SETTING UP AN EMPLOYEE NETWORK

This guide is intended to give some basic guidance about the types of issues you will need to consider if you want to set up a Family/Parents/Carers Network within your organisation. Obviously, the situation will differ depending on the size, complexity and geographical spread of your organisation, so you may find that some of these issues are less relevant for a smaller company.

If your organisation is very small, but you can still see value in having a network to support working parents and carers, you may wish to think about options to collaborate with other local employers (perhaps setting up a joint network or taking it in turns to host events) or find out whether there are any cross-company networks within your business sector that you might be able to join. Equally, having a 'virtual' network may suit some more geographically spread or smaller employers.

WHAT IS AN EMPLOYEE NETWORK?

An Employee Network is a group of employees centred on one or more key themes:
- Profession (solicitors, financiers, doctors, ground workers, catering)
- Social cause (environment, homeless, education, disease)
- Personal attribute (gender, disability, life-stage eg caring or parenting, faith and sexual orientation etc)

Some networks have elements of all three, these tend to be national or inter organisational eg Lesbian and Gay Lawyers Association for England and Wales and ICAEW Women in Finance Network.

Within an organisation, employee networks (also known as Employee Resource Groups) are most likely to be centred on one, possibly two of the above.

Employee networks are generally organised by a committee of volunteers.

THE BENEFITS FOR AN ORGANISATION ARE

There is a strong evidence base that shows employee networks are good for an organisation. The evidence is summarised below.

Increased employee resilience and wellbeing	✓ Help to normalise and demystify by sharing experiences and increasing recognition, belonging and motivation ✓ Relationships are the best psychological buffer for negative stress and an employee network provides many opportunities for peer to peer support

	✓ Knowledge sharing through the network provides practical resources to reduce negative stress
Increased engagement and retention	✓ Employees who belong to a network are more loyal and attached to the organisation. They are retained for longer, perform at a higher level and contribute more than non-members. ✓ Employee networks members are more likely to be satisfied with their job, their compensation package and their promotion prospects because of the close emotional bond with their network peers and the company.
Increased innovation	✓ Employee networks create connections outside of the organisational hierarchy, reducing siloed attitudes and increasing communication between departments and across hierarchical levels ✓ They promote greater learning, innovation and performance
Strategy & influence	✓ Strategic role in policy development (eg maternity, paternity, surrogacy, leave, flexible working) to ensure representative and supportive of parents and carers views and needs ✓ Review new policies to ensure they don't adversely impact on staff with caring responsibilities ✓ Employee networks act as a resource to the organisation providing opportunity for employees to consolidate ideas and views to feed back into the organisation. ✓ Employee networks disperse information very quickly and can be leveraged by the organisation to maximise communication
Reduced recruitment costs	✓ Employee networks increase loyalty and a sense of belonging, reducing turnover ✓ Employee networks increase organisational advocacy enabling the organisation to leverage the network members' personal networks for recruitment.

WHY DO EMPLOYEES WANT TO JOIN NETWORKS?

Employees join networks when they strongly identify with the theme of the network. The strength of identification depends on the type of employee network, and understanding this will help the network thrive and also enable effective communication between the organisation and the network.

When joining a network employees benefit from:

- Shared knowledge and peer support
- A sense of belonging and connectedness
- Potentially a greater voice and recognition of one's own concerns in talking with the employer
- Potentially greater or different exposure to career stakeholders
- Influencing policy and practice

HOW ARE EMPLOYEE NETWORKS FUNDED?

The Working Families benchmark shows that in the main employee networks receive a budget from their employer organisation. However, there are a few employee networks that are self-funded through a membership contribution or fee.

Increasingly, progressive employers are recognising the benefits of engaging employees through employee networks and they are providing budget for guest speakers, lunch and learns, clinics and mini-conferences, social networking platforms.

STEERING COMMITTEE

Decide who will be involved in running the group, eg a steering group and discuss:

- How many people will be involved? Bear in mind that you need sufficient resource to achieve the network's objectives, but that too large a committee can become unwieldy and find it difficult to make decisions in a timely fashion. Allowing the committee to organise sub-groups to deal with specific tasks can be helpful with this.
- Does the steering committee include senior role models who can help to give the group credibility at a high level, and have access to the resources it will need?
- Does the steering committee include employees from across all areas of the business, and a good range of the types of employees it is aimed at? If possible it should include both mothers and fathers of children in a range of age-groups from babies to teenagers, grandparents who have some caring responsibility, parents caring for disabled children and those with caring responsibilities for other adults (such as their parents).
- How will you ensure that the contribution of steering group members is properly recognised (e.g. could it become part of their performance objectives, or be recognised as an example of 'going the extra mile' at appraisal time?) and that they are given sufficient time (and/or support) to plan and organise network activities effectively?
- Will you have specific rules about how the steering committee of your network functions e.g. should committee members be recruited for a set period and/or should an agreed proportion of members (e.g. one third) roll-off each year and be replaced by fresh blood, in order to keep energy levels high and bring in new ideas?
- Will the committee have a formal people structure with clearly defined roles? This can be useful in helping it to run efficiently. At the least, a chair should be appointed from the start to ensure effective leadership. This should be someone who has sufficient time and willingness to do the role effectively. You may wish to make the role a job-share one and/or to appoint a deputy.
- Are you able to allow a generous block of time for the start-up of your committee e.g. an away-day to allow them to get away from their day jobs and focus on establishing the objectives and ground-rules of the group, and beginning planning for communications and events.

