FOCUS ON Interfaith Employee Resource Groups
Interfaith Employee Resource Groups

Religious beliefs are diverse are reflected in the global workforce. Celebrating religious and spiritual diversity in the workplace can be a very powerful contributor to an inclusive workplace culture. Interfaith ERG’s are increasing in popularity, connecting people from diverse spiritual beliefs and backgrounds and increasing employee engagement.

Organizations considering Interfaith ERGs are looking to meet the growing and changing landscape of religions around the world. According to the Pew Research Center’s, “The Future of World Religions: Population Growth Projections, 2010-2050”:

- Globally, Islam will be the fastest growing religion in the next 3 decades. By 2050, the number of Muslims will nearly equal the number of Christians around the world.
- In the United States, Christians will decline from more than three-quarters of the population in 2010 to two-thirds in 2050, and Judaism will no longer be the largest non-Christian religion.
- The global Buddhist population will be about the same size it was in 2010.
- While Judaism will no longer be the largest religion next to Christianity, the Hindu and Jewish populations will be larger than they are today.

This report explains what an interfaith employee resource group (ERG) is and how it differs from other faith based ERG’s. There is a step by step breakdown of how to successfully start a faith-based ERG and best practices to model. Also, included are solutions to common challenges and consideration are offered.

**What does it mean to have an Interfaith ERG?**

In 2012, Pew Research noted that 84% of the US population affiliated religiously. This fact combined with increased religious conflicts around the world have increased attention and interest towards creating interfaith ERG’s. Best practices include creating and ensuring a safe work environment for all employees to support talent mobility, consistency of employee experiences across business locations and a consistent response to external events effecting employees. The considerations and approaches to wellness, safety and response to external events is also addressed in this report.

The Interfaith ERG (also called multi-faith or inter-belief/multi-belief ERGs) addresses the issues of employees and customers from all faiths as well as none. The term “the nones” refer to people who are atheist, agnostic, spiritual or not affiliated with a particular religious tradition). The Interfaith group’s overall mission and goals generally address interfaith issues and provide an organization with support around religious diversity and identity, broadly defined. Successful ERGs typically address talent development, marketing and sales development, organizational culture and awareness and community outreach activities and can include a range
of approaches. Activities, such as an educational panel, may be specific to one religious tradition or can include multiple beliefs.

Tanebaum, the global leader tackling religious bias in the workplace, offers these six tips for starting a faith-based employee resource group:

6 Tips for Starting a Successful Faith-based ERG

1. ** Decide which model is best for your company:** There are three main models for faith-based ERGs: faith-specific, interfaith, and interfaith network. Faith-specific ERGs are created around one particular tradition (ex: American Express has Christian, Jewish, and Muslim groups). Interfaith groups are not specific to any one tradition, but are created to recognize a wide array of affiliations (ex: Merck’s Interfaith Organization). Finally, in an interfaith network model, multiple faith-specific groups are under the umbrella of an interfaith body (ex: Ford Motor Company’s longstanding Interfaith Network). Consider your current ERG structure, the kind of group that has been requested, organizational culture and resources available when deciding which model is the best fit for your company.

2. **Solidify the business case:** The rules that apply for ERGs generally apply for faith-based ERGs as well, including having a solid business case. Talk to interested employees to find out how they think the group will benefit the company’s business strategy and the diversity and inclusion strategic focus. Perhaps the group can serve as an internal focus group on religious accommodations the company is considering (such as Quiet Rooms for prayer, meditation, and reflection), or aid the marketing or business development department in reaching different religious communities or global regions with strong religious cultures. There are many ways a faith-based ERG can positively impact the bottom line.

3. **Make sure it is inclusive:** No matter what model you choose, your faith-based ERG must be open to employees of all faiths and none. People who are atheist, agnostic, spiritual or not affiliated with a particular religious tradition are a part of the religious diversity landscape at your company, and must be considered in the creation of a faith-based ERG. Faith-specific ERGs (i.e. a Christian ERG) should also be open to employees from other faiths who are interested in learning more about their colleagues’ beliefs or in participating in an event the ERG is sponsoring, such as a volunteer event at a local soup kitchen. Another aspect of inclusion worth addressing is the relationship between LGBT inclusion and religion. If you have an existing LGBT ERG, consider asking that group to provide support and guidance in the establishment of the faith-based ERG. This will serve two purposes: the faith-based group will have a mentor group, and the general employee population will see that the two groups are united and working towards the same ultimate goal (inclusion) and are not in opposition.

4. **Create a communications strategy:** It may not be immediately clear to employees why the company is putting resources into a faith-based group. Some may feel immediately alienated, or even threatened by the prospect. Your communications strategy will be
crucial in conveying the business case, the purpose, and the inclusive nature of the group, while also emphasizing that participating in the group is optional.

