be satisfied with or without a company's blessing. A company that manages and supports employee resource groups can benefit more than a company that discourages their formation and drives employees into disgruntled after-hour groups.

Most successful employee resource groups arise more from workers' interests, than from the dictates of management. If employees wish to form such a group and obtain their company's support, here are some tips:

- Assess interest – Determine who would be interested in participating and obtain their commitment to help. Brainstorm with core members to formalize the idea.
- Assess other groups – If other employee resource groups exist within the company, understand their purpose to avoid duplication of effort.
- Be inclusive – Your group should be open to all employees. Those who share the goals and interests of your group will “self-select” to join.
- Define your goals – Begin your group with the “end in mind.” If you want people to join and the company to support your effort, the group's purpose should be clear.
- Identify benefits – Who and how will group members and the company benefit?
- Obtain the company's buy-in – To succeed and be supported by the company will require identifying costs. What are you expecting the company to contribute and how much will that cost?

- Get help – Enlist a member of management, often this will be someone from human resources, to help “champion” your cause. Your first sales pitch will be to your “champion.” You need to make it good.

The amount and type of support an employee resource group will receive from a company varies. Typical support often includes use of a company’s email system for group communication, meeting space, a page on the company’s intranet website, and such technical support as leadership training for group leaders.

Often human resources consultants are called in to help evaluate proposals for employee resource groups, help develop goals and expectations, and recommend the extent of company support.

To assure ongoing support, group members are generally required to pursue activities and goals that are aligned to the company’s goals.

Employee resource groups are powerful mechanisms to connect workers to their companies, build workers’ leadership skills, improve company-wide communications, encourage innovation and improve worker productivity.

Progressive and successful companies embrace, nurture and manage employee resource groups. It’s truly a win-win for everyone involved.

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