



Supporting employee resource groups

Evidence-based
guidance for employers



Employment and
Social Development Canada

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Développement social Canada

Canada

Supporting employee resource groups: Evidence-based guidance for employers

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01 Introduction

Note: Employee resource groups (ERGs) are formally recognized “voluntary, employee-led groups with a shared social identity” such as race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender, or disability, or based on a shared experience or interest.¹ ERGs vary but are typically formed to “contribute to employees’ careers, organizational effectiveness, and [Diversity, Equity and Inclusion] goals.”²

This guide is designed to help Canadian employers subject to employment equity requirements foster the development of and provide support for employee resource groups (ERGs) in their workplaces. Although ERGs are typically employee-driven initiatives, employers can be proactive in encouraging and supporting ERGs as part of their employment equity strategy.

Participation in ERGs is associated with numerous benefits for employees and employers, including:

- fostering connection, sense of belonging, and feelings of inclusion³
- opportunities for employee learning and growth⁴
- greater employee engagement⁵
- decreased attrition⁶
- opportunities for employees from smaller designated groups to provide feedback and be heard by the organization⁷
- increased opportunities for employees to engage with leadership, which can support career development and provide a platform for advocacy and workplace improvements⁸

ERGs and employee self-identification

Workplaces that have ERGs have **higher rates of employee self-identification** (self-ID), with some evidence suggesting that participation in ERGs can facilitate increased self-ID for some groups.⁹ Self-ID data can help employers better understand the needs of their workforce, support employment equity, and meet reporting requirements. Employers that take steps to encourage and support ERGs may increase rates of self-ID by signalling that they value employment equity, are willing to take action to support employees, and that it is safe for employees to disclose their identities. ERGs can also directly support self-ID data collection by providing a forum: (i) for employers to provide information and employees to discuss it; (ii) to engage with employees to understand barriers to providing self-ID data, and (iii) to reach out to potential “employee champions” who are interested in promoting self-ID data collection efforts among their peers.

02 Features of effective ERGs

Providing employees with the right structure, resources, and support to set up and run effective ERGs can unlock their value for your organization. Employees who perceive their ERG(s) as effective are more likely to feel included than employees who believed the groups were ineffective - a factor that can increase rates of employee self-ID and support employment equity more broadly.¹⁰

Effective ERGs typically have the following characteristics:

- a clear purpose and goals that are shared by group members and aligned with organizational strategy
- a formal structure, including roles, logistics, and proposed activities
- alignment with Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI) and business strategies (e.g., activities are linked to organizational outcomes)
- open lines of communication between the ERG and leadership, including departments or individuals responsible for implementing DEI or employment equity initiatives
- dedicated funding and/or other resources, and processes for accessing these
- measurement of outcomes related to the group's objectives
- buy-in and support from organizational leadership (e.g., formal recognition of the group's work and leaders)¹¹

Further reading for in-depth guidance on creating ERGs

Canadian Centre for Diversity and Inclusion / Centre canadien pour la diversité et l'inclusion. (2023). [Employee Resource Groups: Toolkit for creating and sustaining effective ERGs \(PDF, 1.5 MB\)](#).

03 Actions to support ERGs

This section provides guidance for employers and sample strategies they can use to support their employees in creating or maintaining ERGs.

Provide “top-down” support that enables employees to take a “bottom-up” approach to creating and running ERGs

ERGs are most effective when they are created and led by employees, and have the support of senior leaders within the organization.¹² Formal support from leadership can encourage ERGs by communicating a sense of psychological safety, letting employees know that it is safe to participate in ERGs, and by providing material support to employees wishing to start, participate in, or grow these groups.

