

First Annual Employee Resource Network Leadership Summit

ERNs cited as critical for long-term business growth

Executives from high-ranking U.S. corporations gathered at the Mattel Leadership Development Center in El Segundo, Ca., in February for the first annual Employee Resource Network Leadership Summit. The summit, sponsored by Corning, Mattel and eePulse and run by Marshall's Center for Effective Organizations (CEO), exposed participants to new ideas and processes used by successful employee resource networks (ERNs) and promoted shared learning through presentations, panel discussions and workshops.

Most companies with more than 1,500 employees have ERNs or "affinity" groups, which historically were based among minority or underrepresented groups within a company around their similar circumstances and common goals. What's new, according to Theresa Welbourne, a research professor at CEO, is how companies are utilizing such groups.

"Employee resource groups are evolving. Originally used for awareness, recruitment and career development, members today are actively involved in product development, marketing campaign planning and reaching out to specific customer segments," said Welbourne. "In today's economic climate, where tapping into new customers is key to success, the work of ERG members is being recognized as critical for long-term business viability and growth."

Topics during the summit included developing ERN leaders as business leaders, reducing identity conflict in the workplace, using diversity and inclusion best practices as an employee motivator and sharing how organizations are globalizing their ERNs.

Graciela Meibar, vice president of global sales training and global diversity for Mattel, gave a closing keynote address that touched upon her work in developing employee resource groups (ERGs) and furthering diversity and inclusion initiatives at the leading toy marketer and manufacturer.

"Leadership support is critical. We could not have done it without commitment from the top," she said, adding that from the outset she was able to show how such efforts could save money and increase shareholder value by capturing new segments of the marketplace.

Meibar also stressed the need to be strategic and deliberate about which initiatives to tackle. “You can get sidelined and try to do so much quickly that you can get lost along the way. It’s important to maintain focus,” she said.

While sharing best practices was a main component of the summit, Meibar cautioned against participants merely “copying what someone else has done.”

“We all love to hear about best practices, and share best practices among companies, but we have to be careful that whatever we do is good for the company for which we work,” she said. “You have to understand your culture and the political navigation system of your company, the business priorities, the way that you operate. All that is critical. Yes, we can share best practices, we can learn from one another, but we have to be aware of what might and might not work in our own organizations.”

Ian Ziskin, executive in residence at CEO, summed up the inaugural summit:

“It was a very exciting and practical way to bring together leaders who represent a broad spectrum of thinking and experience related to Diversity & Inclusion. Not only did we hear from diversity and inclusion practitioners, but we blended their perspectives with expert academics, HR leaders and, most importantly, operating executives who play critical roles as Employee Resource Group members and leaders.”

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