UNCONSCIOUSLY BIASED: EMPLOYEE NETWORKS 4.0

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Transforming companies' women networks into "gender networks" that actively welcome both women and men is a key trend.[1]

77 percent of network officials, i.e. HR and D&I representatives, leaders and sponsors, want to move away from women-only spaces. Generally, there is a correlation between a lack of satisfaction with a network's outcomes and image and the desire to see more men actively involved. Apparently, organizations are turning to men as "White Knights", where a network appears stuck or fails to deliver on its intended goals.

Members have a more nuanced perspective, however. While a total of 61 percent believe that their network would benefit from a stronger gender mix, senior women and those wanting to leverage the group for personal learning and connecting across the organization see a stronger need to remain among themselves.

At the same time, there is a high level of agreement on just why men should be joining: 67 percent of respondents want them to better understand barriers women are facing at work and / or to leverage their position to support women's advancement. Just 26 percent aim to see men engaged in order to drive a common, mutually beneficial agenda.[2]

This means that networks are prone to repeat a common mistake made when engaging men in diversity and inclusion initiatives: trying to have them become supporters of the "minority agenda" vs. creating an attractive proposition that also considers the own interests and needs of men.

1 Based on 1716 participants from 58 countries – D&I and HR professionals, network leads, sponsors, as well as employee members and non-members of women networks.

2 According to the quantitative analysis of 437 comments provided by the survey participants.

KEY INSIGHTS: MANY GROUPS ARE ACTUALLY WOMEN NETWORKS IN DISGUISE

✔ The current trend towards gender networks is apparently less about evolving needs and a changing D&I agenda and more about dissatisfaction with the outcomes of existing networks – hoping for men to step up where networks are failing to achieve their intended goals. Not surprising, the appeal for men to join is limited.

✔ There is a fundamental difference between a network focused on addressing the needs of both men and women vs. gaining men's support for a network looking to address barriers that women experience in the workplace.

✔ Developing a successful engagement strategy needs clarity about the actual intentions and must be realistic in evaluating whether its proposition has appeal for the different stakeholders.

✔ Transitioning an existing network – vs. setting up a new one – is not necessarily a recipe for success. Companies following that approach need to validate whether plans are aligned with the requirements of current members, who might not want to embrace a change in membership demographics.

✔ Generally, if organizations believe a network needs "fixing", a strategy review is in order vs. just opening it up for others to join. Looking at alignment and support will be key criteria for any such review.
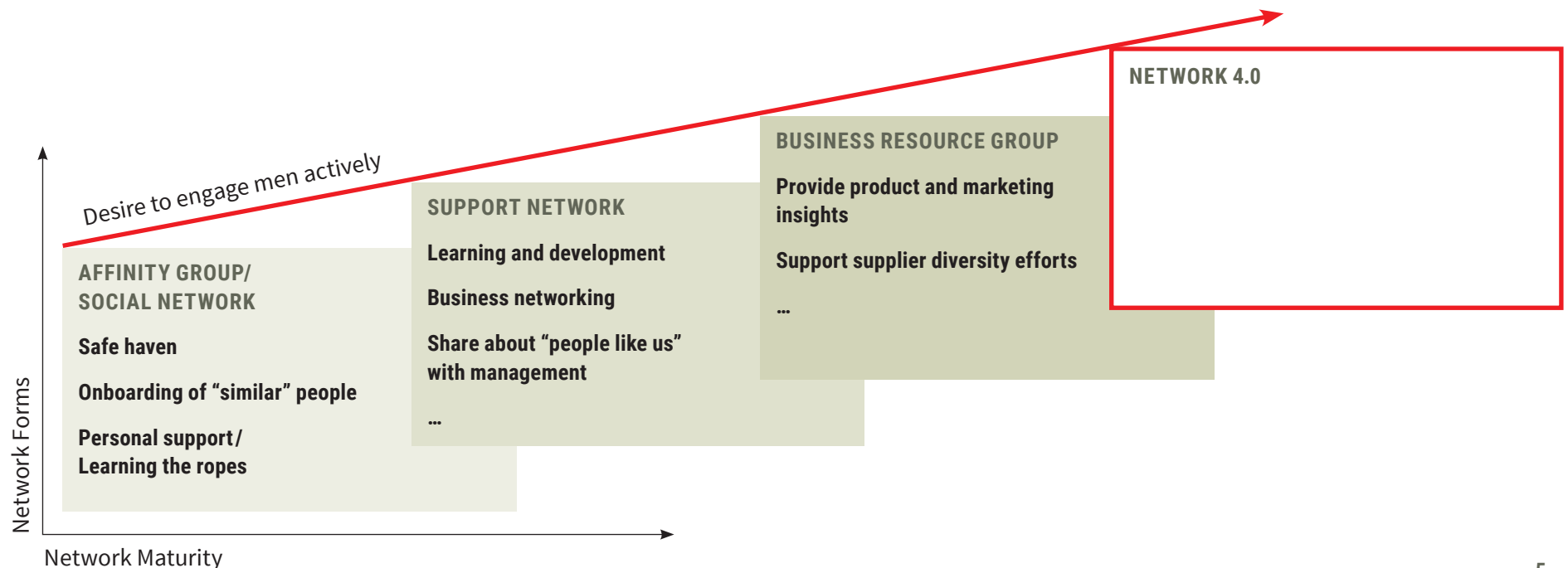
EMPLOYEE NETWORKS 4.0: ENGAGING THE MAJORITY POPULATION

