



Promoting gender equality, advancing the economy

JUMP Corporate Hub 14 February 2019

How to build and evolve your diversity network strategy for more impact

Summary of the session

1. Introduction

This HUB session focused on diversity networks.

Employee networks are increasingly popular within companies in Europe. They leverage the energy and efforts of employees to strengthen culture and collaboration, they contribute to networking, the development of new competencies and increasing employee engagement. Yet research and experience show that despite all efforts, many networks are struggling to meet their members' needs and to prosper and grow. With a focus on the company ecosystem, this interactive session explored how to avoid common stumbling blocks and to make sure groups deliver on expectations.

Our speaker, Veronika Hucke, is the founder of D&I Strategy & Solutions. She shared her knowledge and best practices to explore how networks can thrive and have a positive impact on women.

This Hub session was hosted by Sanah El Ouardani and Florence Dion from TOTAL. Sanah is the Head of Management Control DSI-RC at Total and Florence the Deputy VP Procurement Refining & Chemicals, Affiliates Support. They are both Co-President of TWICE – the Total women's network – Belgium. It is the first time it is a co-presidency.

2. Company testimonial

Sanah El Ouardani and Florence Dion, Co-Presidents of TWICE from Total

TWICE is the Total women's network. Created in 2006, it is present in more than 30 countries and it includes 39 local networks and more than 4000 members.

The main objectives of the network are to accompany women's career in the Total Group as well as to raise awareness of the issues of gender equality. The organisation is at the service of the Total Group's Diversity policy. The network offers a wide range of activities: mentoring programme and working groups, personal development

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workshops, conferences and testimonials, breakfast/lunch meetings, movies projection, outside events, etc. Since 2009, more than 800 mentees have benefited from the programme by female or male managers with a high satisfaction rate.

TWICE Belgium is the second biggest network after the Paris one. It is composed of 268 members. Its main focus is increasing visibility and awareness, personal development and developing partnership with HR.

The TWICE network is open to everybody. Yet Sanah and Florence are concerned that younger women do not get the issue and are therefore less interested in the network. For instance, they usually have more mentors than mentees in mentoring programmes, which highlights the need for more and better communication. More attractive activities for young women should be explored. For example, they organised for the first time a session only on experience sharing. During this session, they focused on maternity leave. It is very informal so that people feel comfortable.

In Feluy, they realised that the higher the manager was, the more men came to the activities. However, it is sometimes better to have middle managers to reach younger people.

3. Guest speaker

Veronika Hucke, Diversity expert, D&I Strategy & Solutions, author of « Unconsciously biased: employee networks 4.0 »

Veronika Hucke is a seasoned leader with deep expertise in Diversity and Inclusion (D&I), change management and communications. Her recent research and publications have focused on employee networks as well as D&I impact: “A Fresh Look at Women Networks” and “Unconsciously Biased: Employee Networks 4.0”. “Achieving Results: Diversity & Inclusion Actions With Impact”.

Veronika has held leadership roles at HP, Xerox, Alcatel and Philips, and combines subject matter expertise with extensive experience in working across large scale organisations. In 2015, she founded D&I Strategy and Solutions a consultancy firm focused at strategy development and implementation as well as research. She is part to the faculty of the The Conference Board’s “D&I and Change Academy” and has acted as a member of the Executive Committee of their “Diversity in Business Council”. She has been honored with the “Global HR Excellence Award” and was shortlisted two consecutive years for the “European Diversity Award”.

During this Hub session, she presented what she knows about networks in order to give tips to companies.

Network rules

Today, there is a lot of literature saying networks can fix the situation for women, but it usually does not underline enough the fact that it demands a lot of hard work. In order to work well, networks should follow specific rules. First of all, it is crucial to align network resources and ambitions. Budgets are often limited, and a lot of networks do

not even have any. The problem is when there is no connection between funding and expected deliverables – and it is very often the case.

Then, a network only works if some relevant metrics are put in place.

Finally, some network leaders need to be recognised. They should consider members' needs and expectations.

An “excess baggage”?

The majority of networks combine high ambitions with limited resources. The risk is that the network becomes a burden for its leaders. In fact, more than half of ERG leaders invest at least one day per month in their network, even though this time spent is rarely recognised. It can therefore hinder their careers. Leading a network can also impact the perception that your employer has of you as he or she might believe that you are therefore less involved in your actual job.

A women-only network?

In “Unconsciously biased: employee networks 4.0”, Veronika Hucke writes that transforming companies' women networks into “gender networks” that actively welcome both women and men is a key trend. However, many networks are treated as “damsel in distress”, that is to say that men should come in order to “save” those women. So, should men be integrated into those networks or is it better to have women-only networks?

77 percent of network officials, i.e. HR and D&I representatives, leaders and sponsors, want to move away from women-only spaces. Generally, this is due to the fact that members of the network are not satisfied with its outcomes and/or image. They also want to see more men actively involved. For the network members, the perception of men joining the network is more nuanced: 45% want men allies to support advancement, 17% want to address common or respective challenges, whereas 17% prefer to remain among themselves – and 21% have not quite made up their minds.