5. **Seek out strong leaders**: Finding capable employees to take on leadership roles and bringing on an executive sponsor is a crucial part of the creation of any ERG. Finding leaders who are fully aligned with the group’s business case and the company’s values will help to alleviate concerns that employees and senior leaders might have about preferential treatment within the group. An executive sponsor who can be a champion for the group and speak to the inclusive nature of the ERG can also make a positive impact in how the group is viewed within the company.

6. **Generate interest through a launch event**: A launch event is a great way to attract members to a new group. The event can be an extension of your communications strategy and showcase the diversity within the group, as well as highlighting the ways in which the group plans to have a positive impact on the business. Having a senior leader (the executive sponsor or another interested party) at the event to give an endorsement can also demonstrate that the company is fully behind the group.

**Trends and Considerations:**

**Programming** - Interfaith Week is the first week in February and can be a demonstration of intersectionality and inclusion with other ERG groups. Content can help build awareness and increased dialogue to support employees and customers

**Organizational Policy** - Interfaith ERG’s are at the forefront for planning for prayer rooms or spaces that are inclusive and interfaith holiday/recognition

Quiet Rooms were first envisioned as “Prayer Rooms” to provide comfortable spaces for employees who were members of religions (e.g. Islam and Orthodox Judaism) that required daily prayer at certain times during the workday. However, the concept evolved to ensure that the practice did not appear to “endorse any particular religion or belief system” and offend non-religious employees and religious employees of other faiths. The name “Quiet Room” emphasizes that these non-denominational places for worship or reflection were open to all employees, including non-religious workers, who would benefit from the availability of a place for meditation or reflection. In addition, companies designed the room to suit the various needs of the members of their workforces and made the designs flexible so they could be changed to accommodate new employees’ needs over time.

Ford Motor Company introduced “meditation rooms” as early as 2001. The company began with two meditation rooms in Dearborn, Michigan, one in England, and another in Germany.

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According to Rob Matras, Diversity and Work life Coordinator for Ford’s product development organization when the practice was first introduced, a meditation room was “for individuals or groups to utilize for meditation, prayer, contemplative thought or a mental break to reduce stress. It's not a break room. It's not for a lunch break. It is a quiet space.”

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A Process for Designing and Launching “Quiet Rooms”

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ERG’s Play an Important Role in Faith–Driven External Forces

ERG’s can play an important role in mitigating risks centered around faith-driven external forces. For example, the Muslim ban and concern for Islamophobia as a global concern in

St. Ethelburga’s Centre for Reconciliation and Peace, Recovering the calm: Best practice guide to prayer rooms and quiet space at work” (last accessed February 20, 2015)
January 2017 triggered greater interest in best practices and initiated interest from organizations and employees to ensure all employees are supported.

Tannenbaum Center for Religious Understanding and a DBP Solutions @Partner recommends the following planning. Interfaith ERG’s are often at the forefront of problem solving and messaging organizational responses both internally and externally.

**Internal considerations**

- Laying the ground work/purposeful planning
- Knowing employees
- Understanding/considering business implications of policy platform
- Impact of global elections
- Impact of local/state elections
- Wellness resources
- Recommitment to the ERG and employees
- D&I re-commitment, support and focus centered around religious diversity
- Employee safety/wellbeing – re-evaluate the needs of key employee populations
- Making space for difficult conversations

**External considerations**

- Public statements
- Sharing internal communications
- Signing amicus briefs
- Pledging decisions (Starbucks and Lyft)

**Other considerations**

- Deciding on what to respond to. What? Which issue is a priority?
- Potential business impact
- Support/Opposition to political administrations

**Examples of corporate actions companies have taken to dispel Islamophobia**

1. Create ongoing opportunities to combat stereotypes and raise the profile of Muslims in your company/industry.
   a. Feature Muslim senior leaders in internal communications/spotlights.
   b. Create opportunities for employees to volunteer with local Muslim nonprofits.

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2. Send internal communications condemning acts of violence/hate crimes against Muslims in the local community.

3. Remind your workforce of your commitment to a diverse and inclusive workforce of people from all backgrounds, including religious and non-religious beliefs, and of the expectation that all colleagues will be treated in a respectful manner.

4. Create/designate space within the office that can be utilized by those who engage in daily prayer (or meditation/ reflection). This space should be open to employees of all faiths and none. 
   a. Consider making additional space available during the month of Ramadan, when the need may increase.

5. Make a variety of Halal food options available in the cafeteria and at company-sponsored events
   a. Keep in mind that these food options should also be kept apart from non-Halal food to avoid cross contamination.