- **Develop a formal ERG strategy as part of employment equity efforts.** Outlining how ERGs fit within the organization’s employment equity goals and strategy is an important exercise for leadership. It provides an opportunity to generate buy-in among leaders in advance of employee interest in ERGs, enabling consideration of how ERGs align with the organization’s mission, employment equity work, and business strategy.¹³
- **Outline a clear process for employees to follow if they are interested in creating an ERG and identify the individual(s) who will be responsible for liaising with interested employees.** The process should be simple and accessible. An example of a potential process could be:
 1. an employee or group of employees is interested in forming an ERG
 2. they approach HR to learn more about the process for forming an ERG and the resources they can expect
 3. they or the HR contacts email all staff or post to the company intranet to gauge interest in the group
 4. there is an initial meeting where interested employees discuss the goals and structure of the group
 5. the group is formalized

In section 5, we have included an example of a [“How to create an ERG”](#) guide to share with employees.

Designated individuals, typically in HR, can assist with any coordination or administrative needs and provide tactical support and oversight. They can meet with employees interested in starting ERGs and assist them with planning, navigating the internal process, and accessing key resources (e.g., for communications or events).¹⁴

Smaller employers may have less capacity to assign someone to coordinate ERGs, in which case another process should be developed to meet the organization’s needs - as long as the process is transparent and simple for employees to follow.

- **Use organization-wide channels to increase visibility of and communicate support for ERGs.** Senior leaders, particularly those who are willing to act as resources or allies, can signal their support for ERGs to encourage employees to consider starting groups.¹⁵ It can also reinforce support for existing ERGs. Support can be communicated in many ways, including:
 - » introducing or promoting policies and resources for groups and explicitly indicate support
 - » speaking on the importance of ERGs to the organization more generally
 - » working with ERGs to amplify or promote key messages using organization-wide channels, such as newsletters. For instance, when an ERG is first starting, leaders can assist with recruitment using internal communications
 - » providing formal recognition for ERGs
 - » collaborating to ensure that communications are consistent with the actual goals and activities of ERGs.¹⁶ The relationship between employees and leadership can become strained when there is a disconnect between the actual purpose, mission, and activities of ERGs and what leadership is communicating about these groups

Designate internal resources for the formation and support of ERGs, and promote these resources to employees

Internal resources can include both financial and non-financial supports, such as meeting rooms, access to technology equipment, administrative set-up (e.g., email, intranet), and other assistance.¹⁷

- **Promote policies, available supports and resources as part of regular business operations (e.g., providing information when onboarding new employees) and at timely moments.** For existing employees, make resources (and ERGs themselves) salient to potential members by promoting these in communications or programs that are geared toward groups or at key moments with these employees. For example, sharing information about an ERG for parents to employees returning from parental leave
- **Alleviate the burden of running ERGs by providing financial compensation to employees, or freeing up time to perform these tasks by formalizing them as part of their role.**¹⁸ Starting and facilitating an ERG often involves unpaid work, conducted on top of employees' existing workloads and working hours. This places an additional burden on some employees, introducing an informal cost to participating in ERGs, which may dampen such efforts. Employers can work with employees to alleviate this burden; for example, creating time for employees to do this by including ERG-related tasks as part of their role (in place of other work), offering financial compensation, and/or providing other forms of formal recognition

Support career development functions of ERGs, such as mentoring and skill development, by leveraging internal expertise and external networks

- **Employers can support career development goals by connecting ERGs to mentors and networking opportunities within and outside of the organization**¹⁹
- If you do not offer internal or external mentorship programs, consider reaching out to the ERGs and/or leadership for other employers in your sector or geographic area to enable career development through your ERG(s)

Help ERGs collect and access data

- **As part of the initial conversations between HR and ERG leaders, identify which data will need to be collected to monitor and understand how ERGs are functioning.** When drafting the ERG strategy and/or policies, determine how the organization will measure if these are successful and identify areas where additional support or alternative approaches may be needed
- **Assist ERGs with data collection to measure and track key metrics.** This may include setting up and distributing employee surveys or providing other data as appropriate (e.g., aggregate anonymous data on hiring or promotion). Similar to employers, ERGs may need data to understand the needs of members and potential members, measure outcomes, and get feedback on what is working well and where there may be room for improvement²⁰

