

# Networks that can damage women's careers

By Alison Maitland

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The following comments about corporate women's networks should set alarm bells ringing with CEOs and HR directors. One employee says of her organisation's network: "Unfortunately there are good initiatives now and then to build it up, but it is not sustainable, it doesn't seem to get the attention it needs to have." Another says: "I don't see any successes since there is no investment." A third describes her network's impact as "potentially enormous, but actually irrelevant".

Women's networks - also known as affinity or employee resource groups - are typically viewed by businesses as an essential pillar of their efforts to increase the number of women in leadership roles. But new research\* shows that networks frequently fail to make headway, leading to frustration and disengagement among female employees.

It's not that networks are worthless per se. They can be very successful - but only if they are supported by serious investment and commitment from the business.

The main problems identified by the international survey, carried out by consultants Veronika Hucke and Lisa Kepinski, are: a lack of funding, a lack of recognition for those who lead networks, a lack of clear objectives tied to business strategy, and a lack of measurement of whether networks actually achieve their declared goal of women's advancement. As a result, many networks start with high expectations and produce poor outcomes.

**The majority of networks represented in the survey share the problems associated with "women's work"**

Hucke and Kepinski, who were previously the global heads of diversity & inclusion at Philips and AXA respectively, say the majority of networks represented in the survey share the problems associated with "women's work": they are invisible, underpaid, under-resourced and under-valued. The network

“becomes an example of what it is supposedly trying to rectify in the organization, which limits its ability to drive change”.

Their report, “A Fresh Look at Women Networks”, investigates the unspoken reality that, while networks continue to be touted as a “must-have” for gender inclusion, numerous women who are responsible for, or take part in, them, privately bemoan the experience, explains Kepinski.

The online survey in four languages received over 1,700 responses from 58 countries, the vast majority from women. They included heads, sponsors, members and non-members of networks, and HR and D&I professionals. It shows that:

- Organisational expectations, resources and metrics are generally not aligned, resulting in “unobtainable lofty ambitions” for increased engagement and talent attraction and retention
- Only one in three respondents say their network is seen as “actively used to support the business” or as “part of our culture”
- Fewer than one in three members would recommend their network to others
- Women are investing large amounts of time running networks for worthy reasons, but over half are receiving no recognition, and 87% say network activities are not part of their appraisals
- Network leaders who are not recognised, and members who don’t feel good about their network, have lower engagement scores

It seems likely, the authors say, that the considerable time invested by women in activities that are not recognized by the company, together with lower engagement, has a negative impact on women’s advancement.

The mismatch between goals and funding is starkly illustrated by this finding: about half of the networks that say learning and development is an important part of their agenda have a monthly budget of less than €2 per participant.

## Networks should be business initiatives, not social outreach

“It is remarkable that so many companies and networks don’t meet basic requirements that actually are common sense,” says Hucke. “A lot of networks apparently just get started and ‘hope for the best’. For the first time, our

research demonstrates that there can be a hefty cost attached to that approach.”

It’s also clear to me that the fundamental problem with many networks is that they encourage - or even abandon - women to tackle the issues related to male-designed cultures on their own. This is the wrong way round. It is businesses, and their mainly male leaders, who should ensure that the female talent in which they are investing fulfils its potential – in collaboration with the women concerned. Networks should be business initiatives, not social outreach. Perhaps it is not surprising that some find themselves dismissed as the “coffee club” or “knitting circle”.

What do successful networks do that is different? Like the authors, I have encountered some of these and found them inspiring. They are business driven and ensure that women meet senior leaders in the organisation. Network organisers are invited to provide input to the executive management. Their roles are seen as career enhancing. These networks connect women across the company for greater influence and support of women moving up behind them. They are well funded and track progress against targets for improved outcomes for women on things like pay, retention and promotion. Some provide vital insights into new products and services by enlisting the views of female clients.

Given the researchers’ stark findings on the reality in many networks, what do they think women and organisations should do? Hucke says: “Our advice to both – organisations and women – is to check what you are letting yourself into and take the necessary steps to make sure that the experience lives up to expectations.”

I’ve often argued in this column that initiatives like these will only work if they are part of a broader culture change in the organisation, a point that the authors also underline. “We hope the results will spark a fresh discussion on women networks for the benefit of women, men, and the companies where they work,” says Kepinski. I’m sure they will.

\**A Fresh Look at Women Networks* can be downloaded from the authors’ websites: [www.di-strategy.com](http://www.di-strategy.com) and [www.inclusion-institute.com](http://www.inclusion-institute.com)

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