Companies' internal employee networks are often expected to follow what is considered a "natural evolution" to provide maximum value:

1. Moving from an affinity group of employees coming together because they share a common key demographic – like gender or race – and its resulting challenges,

2. Towards a support network that offers learning and development opportunities for their members,

3. To become a so called "Business Resource Group" that provides product and marketing insights for "people like them" and directly supports revenue growth.

This report looks at another current trend within the D&I and employee network community and at what could be considered "Network 4.0": aiming to engage the majority population – e.g. have men join the former women networks and evolve them towards what are then called gender networks.

NETWORK 4.0

BUSINESS RESOURCE GROUP

Provide product and marketing insights

Support supplier diversity efforts

...

SUPPORT NETWORK

Learning and development

Business networking

Share about "people like us" with management

...

Desire to engage men actively

AFFINITY GROUP/ SOCIAL NETWORK

Safe haven

Onboarding of "similar" people

Personal support/ Learning the ropes

Network Forms

Network Maturity

"WE NEED MORE MEN TO MOVE THE NEEDLE"

The traditional women network is dead – at least according to three out of four HR and D&I representatives, network leaders and sponsors. Instead of a women-only activity, they want to engage men to participate.

There is also a strong agreement, just why men should join: About two thirds of participants want to see them included as they are in a position of power and considered key allies to make sure the group has an impact. Just one in four respondents believes that joint efforts are needed in view of a changing society and new challenges facing both women and men.

At the same time, the call for "more men" highlights a con-sistent dilemma: the sought after target audience is not very eager to join. This even holds true for "gender networks", which are described as having women and men as equal participants and topic area of focus: 83 percent of respondents engaged in such groups report that men are scarce.

"Men hold most positions of power."

"Gender bias at work can be eliminated by the change in consciousness of men rather than women."

"Men bring validity to the network and the issues."

"To create sustainable culture change, everyone in the company has a role to play."

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"I BELIEVE WOMEN SHOULD HAVE A PLACE TO BE AMONG THEMSELVES"

There are three main factors that make women more reluctant to have men join: (1) the network as is delivers on their expectation, (2) they feel the network purpose calls for an all-female audience. The biggest correlation, though, is (3) with respondents' age. While 73 percent of Millennial women (born 1981 – 1997) are keen to involve more men, this is only true for 61 percent of Gen X (1965 – 1980) and 42 percent of Baby Boomers (1946 – 1964).

