

ENGAGING EMPLOYEE RESOURCE GROUPS

What are employee resource groups, and how can the arts community partner with them as a primer to developing deeper, more strategic, and longer lasting relationships with businesses? This tool-kit outlines the basic tenets of employee resources and provides tips and examples for collaborative programming.

WHAT ARE EMPLOYEE RESOURCE GROUPS?

Employee resource groups (ERGs), also known as affinity groups, are networks of employees within a business that come together based on personal characteristics, interests, or experiences. The groups foster diversity, boost employee engagement, and serve as a resource for the company, and can typically be contacted through the Human Resources department. Some of the most common ERGs are centered around:

- People with disabilities
- Military veterans
- LGBT issues
- Women
- Cultural diversity
- Religious affiliations
- Generations (i.e., millennials, baby boomers)

AS ERGs HAVE GROWN MORE COMMONPLACE IN LARGE CORPORATIONS, THEIR SERVICE TO THEIR COMPANIES AND THEIR COMMUNITIES HAS ALSO GROWN.

They have begun to step outside of the office and offer community service and take advantage of volunteer opportunities. However, many arts organizations are unaware of the existence of ERGs or how to engage with them, and they are largely untapped resources for fostering arts and business partnerships.

WHAT ARE THE PURPOSES OF ERGs?

ERGs exist to serve a combination of internal and external issues, which vary slightly from company to company. Their activities and strategies are to:

- Support employee recruitment efforts
- Craft a positive corporate image
- Advance strategic goals
- Offer employee teambuilding, networking opportunities, and mentorship
- Cultivate understanding amongst employees of different backgrounds and experiences
- Develop a more engaged office culture
- Boost employee morale and develop a strong workplace
- Make a difference in the community

WHY ARE THE ARTS USEFUL FOR ERGs?

ERGs and arts partnerships, while not new, are not being designed and implemented as often as they could be. For many companies without an official policy for working with the arts, they tend to be one-off collaborations.

THROUGH ERGs, THERE IS A HUGE OPPORTUNITY TO BUILD LASTING, MUTUALLY BENEFICIAL RELATIONSHIPS.

Before these relationships can be formed, you must communicate to the organizers of ERGs what the value of the arts are to the strategic goals of the groups. The arts can benefit the goals of the ERGs in the following ways:

Support Employee Recruitment Efforts

- Oftentimes, ERGs are used as a recruiting tool, as a way of encouraging more diversity, and attracting potential employees who share the beliefs of the company.
 - **Example:** For networking or recruitment events at a company, offer your arts space as a location to hold the event. For example, a community arts space putting on a show of work by female artists could invite a women's interests ERG to hold a recruitment or networking event in the space for young, female business employees. It would serve the dual purpose of bringing new people in your doors, and will showcase the business and its employees as making the arts, creativity, and innovation a priority, which is often appealing to prospective employees.

Craft a Positive Corporate Image

- Give companies opportunities to engage their employees through the arts, but also to show the local community that they're doing so. You can help the company build its brand by using employees as representatives.
- **Example:** Invite a disabilities ERG to be volunteer ushers/backstage assistants at a theater's production that is designed specifically for people with autism or the hearing impaired. The theater can proudly share the company's commitment to the arts and access for those with disabilities through an announcement during the show or via a video/blog series after the event.

Advance Strategic Goals

- While many companies see the value of the arts, the goal first and foremost is to push strategic goals for a stronger bottom line.

INSTEAD OF PRESENTING “ART FOR ART’S SAKE”, TIE SUGGESTED COLLABORATIONS WITH THE ADVANCEMENT OF THOSE STRATEGIES IN MIND.

- **Example:** For law firms and other companies that deal with clients, an important part of the business is cultivating those relationships. Provide an opportunity for members of ERGs to bring potential or existing clients to an opening night performance of a theater production or a behind-the-scenes look at a community art studio.

Offer Employee Teambuilding, Networking Opportunities, and Mentorship

- While there is a natural volunteer component to ERGs, they also provide tremendous opportunity for leadership building, networking, and mentorship opportunities for employees who identify with the ERG.
- **Example:** Invite a veterans group to a lecture at a museum on an exhibition of veteran art throughout the past 100 years, as well as a discussion and lecture on how the arts can provide relief for veterans struggling with issues such as PTSD. Provide the opportunity for a lively, open, and stimulating discussion that will challenge their perceived notions and encourage them to think outside the box.

WHILE YOU CAN HELP BUILD A HOUSE OR WORK AT A SOUP KITCHEN AND GIVE BACK TO THE COMMUNITY, OFTEN TIMES IT'S THE ARTS EXPERIENCES THAT BRING MORE CULTURAL AWARENESS AND BUILD LEADERSHIP AND MOTIVATION IN A PERSON. THE ARTS HAVE A DIFFERENT KIND OF IMPACT THAT CAN'T BE GIVEN BY TRADITIONAL FORMS OF VOLUNTEERING.

Cultivate Understanding Amongst Employees of Different Backgrounds and Experiences

- While ERGs by design are built around bringing together people who share common interests and identities, they also present the opportunity to open the door to embracing diversity when they collaborate or join together.
 - **Example:** During Black History Month, invite an African American group and a collection of other ERGs at the company to accompany the group to a theater performing a play on Martin Luther King, Jr., as well as hear the director or the actors give a lecture to gain an understanding of the history and the lingering effects of the Civil Rights Movement.

Develop a More Engaged Office Culture

- In order to be fully engaged, an employee needs to feel that what they do is meaningful, that they work as part of a team, and that their opinions and skills are valued by the people around them.

