

 Search

In-House Resource Groups Can Help And Harm

by NANCY SOLOMON

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Many companies like to portray themselves as big, happy families. But, sometimes they break that family down into smaller groups, like women or minorities, who can look out for each other.

The Chubb Group of Insurance Companies, one of the country's largest property and casualty insurers, and the employer of 10,400 workers, is one such company. At its New Jersey headquarters, there is a black employee network, and there are groups for Latinos, Asians, people with disabilities, working parents and young people.

Chubb midlevel manager Keith Ellsmith is a member of the company's gay and lesbian networking group.

"It is the face of diversity for gay and lesbian employees at the organization," he says. "Being able to be out and be yourself at work, it takes a level of pressure completely off your shoulders and allows you to be more productive."

On One Hand: Tangible Results

These groups can create tangible change in the workplace. The gay and lesbian network persuaded the company to provide domestic partnership benefits for its employees.

Donna Griffin, Chubb's chief diversity officer, says networking groups are a way to attract talent, especially young people who might Google a company before deciding whether or not to apply.

"They do actually look at our Web site and they do look at awards," Griffin says, "whether it's being recognized by the Human Rights Campaign or [that] we were one of the top 50 companies for Latinas."

Griffin says networking groups are not just there for employees — they also help with Chubb's bottom line.

"For example, in May of this year, we had a specific program that was geared toward our Asian-American agents and we utilized resources from our Asian business network in order to make that happen," Griffin says.

On The Other: A Balkanized Workplace

But there can be a downside to this approach. Harvard sociologist Frank Dobbin studies diversity strategies and says networking groups can balkanize a workplace, especially when it comes to racial minorities.

"When minorities start meeting together they become resegregated and whites start to see them as an oppositional group, rather than members of the corporation," Dobbin says.

He acknowledges that these groups do have value for some employees. If you belong to a women's group, for example, statistics suggest you have a good chance of meeting female managers who might mentor you.

"These are the people who can help you get ahead and these are the people who identify talent and decide who gets promoted," Dobbin says. "It's managers, not low-level workers."

And for employees anxious to move up the corporate ladder, that kind of mentoring might be the best thing a networking group can offer. Dobbin says if these groups just function like social clubs or outlets for employee complaints, they run the risk of becoming mere window dressing — nice for the company brochure, but not the best way to make the company really look more like America.