The main reason for not wanting to include men is a request for a women-only space, which is mentioned by more than half of the respective respondents. About one in five highlights the need for different platforms to serve different purposes.

Believing that – with the increasing share of Millennials in the workplace – members will just outgrow these concerns is unlikely. In view of related research, differences in perception by age are probably less about a changing view across generations, and more connected to one's experience in the workplace. Many of the experienced women state that they are well networked and are part of mixed gender organizations specific to their industry or function, which is true for them far more often than for younger women. The women network fills a specific need that is not addressed elsewhere.

"It gives women an opportunity to get together and express themselves freely on topics that matter. Men would hinder that."

"There are so few women in our environment. It is good to have a female space."

"When men participate, I see the participation of women decrease."

"You would need a genuine purpose and clear rational. Otherwise it is demotivating for male colleagues and puzzling for female members."

"Mixed Networks are a dime a dozen."

"MEN ARE PART OF THE PROBLEM AND MUST BE PART OF THE SOLUTION."

No matter what their engagement strategy, almost all networks find men not very willing to join. It hardly matters whether they are invited as guests, sponsors, allies or regular members. The research shows three related issues that help understand why past and current strategies have failed

1. Most networks want to leverage male members to address barriers women are facing in the workplace. While this is a great agenda for men that are interested to act as sponsors, it is not an attractive proposition for a sufficient number.

2. As one of the drivers for including men is dissatisfaction with network outcomes, expectations regarding their contribution are high. Judging from comments provided, this can result in an outreach that aims to teach and / or blame them for aspects that members find are amiss with an organization's culture. This probably does not make the network men's preferred place to spend what tends to be spare time.

3. Finally, one can't ignore the aspect of unconscious privilege and gender stereotypes. As members of the majority population, many men are simply not aware that anything might be amiss or just appreciate the status-quo. And even those open for change can hesitate to join due to the implicit costs they potentially occur by being associated with the group. This is especially true, as gender focused employee networks tend to have a mixed image at best.

"Men's support will make it easier for women to climb the ladder."

"They will better understand the challenges women are facing."

"We won't solve the issue without men – especially as they usually cause the problems in the first place."

"Men tend to have better positions in the company and women can benefit from networking with them."

HIGH EXPECTATIONS –
BUT OFTEN LIMITED SUPPORT

Seeing the concerns many organizations have about the performance of their women network, makes it worthwhile to consider other aspects that impact success vs. just aiming to include men.

- Many network leaders as well as HR and D&I professionals have a long wish list of what their network should achieve – including "increase of employee engagement", "offer learning and development opportunities" and "attract and retain female talent". At the same time, only very few have implemented relevant metrics. Focusing on the number of members and events doesn't support performance tracking and evolving strategy and agenda over time.

- Just 13 percent of network leaders say the role is part of their performance appraisal although every second invests a day per month and more. 56 percent receive no specific recognition at all. Leaders that are not being recognized for the work are less likely to believe their employer is serious about diversity and inclusion efforts and are less positive about their organizations "strategy and future direction". It probably also impacts their ability to rally members behind a common course in support of their employer.

- Budgets tend to be limited, with one in five respondents (18%) reporting that their network does not have any. Also, there is no apparent connection between funding and expected deliverables.

- Most groups suffer from a weak standing. Two thirds of respondents state that their network is seen as a social club, not delivering value or just not well known. The level of male involvement apparently has no impact on image.

MOVING FORWARD

The following questions can guide thinking as organizations are reviewing the strategy of their employee networks:

A strategy review is required because of CHANGES IN THE ENVIRONMENT / ORGANIZATION – i. e. the need to address new D&I challenges

NETWORK STRATEGY	
	Is an employee network the appropriate channel to achieve the intended goals?
	What is it actually expected to contribute and how does it need to be equipped to do so?
	How is success being defined and measured?
	How do network activities fit into the broader D&I strategy?
	Is rebranding an existing network the right way to go vs. e. g. setting up a new group?
	Is it possible to reposition this network successfully to address the new challenges?
	Is there any "baggage" to consider, as it might impact success?
	How does the network agenda and activities change in order to address its new targets?

