

# The Use of Affinity Groups by Fortune 100 Firms

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*We found that 66 of the Fortune 100 firms mentioned affinity groups on their websites. The most frequently mentioned themes were professional development (68%) and diversity (66%). The vast majority represent protected classes. Fifty-eight percent fell into the “legal” category; 30% fulfilled a business function in that they were targeted at people from different countries which could benefit marketing, recruiting, and retention efforts; and 13% fell into the “other” category. We present possible reasons why firms may not have them listed. We conclude by discussing SMART goals and how they can be used to make affinity groups more effective.*

## **BACKGROUND**

Two things should not come as a surprise to any reader. First, today’s workplace is quite diverse; second, a firm’s website is an important marketing and communication tool. In response to a diverse workforce, most firms have diversity programs and these programs typically include affinity groups. These groups are based on common interests that bring employees together to share their concerns and address common problems as well as encourage camaraderie and fellowship. Not surprisingly, these groups are very popular. In fact, Hall (2007) found that over 90% of Fortune 500 firms have some type of affinity, networking, or resource group.

As a marketing and communication tool, a firm’s website tells stakeholders about what the firm values, including diversity. Cappelli (2001) suggests that corporate websites should be designed as a marketing tool with potential applicants in mind because the corporate website is typically one of the first places prospective employees go to learn about the firm (Kraichy & Chapman, 2014). The website can help job seekers determine whether there is a fit (Newstex, Feb 23, 2015) in terms of work-life balance, community involvement, and diversity among other things. Since having affinity groups is a way of showing a commitment to diversity, i.e., putting words into action, it is reasonable to expect that firms will mention affinity groups on their website if they have them.

Given the importance of diversity and given the importance of a firm’s website in communicating its values, we will examine the extent to which Fortune 100 firms show their commitment to diversity by mentioning affinity groups on their website. In addition to determining the presence or absence of affinity groups on the website, we also examine the way these groups are portrayed by firms having them as well as the types of groups that these firms value. We begin by defining and presenting a brief history of these groups. This is followed by a discussion of the legal and business benefits and pitfalls surrounding

affinity groups. After presenting our research study, we discuss how SMART goals can be used to enhance the value of affinity groups.

## **DEFINITION AND HISTORY**

Employee affinity groups, also known as network(ing) or resource groups, can add value to a diversity program. These groups are typically based on common interests such as age, ethnicity, gender, and sexual orientation. However, they can be based on any characteristic, e.g., single parenthood, which brings employees together to share common concerns, address common problems, and provide camaraderie and fellowship. According to Jennifer (2006) affinity groups first appeared in the late 1970's and early 1980's and focused on race and gender. Citing a 2005 Society for Human Resources Management publication, Jennifer (2006) says that the top reasons for forming these groups include reduced costs associated with turnover, absenteeism, and low productivity; an improved bottom line; and increased organizational competitiveness. In addition, they can help prevent marginalization of certain groups of employees. It could also be said that affinity groups serve as an organizational smoke detector and assist human resources with better understanding the needs of different groups.

## **LEGAL AND BUSINESS ISSUES**

While the benefits of affinity groups are many, there are pitfalls associated with them. In this section, we discuss these benefits and pitfalls from a legal perspective as well as a business perspective.

### **Legal Issues**

Affinity groups provide organizations with a number of legal benefits. However, to avoid legal problems, their activities must not violate labor laws or laws related to discrimination.

#### *Benefits*

One benefit of affinity groups is that they can minimize EEOC complaints. This is especially true for firms with a global workforce and presence in multiple countries because cultural norms regarding sexual harassment and racial discrimination are not universal. As such, without proper acculturation an employee may engage in behaviors that are appropriate in his or her culture, but are illegal in ours. This concern is supported by the work of Segal (2006) who studied college students from the United States, Canada, Ecuador, Germany, the Netherlands, Pakistan, the Philippines, Taiwan, and Turkey and found that culture affected whether the subject felt that the situation described to them did or did not involve sexual harassment and the type of penalty that would be appropriate. Similarly, Zimbrot (2007) found that the definitions of and responses to sexual harassment are different in South American, European, and Asian countries. For example, Brazilians have a different concept of what constitutes sexual harassment than North Americans. Furthermore, given the patriarchal nature of the society, Brazilian women may consider sexual advances as being normal. People from Asian countries tend to be more tolerant or less likely to report actions that are sexually harassing than others and their rates of reported sexual harassment are lower than in the U.S. This could be because in collectivist cultures, victims of sexual harassment may be reluctant to complain because it may be viewed as disharmonious.