6. Implement an inclusive dress code that does not prohibit hijabs and other kinds of headgear worn for religious purposes. If a certain dress code is necessary for safety or hygiene standards (i.e. a prohibition on facial hair or long sleeves in a health care workplace), clearly communicate why this is a necessary policy, thereby clarifying that it is not based on discrimination, and work with employees to find accommodations wherever possible.

7. Acknowledge and/or celebrate Muslim holidays, such as:
   a. Remind appropriate stakeholders, including managers and HR, when holidays and observances are coming up so that they can be proactive in arranging any necessary accommodations.
   b. Send company-wide notices about upcoming holidays and observances throughout the year so that employees can greet Muslim colleagues and clients appropriately.

**Best Practices**

**Interfaith ERG’s**

**Merk & Co- Merck Interfaith Organization EBRG (MIO)**

Merk’s interfaith organization EBRG has worked to bring greater awareness to the understanding that faith, religion and spirituality are intrinsically linked to culture. They are fostering inclusion among employees from all walks of faith – including those who are agnostic and those who may be members of other Merck EBRGs; and have developed workplace initiatives and promoting partnerships with other EBRGs – from lunch ‘n learns and panel discussions to community service events - to support the employee leadership development and the greater community. Merck understands that MIO supports its mission of saving and improving lives by sharing insights on how patient’s religious commitments can impact medical adherence and enhanced health care outcomes.
Building Awareness and Promoting Partnerships: MIO has collaborated with Merck League of Employees of African Descent (LEAD) EBRG in the “Role of Faith” in Black History Webinar. This was a first-ever collaboration between the Interfaith and LEAD EBRGs to help educate and build awareness of the linkage between faith and the Black culture from times of slavery through the civil rights movement, as well as highlight the diversity in faith in the Black community. This was a powerful webinar that was educational, informative and helped foster greater collaboration between both EBRGs; it was extremely well received and attended by more than 100 employees.

Learning from Other Merck EBRGs on Best Practices to Support Career Advancement of MIO Members: MIO has been successful in developing leadership forums for members to advance in their career – thereby, helping them to become more successful in their roles on teams and driving business performance. This is an important HR and business leader goal.

MIO also participated in the first-ever Merck Global Diversity & Inclusion Month (September, 2016) where it hosted a panel discussion on how faith can influence Merck employees, customers and patients. Approximately 200 colleagues from around the world joined in the conversation.

- Fostering Inclusion – MIO leverages best practices to positively impact employee productivity in the workplace using faith as the foundation;
- Honoring Holiday Celebrations – recognizing all major religious holidays to build awareness and foster understanding among employees of the many different religions around the world, as well as the common humanity of faith that unifies us.
- Providing a Quiet Room for Prayer, Reflection - offering choices when employees want to participate in prayer during work or find time to practice “mindfulness.”
- Creating Employee Engagement – Merk realized they do not park their faith at the door, but rather they want to bring their whole selves to work — faith.

Being able to bring one’s whole self to work from a faith perspective is resulting in greater employee engagement. Attendance at lunch ‘n learns is robust and new chapters have been formed in the U.S. and most recently in the Gulf Region, Dubai (2017 new chapter opening). Global chapter membership for the MIO is now estimated at 15% of all members.

Ford Interfaith Network (FIN)

The mission of the Ford Interfaith Network is to “assist the company in becoming a worldwide corporate leader in promoting religious tolerance, corporate integrity, and human dignity. They strive to act in accordance with their beliefs and out of love for human beings and all of creation, promoting understanding and respect for the various faiths. The Ford Interfaith Network was created in 2000 as an umbrella group to connect the informal religion specific groups that had formed across Ford’s locations.

The Ford Interfaith Network operates to bring together the smaller religion-specific groups for larger initiatives that focus on similarities as opposed to differences. Such a model may be considered a better practice for companies going through transition or growth. For example, if employees have already formed informal religious groups (such as Bible study groups or religious community outreach groups), creating an Interfaith Network can be a way to formalize
the groups and more efficiently supervise their activities. In addition, Interfaith Networks provide an avenue for communication and collaboration among groups, providing support and resources. Companies that are experiencing a period of growth may find it difficult to provide executive leadership support to a growing number of sanctioned religion-specific ERGs.

**Accenture Interfaith ERG**

Under the banner of “Building Bridges” the Accenture North America Interfaith ERG led the charge, in partnership with the African American, LGBTQ, Women’s, Military and Faith based ERGs, to establish various channels and forums to create open dialogue with leadership.

