Diversity networks in organisations: are they really (net)working for equality?

In recent years, the use of diversity networks in organisations has increased tremendously. Diversity networks, also referred to as 'employee resource groups' or 'affinity networks', are initiated to inform, support and advance employees with similar social identities. In many organisations, diversity networks are part of a larger diversity management agenda and an increasingly popular practice to promote equality, diversity and inclusion in the workplace.
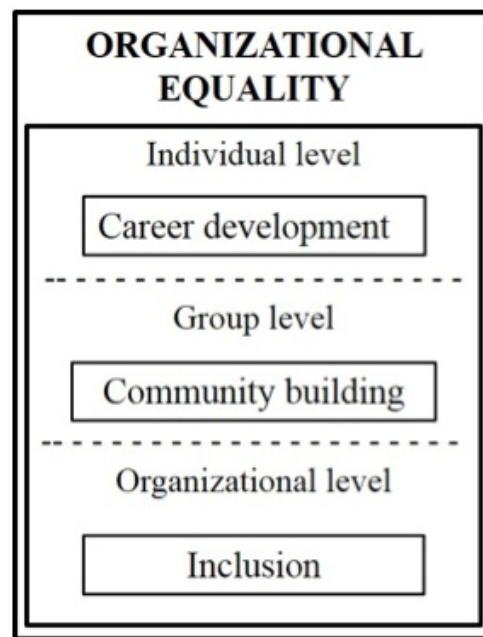
The popularity of these groups in organisations is based on the widespread idea that involvement in networks presents an important career management strategy. Ample academic studies have shown that successful networking is associated with positive career outcomes and increased social support. Based on the beneficial effects of networks in general, diversity networks would present a strategy for advancing the positions of historically excluded social groups in organisations. Emanating from the US, the first such networks focused on the social inclusion and numerical representation in senior ranks of women and ethnic minorities. Currently, diversity networks exist for a much wider range of employee groups, focusing for instance on sexualities, disabilities, religion, and age.

Despite their proliferation in organisations, it remains questionable how these networks are functioning and whether they actually help to further equality. Yet, the prevalent idea is that they are an invaluable instrument for organisations. There is little dispute that they help increase the (career) opportunities of women and other historically excluded groups. Organisations uncritically adopt them for various employee groups as if 'one size fits all' and possible tensions, conflicts and contradictions are overlooked.

We challenge this celebratory rhetoric of diversity networks by taking into account different levels of equality in organisations. We not only focus on numerical outcomes in terms of career development, but also on more structural organisational change and how diversity networks possibly challenge the underlying mechanisms that cause inequality in organisations. In doing so, our study sheds new light on how different diversity networks either help or hinder equality.

We focus on the key figures of five different diversity networks: the board members of a women's network, an ethnic minority network, an LGBT network, a disability network and a young employee network. As the de facto leaders of their group, network board members play a crucial role in defining goals, making strategic decisions, and organising activities for members. We explored the contribution of diversity networks to organisational equality on three main levels: network members individually, members as a group, and the organisation as a whole (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Three-level framework of organisational equality

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ORGANIZATIONAL
     EQUALITY

   Individual level

  Career development
- - - - - - - - - - - -
     Group level

  Community building
- - - - - - - - - - - -
  Organizational level

      Inclusion
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Individual level

The contribution of diversity networks to the individual level of equality pertains to the career development of each member. Resonating with the idea of networks as an important career management strategy, board members emphasise that diversity networks provide people with useful tools for their career advancement. Especially the board members of the women's network see the networks as a way to stimulate ambitious women to take responsibility for their professional career success.

With its activities, the women's network strives to empower their members professionally and encourage them to become as strategic and assertive as men if they want to be successful. In doing so, career development is seen as an individual choice and people are made individually responsible for their careers. Although this may benefit the career development of some, as long as the hegemonic male standard ways of doing are taken for granted, organisational barriers that impede upward mobility remain invisible. This limits the contribution of diversity networks to equality on the individual level.

Group level

Here the contribution of diversity networks lies in community building between employees with similar social identities. The networks create opportunities for people to meet and discuss issues related to inequality freely within the safe confines of the group. Community building is particularly valued by the board members of the ethnic minority network, the LGBT network and the disability network, as they may be excluded in work environments dominated by white, heterosexual and able-bodied colleagues.

However, we observe a clear tension as these board members fear stigmatisation and disadvantage when they are perceived as exclusive communities for ethnic minority, LGBT or disabled employees only. This makes diversity networks reluctant to emphasise difference too much, choosing to conform to the majority culture rather than challenging the lower status of minority employees. When doing so, the idea of a safe space is lost and the contribution of the networks to group level equality is counteracted.

Organisational level

The contribution of diversity networks at this level pertains to inclusion. This entails addressing organisational norms, policies and practices in order to change them to be more inclusive to all employees. For example, diversity networks seek to involve management to draw their attention to the organisational culture and processes that cause organisational inequalities. The board members of the disability network are the most vocal about inclusion and structural change as they challenge restrictive work practices and the narrow notion of a career. They argue how the organisation should adapt to employees with a disability, rather than the other way around. The board members call for changes in both mindset and practices in order to include employees with disabilities as full organisational members.

Our analysis revealed how network board members legitimise the existence and functioning of their networks, how they address organisational equality and how this varies across different networks. The contribution of diversity networks to equality is not without contradictions. They can simultaneously produce and counteract equality on the individual, group and organisational level. Moreover, it is not self-evident that they contribute to equality on all levels.

Overall, diversity networks tend to focus primarily on individual career development and members' community building. While these represent the individual and group levels of equality and are valuable in their own right, the organisational level of inclusion remains underplayed. This has profound implications for the contribution that these networks can possibly make to organisational equality in the long run.

As long as structural inequalities in organisations go unchallenged, and there are no calls for substantial change of norms, processes and practices that reproduce those inequalities, the contribution of diversity networks to equality remains limited. In order to ensure their full equality potential, diversity networks should promote the value of a wide array of individual career trajectories and unique contributions, advocate minority cultures to be legitimate and visible and challenge inequalities in organisational processes.

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Notes:

- *This blog post is based on the authors' paper Diversity Networks: Networking for Equality?, British Journal of Management (2018).*
- *The post gives the views of its authors, not the position of the institutions they represent, LSE Business Review or the London School of Economics.*
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