USING THE ARTS, THROUGH VARIOUS INTERNAL AND EXTERNAL ACTIVITIES, CAN HELP TO MORE ACTIVELY ENGAGE THOSE IN THE WORKPLACE, STRENGTHENING THE WORK OF THE COMPANY.

- **Example:** Often, in addition to providing opportunities for individual ERGs, companies wish to encourage the various interest groups to collaborate in order to foster an appreciation of diversity and the differences of others. Work with the company and an artist to develop an arts-based curriculum that teaches employees how to work together and appreciate one another's skills. The arts are a fantastic vehicle for team-building, and can include poetry, dance, painting, or any other art form. This can be especially effective for groups that span multiple offices in the state or country.

Boost Employee Morale and Develop a Strong Workplace

- It's important for companies to show that they value their employees, both to increase their effectiveness and cultivate and retain good workers. Providing tickets or free experiences to arts events not only communicates that a business wants to reward employees, but also helps to foster appreciation for the local arts community.
- **Example:** Work with an LGBT group to showcase an exhibition of employee artwork that celebrates LGBT History Month, whether it's a painting, poetry recitation, performance, or piece of pottery. Employees can be involved with the creation of the work or the curation and set-up of the exhibition, and everyone from the company would be encouraged to attend an opening reception to learn about and celebrate the creativity and diversity of co-workers.

Make a Difference in the Community

- Many companies have specific CSR goals and are interested in offering opportunities for their employees to advance those issues in their local community.

CONSIDER PARTNERING WITH ANOTHER PROGRAM OR NONPROFIT FOCUSED ON ANOTHER SOCIAL ISSUE – HUNGER, THE ENVIRONMENT, DISADVANTAGED YOUTH – TO PROVIDE A CHANCE FOR A COMPANY TO BECOME INVOLVED IN THE ARTS WHILE ADDRESSING THE STATED FOCUS OF ITS CSR GOALS.

- Example: Partner with a religion-based ERG to design and paint a mural in the community with a group of underserved children from a church, temple, mosque, or similar organization.

DOS AND DON'TS FOR ENGAGING ERGs

- **Do listen.**

Talk to the corporate or ERG representatives about their goals and needs.

- **Do your research.**

It's important to know the CSR goals of the corporation. With a clear understanding of the corporation's strategies, you can be prepared to frame your proposal and approach in the most effective and beneficial way for both your organization and the business. On the flip side, other ERGs are not affiliated with the broader CSR goals and may be open to other opportunities, so it's important to do your research and come prepared.

- **Do have multi-pronged opportunities.**

Think beyond a marketing opportunity for the business. Offer both volunteerism and employee engagement opportunities as part of the partnership.

- **Do come with ideas.**

Be able to explain ways in which the business and its employees can benefit from the partnership.

- **Do engage at specific and strategic times.**

Plan engagement opportunities for specific holidays or awareness months throughout the year focused on diversity.

- **Don't shy away from new media.**

Recognize new media as a valuable resource that will bring you closer to a valuable group: millennials, which are a large part of the makeup of ERGs. Keeping in mind the younger demographic of ERGs, work with businesses to engage ERGs via social media.

- **Don't miss opportunities for further engagement.**

Don't let an ERG partnership be a one-off experience. Continually work to strengthen the relationship and make it long lasting.

- **Don't ask for support without offering opportunities.**

Companies want to engage with the arts beyond monetary support. Think about what the arts bring to the business, not just what the business brings to the arts.



HOW DO YOU CONNECT WITH ERGs?

Now that you've done your research, crafted your message and idea, and tailored it to the needs of the company, you've got to make contact and propose the plan. The department/employee to contact about partnering with ERGs will vary from company to company, though it is most likely overseen by the Human Resources or Corporate Social Responsibility department. Sometimes it's tricky to know where to start because companies don't often advertise the contact information, or even that they have ERGs at all. So where should you start? Here are some tips:

- The website is an obvious first place to start. Larger companies are more likely to showcase their ERGs, though often it will just be a list of the groups. If you can't find any explicit information about ERGs, try reaching out to someone in either the Human Resources or Corporate Social Responsibility department.
- If there is no contact information for ERGs on the website, see if you or anyone you work with knows anyone at the company who can point you in the right direction.
- Ask your board members in the business community what department is likely to oversee ERGs and ask if they have any contacts who can direct you to the right person.

More Americans for the Arts Resources

It is important to remember that the ideas laid out in this tool-kit are only the tip of the iceberg – we encourage you to visit [The pARTnership Movement](#) for more ideas, inspiration, and resources to assist you in forming relationships and programs with the private sector.

- Download the [8 reasons to partner with the arts](#), a powerful advocacy piece for encouraging businesses to support the arts.
- To learn more about examples of businesses who have successfully partnered with the arts to recruit and retain talent, read [the first in a series of 8 pARTnership Movement essays](#) based on the 8 reasons to partner with the arts.
- To learn more about examples of businesses that have successfully used the arts to build their brands and increase market share, read the second pARTnership Movement essay on [Putting Your Brand in the Spotlight](#).
- To learn more about [using the arts to foster critical thinking](#), read the third pARTnership Movement essay on helping employees stimulate the critical thinking needed to advance business goals by partnering with the arts.
- Learn more about engaging employees through the arts, starting arts-based training programs, or creating a Business Volunteers for the Arts® program in our [other pARTnership Movement tool-kits](#).
- Contact the Private Sector Initiatives Department at Americans for the Arts at privatesector@artsusa.org.

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