The final benefit of affinity groups, especially when they support members of a protected class, is that the groups may be seen as a diversity initiative and, as such, the presence of these groups may show good faith when faced with a discrimination lawsuit. Research has shown that even when a diversity initiative is nothing more than window dressing, discrimination lawsuits succeed less often against companies that do (vs. do not) have diversity initiatives (Edelman, Krieger, Eliason, Albiston, & Mellema, 2011). This benefit is due to the fact that these initiatives often convince people both in and out of the organization that discrimination claims are unfounded (Kaiser, Major, Jurcevic, Dover, Brady, & Shapiro, 2013). For example, in *Wal-Mart v. Dukes*, the Supreme Court ruled that Wal-Mart's female employees couldn't

establish discrimination across all its stores because the firm had a policy that clearly forbade discrimination based on gender even though it had little impact on actual practice.

### *Pitfalls*

If not properly managed, affinity groups can cause legal problems. These problems fall into two categories. The first deals with possible violation of labor and civil rights laws. The second deals with a situation where a group identifies a possible civil rights violation that would otherwise go unnoticed.

According to Hall (2007), affinity groups have two types of legal risks. The first involves violating the National Labor Relations Act. If the group discusses grievances, labor disputes, wages, or conditions of work with management, the group can be considered a labor organization. The second risk involves violating Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. A firm will violate Title VII if doesn't treat all requests to form an affinity group within a particular class or category equally. Specifically, if a firm has an affinity group for Hispanics, it may not disallow an affinity group for Asians; if it allows a group for Christians, it may not disallow groups for other religions. Title VII will also be violated if the firm allows a group to restrict its membership. For example, while a firm may have a women's affinity group, it may not have a women-only affinity group as all groups, regardless of affinity, should remain open to all employees even if men may be less inclined to participate (McGlothlen, 2006).

To minimize these legal issues, Campbell, Combs, & Seibel (2015) suggest the following. First, management should require that a group's mission or charter be consistent with the firm's business goals. The group's organization and a list of leaders as well as how they will be selected and how they will be replaced should be included with the application to make it clear that leaders were not chosen by the company. Second, management should state that group membership is voluntary and open to all employees interested in the group's mission. As such, men may join a woman's affinity group as long as they do not try to co-opt the group. Finally, management should make it clear that the group should not deal with human resources issues. If a human resource issue arises, the group can bring it to management's attention with the understanding that it is merely a suggestion.

An affinity group may identify discriminatory behaviors that would otherwise go unnoticed. This can arise when members of a protected class form an affinity group specifically to determine whether members have been discriminated against or when members of an existing group determine that they have been discriminated against as a result of having informal discussions. Campbell, Combs, & Seibel (2015) give an example where a women's faculty group at Penn State discovered pay inequality and ultimately filed a class action suit. Of course, while the class action suit was likely unpleasant for the University, if in fact, there was discrimination, it needed to be addressed and the group performed an important function by bring the pay inequality to the University's attention.

## **Business Issues**

### *Advantages*

In addition to empirical evidence that that affinity groups enhance performance (Ward, 2014), there are numerous specific instances where affinity groups have proven their worth (Jennifer, 2006). For example, they helped Texas Instruments' recruiting efforts because prospective employees felt that the affinity group provided a built-in comfort zone since there were others at the firm with a shared background. The benefits of affinity groups can go beyond race and gender. At a large law firm, a parents' group was able to make their concerns for emergency day care, part-time schedules, and parental leave heard (Jennifer, 2006). An additional benefit is that people who feel listened to are more likely to want to stay and see their suggestions implemented.