By bringing together close to 900 employees, three consecutive forums and over a period of three month, the ERG leadership (supported by its membership) was successful in influencing a cross section of the C-Suite (including North America CEO, Global Legal, Global HR, and Global Inclusion and Diversity) to engage and escalate across the greatest areas of concern. The various, diverse viewpoints across varying levels and roles was welcomed by top company leadership as an effective approach to elevate leadership messaging and take relevant actions, while creating an open, transparent feedback loop.

**Faith Based/Religious Specific ERG’s**

**American Express Religion-Specific ERG’s**

DBP Member, American Express, sets an excellent model for supporting religion-specific ERGs. The company’s faith-based ERGs, which include:

Jewish Employee Network (CHAI), from the Hebrew word meaning “life,” hosts educational and community oriented events to foster awareness of Jewish culture. It serves as a resource and support network for members and strives to enhance overall diversity and inclusion in the workplace.

Muslim Employee Network (PEACE) fosters an environment of awareness, understanding and education through lunch and learns, informational booths and participation in community activities to counter the stereotypes and misinformation surrounding Islam and Muslims.

Christian Employee Network (SALT) serves as a resource group for the Christian employee community. Its members strive to make a positive difference in the workplace by demonstrating a commitment to the values and leadership principles set forth by the company. SALT is open to all denominations.

These networks help American Express employees bridge the spiritual and practical aspects of life, learning and development. Like all of American Express’ 16 ERGs, its faith-based networks

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are highly regarded and their expertise is sought when ethnic and cultural events are planned, recruitment initiatives to advance and retain diverse groups are launched and insight is needed to better market to multicultural communities.

Religion-specific ERGs can be a very useful model for fostering a sense of community among diverse employees and helping solve real business challenges. For example, American Express has leveraged the expertise and diverse insights from their religion specific ERGs for product development and marketing initiatives. In recent years, the company collaborated with these ERGs to brainstorm innovative ways to celebrate diverse holidays and traditions. As a result of this collaboration, American Express introduced new gift cards to celebrate cultural holidays, such as Diwali and Chanukah.

**Dell- Faith Employee Circle**

The vision of the Faith Employee Circle (EMC) is to serve as a network and resource group to the faith-honoring employee community at EMC. Their commitment is to be inclusive of all employees, and align to EMC core values while making a positive impact in the workplace and our communities.

**Challenges and Considerations**

The Interfaith ERG could be considered a better practice for large companies of 1,000 employees or more, especially if chapters of such a group will be formed across several office locations. In very large companies, it may be more difficult to manage the business goals of several religion-specific groups. Furthermore, given the diversity of belief and practice across the globe, large companies could be challenged with the number of employees wishing to form separately operating religion-specific ERGs.

- Promoting religious beliefs
  - Many of our companies are committed to creating an environment where employees can bring their whole selves to work. That includes the employee who does not hold the popular opinion. ERGs are a great way to show that the company acknowledges and values the different identities employees bring to the office. You probably have an LGBT ERG, but what about an interfaith one? A faith-based ERG should not be formed in opposition to an LGBT ERG, we know many companies that have both LGBT and faith-based ERGs, both with strong business cases, and formed not against any group of people but for those who share a particular identity, want to learn more about that identity, or who want to be an ally for a group of people. Employees whose religious beliefs are central to their identities will likely benefit from having a space to appropriately express their beliefs. It is also a great opportunity to challenge stereotypes about religious people that may exist within your company. Allowing a faith-based group to form, in line with the values and policies of your company, including LGBT
inclusion, allows other employees to see that “religious” is not synonymous with “bigoted.”

- Theological/ideological battles with employees
  - People can believe whatever they want to, and they will. Some employees will disagree with lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) inclusion efforts - such as the establishment of a Pride ERG chapter in their location, or a new commercial targeted towards LGBT customers -- based on their religious beliefs, and there isn’t much you can do about that. Instead of asking them to show you what part of the sacred text they’re referencing that leads them to believe that same-sex relationships are wrong, explain the company’s diversity and inclusion strategy and the business reasons for investing in LGBT inclusion. Then, if an employee decides to air their opinions in a way that is disrespectful or contributes to an unwelcoming, or even hostile work environment, focus on the disrespect or the hostility rather than the theological validity of the belief. It’s not your job to change anyone’s mind about LGBT inclusion, but it is your job to create a safe and respectful work environment for all employees.

**Solutions**

- Do not promote religious beliefs, but do create space for appropriate expression.
- Sanctioning one interfaith group allows executives to engage in the topic efficiently and ensure that the group is delivering on its business goals.
- Diversity of religious practice at the leadership level is very important when considering the formation of such an interfaith group.
- Leadership should be comprised of individuals from majority and minority faiths, and should also include representation from employees who do not affiliate with a specific religious tradition.

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