04 Additional guidance for small and medium-sized employers

Smaller employers have several characteristics that can make it more difficult to set up ERGs compared to large employers, including:

- fewer resources available to fund and support ERGs, such as limited space
- smaller HR functions and/or fewer employees to manage the administration of ERGs
- fewer employees, which may make it challenging to
 - » generate enough interest to start an ERG
 - » have enough people who belong to a particular group or have shared experiences to start an ERG
 - » make ERGs available to all employees / employee groups who would like to start one (i.e., if some groups are more prevalent in a workplace)
 - » sustain existing ERGs due to fewer members
 - » generate buy-in from HR and leadership (e.g., due to resource costs or perceived benefits)

How can small and medium-sized employers support ERGs

Assess employee interest in ERGs to help employers support the most feasible groups based on group size and topic of interest

Relative to larger employers, the resource costs to operate ERGs are larger, which may mean they have to decide which ERGs to support. Employers should solicit employee interest in different types of groups to assist them with understanding the relative interest and size of potential ERGs so they can decide how to assign limited resources.

If there are existing ERGs, employers should re-assess employee interest in groups on a regular basis (e.g., annually) to ensure that groups reflect current workplace dynamics and interest. If such a system is implemented, employers should be transparent about how the process and how ERGs are selected.

However, employers should be cautious when using this approach as it could systematically exclude some employees or groups (i.e., if there are fewer members of a group or if members of that group are less willing to indicate they are interested in participating). Alternative engagement initiatives targeting designated groups too small to justify an ERG should be proactively offered to ensure all designated groups are equally engaged in the implementation of employment equity.

Provide low-cost ways for employees to organize and operate ERGs

Employers should first understand what ERGs are looking to do and then look for low-cost ways to support these activities. For instance, providing ERGs with resources to collaborate and/or organize via digital collaboration platforms, such as Slack or Teams. Encourage groups to focus on smaller scale activities, such as low-cost discussions, community service projects, guest talks, and social events.

If there is more than one ERG in the workplace, encourage groups to share resources and plan overlapping activities, where appropriate

Employers may wish to work with ERGs to coordinate activities to make the most of limited resources. One way to do this is through regular cross-ERG check-ins with ERG leadership to identify opportunities for overlapping events and shared usage of resources.

Network with other employers to identify shared opportunities to support ERGs

Employers can connect with organizations that do similar work or operate in the geographic area to gauge interest in sharing cross-organizational learnings and identify potential ways for ERGs to collaborate and/or enhance each other's operations. For instance, if another organization has ERGs for similar groups, employers could facilitate a meeting with leaders from both ERGs in which to identify opportunities for shared events. Employers could also send emails with events that ERG members from other workplaces are able to join.

05 Additional materials for employers

Example resource for employers

Below is an example resource that employers could adapt and circulate to help employees get started with creating an ERG:

How to create an employee resource group (ERG):

- If you are interested in forming an ERG, contact Jayne Example smith in HR (Jayne@employer.ca) to learn more about the process to create an ERG and various resources that we can offer
- Gauge employee interest in forming a group (e.g., you or someone from HR can email all staff or post to the company intranet to gauge interest in the group)
- Have an initial meeting where interested employees decide on the group's purpose, goals, and structure of the group
 - This might include the group's objective, proposed activities and programs, communication channels, and if any formal outcomes, such as metrics or measures for success, will be collected
- Determine desired budget and identify available organizational resources to meet these needs
- Meet with your HR contact person to formalize the group.
- Once the group is approved, recruit members and host the first meeting for members to align on the group's goals and activities.

Note: ERGs are created in many ways and do not have to follow these specific steps.

Further reading

In-depth guidance on creating ERGs: Canadian Centre for Diversity and Inclusion / Centre canadien pour la diversité et l'inclusion. (2023). [Employee Resource Groups: Toolkit for creating and sustaining effective ERGs \(PDF, 1.51 MB\)](#).

06 Footnotes

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