In addition to helping attract and retain employees, affinity groups can be used to gain insights into the consumer behavior of different groups so that they can be better targeted. This was the case at Ford where its parenting group helped review new minivan designs. They also participated in focus groups and were asked to respond to new advertising campaigns. Affinity groups can be especially helpful for multi-

national firms. For example, at Eli Lilly, members of its Chinese affinity group provided voluntary housing for visitors from Lilly's Chinese affiliates (Jennifer, 2006).

### *Pitfalls*

There are a number of potential business pitfalls regarding affinity groups. The first is based on Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986; Turner, 1999). Social Identity Theory states that people define themselves in terms of social group membership that has emotional significance or value connotations. One result of social group membership, according to Social Identity Theory, is intergroup conflict (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). In fact, the mere awareness of group membership may, under certain conditions, cause intergroup competition and discrimination to help achieve a positive social identity.

Earlier we defined affinity groups as being based on common characteristics such as age, etc., or any other interests that brings employees together to share similar concerns, address common problems and provide camaraderie and fellowship. This definition is similar to how a group is defined according to Social Identity Theory. As such, affinity groups can become a business problem if they result in an in-group/out-group mentality.

Although there appears to be no research that attributes business problems specifically to affinity groups, there is evidence that diversity initiatives, in general, may not only be ineffective but could even be harmful. Since affinity groups are diversity initiatives, it is possible that these findings may also apply to them so they will be discussed here. Although the study was conducted approximately twenty years ago, Rynes & Rosen's (1995) conclusion that the success of diversity training depends upon top management support likely remains valid today. More recently Legault, Gutsell, & Inzlicht (2011) concluded that poorly developed, executed, and supported diversity initiatives will not only be unsuccessful, but could possibly be counterproductive. They state that if diversity initiatives are seen as reducing one's ability to develop one's own views about diversity, these initiatives can cause hostility toward the group. They conclude that social pressure for political correctness can be counter-productive. Many people believe that "diversity" is merely repackaged affirmative action (i.e., reverse discrimination) and is inconsistent with a post-racial society (for a discussion, see Clegg, 2000 and Domina, 2011).

There may be other business problems that can be attributed to affinity groups. First, affinity groups may be used by some employees to isolate themselves from non-group members and, as a result, they may not learn the corporate culture or feel they are part of the organization. There is also the issue of whether it is best for a firm to have employees who can only function in the organization if they belong to an affinity group.

## **RESEARCH STUDY**

### **Research Questions**

Our purpose is to look at the extent to which Fortune 100 companies mention affinity groups on their website, the context in which those groups are presented, and the types of groups these firms have. Specifically, we have four research questions.

RQ1: What percentage of the Fortune 100 lists affinity groups on the website?

RQ2: What themes are present when firms describe their affinity groups?

RQ3: What specific groups are most often mentioned on the website?

RQ 4: To what extent can these groups be said to perform a legal, business, or some other function?

### **Methodology**

The 2015 list of Fortune 100 companies was used as the data source. Using Google, each firm's home page was accessed. The initial search term was "employee groups." If this did not lead to the appropriate page, the terms listed below were entered until the appropriate information was found. If the desired information wasn't found, the firm's Corporate Citizenship report was accessed and searched using the

following terms: employee groups / networks / teams; associate groups / networks / teams; resource groups / networks / teams; and employee diversity.

The websites were analyzed by looking for the following: 1) a mention of the specific type of individual targeted by the affinity group and 2) the purpose(s) of the groups. Also, specific key words were recorded that told how the organization viewed these groups.

## RESULTS

Based on the fact that Hall (2007) found that over 90% of the Fortune 500 had some type of affinity group and given their presumed importance in attracting employees, we were surprised to find that 34 of our Fortune 100 corporations (34%) did not mention affinity, networking, or support groups on their website (RQ1). Of course, our findings do not mean that all of these 34 firms do not have affinity groups; it merely means that our search failed to find them. However, it is likely that a job candidate viewing the website would conclude that the firm did not sponsor affinity groups which could make the firm a less desirable place to work.

We began by trying to determine what themes were present in the firm’s discussion of affinity groups (RQ2). We found that this language often described the organization’s diversity statement, its philosophy on diversity and affinity groups, or some type of welcoming statement. The results of our keyword analysis are presented Table 1. Of the firms that discuss affinity groups on their website, the most frequently mentioned theme was “professional development” (68%), followed by “diversity” (66%). However, when diversity-related terms are combined (cultural awareness, diversity, inclusion), it is clear that diversity is the main theme. In fact, the diversity theme was present in the discussion of recruitment/retention as well as mentoring.