REMIT AND SCOPE OF THE GROUP

Be clear about the aims of the network:

- What will the objectives of the group be? For example can the remit be broadened beyond supporting existing staff to contributing to and influencing the development of policies and practices aimed at supporting parents and carers?
- Who will the group be open to – will it be all employees at all levels of the organisation? (This would usually be the most appropriate option for a family/carers/parents network).
- How will you assess what your employees need most from the network? It may be useful to start by canvassing opinion from your employees (e.g. by a survey to all staff) on what areas of interest might be most pressing, and you could also use the process as a good opportunity to start communicating about the existence of the network.

SUPPORT

Use any existing forms of support you might identify, for example:

- Are there any other networks in your organisation that can link to this network or can provide support and guidance during the set-up period? E.g. a Women's network might have covered some over-lapping topics in the past, or simply be able to provide general guidance on setting up the group effectively. You could consider having one member of each committee acting as a liaison point between the two.
- Can you provide any other source of expertise to advise your steering committee? For example someone who has been involved in setting up another network (perhaps at a former employer), someone from HR, or an external coach.
- How will the group's activities be funded – e.g. will you set aside a specific budget e.g. for paying external speakers?
- Can your organisation provide any administrative support to help the steering group?
- How will you make it clear that your support for the network is properly communicated and that employees understand that they have permission to attend meetings during the working day?

COMMUNICATIONS

You will need to consider:

- How will you ensure information about the group is communicated across your organisation? For example you might want to start with an message to all staff and follow this up with regular newsletters and posters about specific events. It may be useful to set up a specific mailing list for those most interested.
- Will you provide specific communications to all employees who are about to go on maternity/paternity/shared parental leave e.g. add it to the checklist for briefing those going on leave, add it to your standard letters or maternity/paternity/SPL leave briefing note, set up a monitoring system and send an email/letter etc.
- Will you provide an ongoing virtual notice board for the group? For example a dedicated area on your intranet site.

ORGANISING EVENTS AND ACTIVITIES

You will need to decide:

- What activities will you organise e.g. external speakers on relevant topics, internal discussion groups (perhaps with a senior role model acting as host).
- Will the meetings be held virtually, or at a venue. If the latter, will it be recorded for employees to access at a later date?
- When will activities/meetings take place? Bear in mind that time constraints are likely to be particularly tight for parents and carers so:
  - meetings before and after work may be difficult – lunchtime meetings or meetings during the working day may be better.
  - some parents and carers may work part-time or partly from home, and therefore you will need to think about which days of the week to schedule meetings for – the likelihood is that you will need to use a range of days to ensure that everyone can attend some events
  - think about back-up options like providing slides or information packs from external speakers for those who cannot attend.
- If you are going to hold physical events, where will they take place? Do you have a suitable internal space? If you are a multi-site organisation, will you rotate events across sites, duplicate events in each location, or provide opportunities for employees to visit other sites and/or attend remotely. The appropriate solutions will depend on how many sites you have, how many employees are at each, and how widely dispersed your sites are geographically speaking.
- Will all events be open to all employees? Whilst it makes sense to be inclusive as a general policy, there may be exceptions to this rule. For example you might find that some smaller discussion groups might be more effective when reserved for one group of employees who are likely to have similar issues e.g. a discussion group for women only, or a specific group for those who have recently returned from maternity leave.

REFERENCES

Some of the evidence demonstrating the benefits of employee networks:

Bryan, Martson and Wiess, 2007 "Harnessing the power of informal employee networks" McKinsey Quarterly

Castilla, 2005, "Social networks and employee performance in a call centre" American Journal of Sociology 2005

Cross and Parker, 2003 "The hidden power of social networks: understanding how work really gets done" Harvard Business School Press

Haley-Lock, 2007 "Up Close and Personal: Employee Networks and Job Satisfaction in a Human Service Context", University of Chicago Press

Welbourn, 2013 "Making the business case for employee resource groups" Employee relations today

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