In some companies the networks welcome men, but some specific activities are only for women. Sessions for everyone is a good way to raise men's awareness but at the same time sessions that exclude them are sometimes better to help women speak up. In the end, what is essential is to be clear on why men are included/excluded and explain it to everyone.

A lot of people consider that men should be included as they hold positions of power – and can therefore become key allies to women's empowerment.

But at the same time, a lot of women would rather have a place to be among themselves. They call for a women-only space, that can fill a specific need that is not addressed elsewhere. For example, some say that they can express themselves more freely than if men were present.

How to attract members?

In fact, it is also a matter of communication. In some companies, workshops exclusively for women are badly perceived. This is why it is crucial to be clear and transparent.

A lot of groups suffer from a weak standing. They are often seen as social clubs, where women just have a chat around coffee. Sometimes, they are just not well known.

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Veronika Hucke explains that the two factors that make members recommend their network are their experience and the network image. When both are good, and that therefore members feel that they are part of something “cool”, the Net promoter score increases.

A clear communication is crucial to avoid misinterpretation. You need to define your target and adapt the communication accordingly. It is important to explain the real benefits of the network, but also to position yourself correctly and stay simple: if you send too many mix messages, nobody will come.

What kind of network?

Four different kinds of networks exist. Even if they change in scope, Veronika Hucke underlines the fact that bigger is not always better. What matters is to determine the aim of your network, its focus.

The first type of network is called the “safe harbour”. It is a place where you can meet other women and it aims at creating peer support.

Then, you have the “career network” that is about business networking and career development. It enables women to get to know people that might be important for their careers.

The third type of network is the “culture change”, which means that it really aims at identifying and addressing barriers.

Finally, the “business development” network is about marketing and stakeholder engagement.

It is all about the focus of the network, at the beginning you are focused about the members but the more you grow the more you become organisation oriented. Veronika Hucke summarizes this change of focus by the fact that you move from “my development, my career, my environment” to “our business, our culture, our diversity and inclusion measures”. The Safe Harbour is often bottom-up whereas the Business Development is more top-down.

4. Discussion & Best practices Sharing Session

How to get started?

To get people on board, Veronika Hucke suggests using the concept of persona. That is to say that you imagine someone and try to understand his needs and expectations: how he or she will feel about the network, what will be the impact on him/her, the benefits, the obstacles, etc. It helps you to see how to get other people on board.

You need to have a business case to really identify your target and the objectives of your network. Every company’s culture is different and you need to take this into account. For instance, Isabella Lenarduzzi gave the example of a woman that created a “secret” network outside her company to empower women and create a strategy for when the direction is ready to listen.

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A lot of initiatives can be taken to attract people. Always check if it is inclusive. For example, a breakfast reunion can be nice but it is not mother friendly at all. Veronika Hucke suggests finding volunteers to build programmes on a peer to peer level. Different ideas were shared during this Hub session. For example, you can organise sport events to get people together, organise charity events, develop online learning programmes. People usually do not take the time to train themselves, but taking the time together is easier. You can also offer “How to answer sexist remarks” lessons. Some activities can be only for men, as it is crucial to train them to show them that the company’s culture is not neutral: you need to understand who is important in your organisation as it is the top that must be convinced.

Find ambassadors

It is crucial to have strong sponsors in the direction committee but the most important is that those people are volunteers: they should want to be the ambassadors of the network. Ambassadors should have both the motivation and a strategic position.

How to be sure that men stay real allies?

The risk of opening the network to men is that some women do not speak up as if they were only with women and that men start dominating the network. But at the same time, inviting men in the network is a way of raising their awareness and have therefore a real impact on gender equality. It is also a way of empowering women as men often have important positions and can thus help others to advance their careers – for example by mentoring or sponsoring them.

In some companies, the networks are about diversity in general (religion, culture, etc.) – not specifically gender equality. Therefore, the question of men joining the network is less predominant.

TWICE is a women network that is opened to women *and* men.

In another company, they decided to open their network to men but put a limit on it. For example, no men can be spokesperson of the network as it is really about women speaking up.

What is important is to ask yourself why you want men to come in the network and what kind of men you want in the network – so that the objectives and roles are clear. You need to have men that accept to be disempowered and that realise that they have to leave some place for women.

Do networks really have an impact?

Yes, so it is worth the time/energy spent! In fact, a US study of 2,600 working women across functions and industries attending Women’s networking events examined several outcomes that occurred in the year after the women attended the conference: **42%** of women who attended a female networking conference received a promotion in the year after (vs. 18% those who signed up and didn’t go),

78% percent of them reported feeling “more optimistic about the future” after attending, **71%** of the attendees said that they “feel more connected to others” after attending.

This means that, even if creating a network is time consuming and can be stressful networking events really move the needle on equality.

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Thank you to all participants!

Thanks for sharing!

Don't miss the up-coming Corporate Hub on "Leadership, Culture, Systems: 3 keys to unlocking Gender Balance – and its benefits" (14 May, 2019).