**TABLE 1**  
**THEMES AS A PERCENTAGE OF FIRMS WITH AFFINITY GROUPS (N=66)**

Collaboration between affinity groups	2%
Community Representation/Service	50%
Cultural Awareness/Differences	52%
Diversity	66%
Inclusion	44%
Mentoring	31%
Networking	63%
Outreach (events, etc.)	53%
Professional Development	68%
Recruitment/retention of a particular group	29%
Role Models	5%
Scholarships	10%
Support business mission or goals	27%

Note: The above percentages will not sum to 100% because the same terms were often found on multiple company websites.

Research Question 3 asks about the specific names of the groups listed on the website. These findings are presented in Table 2. It was interesting to note that some affinity groups were mentioned by just about every organization that published this information. Asian, African-American, Latino, LGBT, and Women affinity groups were present in 80% or more of the organizations studied. Groups supporting veterans and those with disabilities were present in 50% or more of the organizations studied. The remainder of the groups were represented with far less frequency with some being represented in only a few organizations.

**TABLE 2**  
**SPECIFIC AFFINITY GROUPS LISTED ON WEBSITE (N=66)**

<b>Group Name</b>	<b>F</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>Group Name</b>	<b>F</b>	<b>%</b>
	<b>req.</b>			<b>req.</b>	
Asian	5	8	Iranian	1	2
	4	2%			%
Administrative (for admin. support staff)	2	3	Jewish	3	5
		%			%
Adoption	1	2	Korean	2	3
		%			%
African-American	5	8	Latino	6	9
	4	2%		1	2%
Agnostic and Atheists	1	2	LGBT	5	8
		%		3	0%
Baby Boomers	2	3	Men	1	2
		%			%
Bangladesh	1	2	Mid-Career Employees	2	3
		%			%
Cancer Support	1	2	Middle-Eastern (Muslim/Arab)	8	1
		%			2%
Chinese	4	6	Native American	1	2
		%		4	1%
Christian	4	6	Pacific Islander	5	8
		%			%
Disabled	3	5	Pakistani	1	2
	8	8%			%
Early Career Employees / Millennial	2	3	Portuguese	1	2
	4	6%			%
Environment Sustainability	2	3	Russian	1	2
		%			%
Executive Network	1	2	Seasoned Professionals	3	5
		%			%
Filipino	4	6	Turkish	1	2
		%			%
General Diversity Group	1	1	Veterans	3	5
	1	7%		8	8%
Indian	8	1	Vietnamese	3	5
		2%			%
Interfaith	2	3	WAVE (Working in Virtual Environment)	3	5
		%			%
Inter-generational	3	5	Women	5	8
		%		3	0%
International / Multicultural	5	8	Working Families (Parents/Caregivers)	1	2
		%		9	9%

Note: Shaded groups were found in 50% or more of the organizations.

Research Question 4 asked to what extent these groups can be said to perform a legal, business, or other function. As the literature suggests, organizations have affinity groups for a number of reasons. As

referenced above, much of the discussion of affinity groups focuses on legal and business issues. As such, these two categories were selected. We defined these categories as follows:

**Legal** - Those groups that could offer a legal defense to the organization or serve a specific, protected class such as those that fall under the Civil Rights Act of 1964, Pregnancy Discrimination Act, or other similar legislation that protects an individual from discrimination.

**Business** – Those groups that increase organizational know-how from a global or cultural perspective, attract diverse groups where a business unit may reside or does reside, and/or enhance marketing efforts to a particular group either in the home country or globally.

**Other** – Those groups that enable camaraderie and fellowship around a particular topic of interest that does not directly involve a protected class or a clear business purpose. From the employee’s perspective, all groups would likely be viewed as an “other” group because the employee would be unaware of the corporate purpose or legal history of each group. From the firm’s perspective, used to categorize the groups, a group could fall into multiple categories. The coding process used the company viewpoint to determine whether the group was categorized as a legal, business, or other group. A group that fell into multiple categories was counted only once. When a group could fall into multiple categories. From the firm’s perspective a group can perform multiple functions. Some groups fall into multiple categories but are only counted once. It was classified as a legal group if appropriate. If not appropriate, it was classified as a business group.