NETWORK LEADERS & SPONSORS	
	Does the new agenda call for changes in network leadership/sponsors?
	Is the change supported by the network leadership team and sponsors?
	(How) does the change impact their role?
	What is their responsibility within the change process and regarding the new agenda?
	Are they equipped to succeed?

CURRENT MEMBERS	
	Is the change aligned with the expectations of its current members?
	What is their contribution in making sure the network achieves its new goals?
	How are they engaged in the change process?
	What is the approach towards members not ready to embrace the change?

NEW TARGET AUDIENCES / FUTURE MEMEBRS	
	Is the changed proposition attractive for the intended new members?
	Is there an adequate outreach and engagement strategy?

A strategy review is required because of UNSATISFACTORY NETWORK OUTCOMES

NETWORK STRATEGY	Is there agreement regarding network priorities and ambitions?
	Is everyone clear about what the network is supposed to achieve?
	Are the necessary interfaces in place to ensure ongoing information and alignment?
	As needed: is there a process to ensure network outputs are being leveraged?
	Have relevant metrics been defined to track outcomes?
	Is there a process for qualified insights and a regular "pulse check" to understand the state of the network?
	Is the network equipped for success?
	Is there recognition for key contributors?
NETWORK LEADERS & SPONSORS	Is there a common understanding between network leaders and the organization (HR, D&I, others) of intended goals?
	Are roles and responsibilities clearly defined?
	Are the people in charge willing and able to fulfill their roles?
	Is there support for the role?
	Are leaders recognized for the work they do?

CURRENT MEMBERS	Are members clear about and have they bought into the networks mission – and do they understand what the network is not supposed to do?
	Are members being heard as part of agenda setting?
	Is there a process to identify and address members' concerns?
NEW TARGET AUDIENCES/ FUTURE MEMEBRS	Does the network have a structure in place to ensure it remains relevant for current and future members?
	Is there an outreach strategy and plan?

ABOUT

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THE REPORT
This report is part of a global research project and is based on the data of a comprehensive online survey "A Fresh Look at Women Networks" conducted by D&I Strategy and Solutions and Inclusion Institute. It took place between August and November 2015, addressing network leads, sponsors, D&I and HR professionals, as well as employee members and non-members of women networks. 1716 participants from 58 countries completed the survey, 92 percent of them women. For this report, special focus was given to more than 800 respondents that shared their perspective on engaging men. Over 600 comments provided were analyzed in-depth.

The earlier report "A Fresh Look at Women Networks", created with Lisa Kepinski of Inclusion Institute, has received a lot of attention in the field and outcomes have been presented at conferences globally, e.g. ICON D&I Seminar, Zurich; JUMP Forum, Brussels; WIN Corporate Forum, London; Women in Leadership Conference, Prague; World HRD Congress, Mumbai; Forum Workplace Inclusion, Minneapolis. Also, a Webcast was conducted with The Conference Board. The report can be downloaded for free via www.di-strategy.com.

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Veronika Hucke is a seasoned leader with deep expertise in diversity and inclusion (D&I), change management and communications and combines subject matter expertise with extensive experience in driving change in large scale organizations. She is a thought leader in the D&I field and a frequent speaker at conferences globally.

Veronika is part to the faculty of the The Conference Board's "Diversity, Inclusion and Culture Change Academy" and has acted as a member of the Executive Committee of their "Diversity in Business Council". In 2016, she has been honored with the "Global HR Excellence Award" in recognition of extraordinary work in the field. In her role as Global Head of Diversity and Inclusion at Philips, Veronika was shortlisted two consecutive years for the "European Diversity Award" for "Best D&I Team" and "Best Company". Her work was also recognized with prestigious awards for "Best Internal" and "Best Integrated" communications and "Best Sustainability Campaign".

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