**TABLE 3**  
**CATEGORIZATION OF SPECIAL INTEREST GROUPS (N=66)**

<b>LEGAL</b>	<b>BUSINESS</b>	<b>OTHER</b>
African-American	Asian	Administrative (for admin. support staff)
Christian	Bangladesh	Adoption
Disabled	Chinese	Agnostic and Atheists
General Diversity Group	Filipino	Baby Boomers
Inter-generational	Indian	Cancer Support
Jewish	International / Multicultural	Early Career Employees / Millennial
LGBT	Iranian	Environment Sustainability
Men	Korean	Executive Network
Middle-Eastern (Muslim/Arab)	Latino	Interfaith
Native American	Pakistani	Mid-Career Employees
Pacific Islander	Portuguese	Seasoned Professionals
Veterans	Russian	WAVE (Working in Virtual Environment)
Women	Turkish	Working Families (Parents/Caregivers)
	Vietnamese	

Although the number of affinity groups listed in each of the three categories is about equal, the actual number of groups supported by an organization from each of the three categories is not. There were a total of 495 individual affinity groups mentioned across the 66 organizations studied. The data shows that 57% of those groups fall into the legal category (n=285), 30% into the business category (n=147), and 13% (n=63) into the special interest category. This seems to suggest that the primary reason the majority of organizations have affinity groups is to serve a specific, protected class.

A further attempt was made to analyze the data by industry type and the geographic location of those firms that reported having affinity groups. This analysis was not useful because many firms fell into more than one industry category. For example, McKesson is categorized as a health care wholesaler, yet its technology solutions segment has sales of over \$3 billion and is No. 2 in the industry according to Fortune (<http://fortune.com/fortune500/mckesson-11/>). Also, McKesson's purchase of the German company Celesio, gives it a role in the generic drug market. General Electric is classified as a member of the diversified financial industry. Yet, it also manufactures jet engines, medical devices, and oil drilling equipment (<http://fortune.com/fortune500/general-electric-8/>). Similar issues were encountered when trying to categorize companies based on geographic location. For example, Proctor & Gamble is headquartered in Cincinnati, yet only 35% of its sales (2012) were from the U.S. (<http://www.valueline.com/Stocks/Highlight.aspx?id=9552#.WNkt5Ge-ZsQ>). Therefore, an analysis by geographic location is not included here.

## DISCUSSION

In light of prior studies, we were surprised to find that 34 firms did not have affinity groups listed on their website. Of course, it is possible that some organizations have affinity groups yet simply failed to mention them on their website. However, having affinity groups but not including them on the website seems unlikely given the emphasis firms supposedly place on workplace diversity and the important role of websites in recruiting. If, in fact, affinity groups help recruit members of under-represented or protected populations, one wonders why references to these affinity groups could not be found.

For those firms that, in fact, do not have affinity groups, we present three reasons for not having them. The first is that the organization sees them as having little value. It may feel that the benefits are overstated. . . . that support for these groups is due to political correctness rather than their benefits. They may also believe that the benefits typically attributed to affinity groups are actually a result of other actions taken by the firm or the Hawthorne effect. These firms may also feel that some of the benefits attributed to affinity groups such as using group members for marketing purposes and to provide housing and other support for out-of-country visitors can be accomplished in a more ad hoc, as-needed fashion.

The second reason for not having affinity groups may be that while the firm believes that these groups are valuable, it believes that they are no longer necessary since the goals of the groups have been incorporated into the firm's general policies and procedures. As a result of clear policies prohibiting discrimination, significant training explaining those policies, and strict enforcement of those policies, affinity groups, the majority of which serve protected classes and act as an affirmative defense against claims of discrimination, are no longer needed to provide an affirmative defense. Also, these firms may have a strong employee orientation that results in employees, regardless of background, feeling at home and embracing the firm's corporate culture. This orientation preempts the need for affinity groups.

The third reason is that these firms either have heard or have found that having these groups will not benefit the organization. These firms may have had affinity groups in the past but did not accrue the benefits that these groups can provide. This lack of results could be due to the failure to properly facilitate the group's activities or issues related to Social Identity Theory, including the perception of reverse discrimination. Not surprisingly, many firms may actually have affinity groups, but may not understand their role in the organization or how to get the most benefit from them. To minimize the number of times an executive says, "We tried them, and it was a disaster," affinity groups should incorporate SMART goals (specific, measurable, attainable, realistic and timely) to ensure that the group achieves a

meaningful corporate goal. SMART goals require that the group clearly show how it will help the business achieve its goals and more importantly how it will measure its progress.

Requiring charters to be renewed yearly with goal attainment as a required supporting document will help ensure that a group performs a meaningful function and is not just another example of a “follow the leader” mentality. As such, forming an affinity group to attract people whose roots are in India is a valid goal in an industry where there is a shortage of qualified workers and the most talented workers are from India. To ensure that the goal is being met, each hire from India should be asked about the extent to which the affinity group caused the person to accept the job offer. One could also develop SMART goals for affinity groups that help assimilate non-native employees, i.e., to help them learn the corporate culture and understand cultural differences that could lead to legal consequences. A simple pre-post knowledge quiz as well as the actual number of reports of discrimination generated by group members could help determine whether the affinity group is valuable. In this context, “increasing diversity” is not a SMART goal and can be hard to define in an organizational context (e.g., racial diversity, gender diversity, diversity in certain ranks, thought diversity, educational background diversity, etc.) and, as such lacks a clear definition to be classified as a SMART goal. To meet the SMART goal criteria, the purpose of the group should be specific as to the type of diversity that is being sought and whether the goal pertains to retention, applications, or hiring. Clearly, it should be measurable. In some cases, it is a simple task, e.g., to increase job applications or interviews from a targeted group. In other cases, it might be more difficult, e.g., increased productivity in a service situation where the employee has little control. To help ensure the continuation of the group, the goal should be attainable within a reasonable, designated time period. For example, if currently the percentage of applicants from the target group is 10%, the group’s goal should be attainable and not represent a stretch goal, e.g., increase applications to 30% versus a more reasonable figure. While 30% may be the ultimate goal, it may not be attainable within a reasonable time period.

The goal should be relevant. Here, relevance is a function the whether the firm believes that it is responsible just to stockholders or to a broader group of stakeholders. Those taking a stockholder orientation would want affinity groups to contribute to the firm’s bottom line. Those taking a stakeholder approach would argue that regardless of whether affinity groups contribute to profits, the mere presence of these groups shows support for diversity, an important societal goal. Last, a realistic time frame for goal attainment should be stated.

## **LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH**

One limitation is that our research focused only on the Fortune 100. It would be interesting to know whether smaller firms have affinity groups mentioned on their websites. Another limitation is the difficulty in categorizing groups without knowing more about the group. The Mercer study (“Employee Affinity Groups,” 2011) cited this problem, also. For example, the “early career employees/millennial” group was, in Table 3, categorized as an “other” group. Yet, if this group was used to help market to millennials, it could have been classified as a business group. Similarly, a “diversity” or “inclusion” group could be viewed as either serving a legal or business purpose. These groups may reduce the number of lawsuits or help retain employees.

## CONCLUSION

Given the importance of websites as a tool in attracting potential employees and conveying the firm's values, we find it surprising that 34 firms did not indicate their commitment to this diversity initiative on their website. We cannot help but wonder why these firms did not take the opportunity to show their commitment to diversity. For those firms that, in fact, do not have affinity groups (as opposed to merely not mentioning them on the website), it is possible that these firms believe that the discrimination that caused these groups to be formed has been addressed to the extent possible and therefore, there is nothing to be gained by having them. If they believe that there is nothing to be gained, then the potential costs such as conflict caused by social identity, may have driven the decision to not have affinity groups. It is also possible that some firms had them at one time but failed to give them adequate support. As such, the groups did not help achieve organizational goals which resulted in their abandonment. We believe that affinity groups would benefit from the adoption of SMART goals. By adopting SMART goals, the benefit of these groups would become clear and serve as a role model for other firms.

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