

Panacea or Placebo: Are Women's Networks Working for Women?

The establishment of Women's Networks within an organization is increasingly common and widely seen as an essential component of an organization's initiative to advance women. Indeed, almost all companies recognized and honored for the advancement of women by independent agencies report that Women's Networks are crucial to their strategies.¹ With the opportunity to survey women professionals attending the Simmons Leadership Conference in April 2011, we decided to explore several elements of Women's Networks, including the extent of Women's Networks within organizations represented at the conference, the goals and activities of the groups, and, most importantly, the perception of personal value and impact for the individual women that the Networks purport to serve.²

Women's Networks often fit within an organization's strategy of creating multiple Employee Resource Groups (ERGs) to advance

employees who are members of traditionally under-represented groups in higher management and leadership positions, which essentially include all employees except white, heterosexual men. Under this umbrella, the most frequently established groups are Women's Networks for Multi-Cultural Women, and Networks for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgendered (LGBT) people.³ Further, ERGs are usually part of a larger organizational strategy for employee advancement that

includes, but is not limited to, programs for mentoring and coaching, career development, and educational opportunities.

This study fits within the ongoing purpose of the Center for Gender in Organizations (CGO) at the Simmons School of Management, to provide ongoing analysis of workplace practices and cultures that impede the advancement of women as well as to explore and participate in the creation of new knowledge that translates into organizational practice. An early contribution of CGO in this field created "A Framework for Promoting Gender Equity in

Organizations,"⁴ which cautions organizations about the use of remedies instead of addressing the hard work of systemic change. Are Women's Networks a remedy—in other words, intended to provide a substitute to the "real" networks within organizations (which are informal and populated by those in power)? Or, as Women's Networks evolve as part of larger and serious institutional strategies, are they contributing to the advancement of women?

Methodology

A total of 269 conference attendees took part in the survey. However, only respondents who indicated that there was a Women's Network in their organization (62%, or n=166) completed the full survey (those who did not have a network or were not sure were directed to the demographics section at the end of the survey). For respondents with Women's Networks, questions were posed on the structure of their network; goals, activities, and services; perceptions of value; involvement in the network; and general demographics. Please note that in reporting the findings, the "overall sample" and all reported percentages refer to the group that completed the full survey (those with Women's Networks).

Overall, respondents were well-educated, successful women⁵ with extensive work experience. They were reasonably affluent and contributed significantly to household incomes. Analysis revealed no significant differences between those respondents who completed the full survey and those who only completed the demographics section (without Women's Networks).⁶

Findings

Results were analyzed for all respondents with Women's Networks in their organizations. First, we examined the perceived overall effectiveness and level of involvement of respondents in their networks. For the total sample of respondents with Women's Networks, the overall effectiveness and involvement results are presented in Tables 1 and 2 on the next page.

As seen in Table 2, just over half of the respondents (55%) are actively or occasionally involved in the activities of their Women's Network. A surprising 29% were not members. When asked why they were not members, 55% cited lack of time as the reason, with other reasons including not sharing the goals of the network, not seeing value in the network, and lack of eligibility. In order to gain a better understanding of these findings, results were examined separately for respondents who rated themselves as actively involved in their network (n=38), respondents who rated their network as very effective (n=42), and respondents who rated their network as

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Table 1: Overall Effectiveness of Women’s Networks

Effectiveness Dimension	Not at All	Somewhat	Very
Effectiveness of Network in Meeting Goals	8%	71%	21%
Effectiveness of Network in Promoting Women	15%	69%	16%

not effective (n=13). As expected, there was a very strong correlation between those respondents who were actively involved in their network and those who felt that their network was effective. Significant differences by subgroup are noted below.

Finally, we examined the demographics of women who were more actively involved in their network and/or who found their network very effective. In this analysis, we found that African American women were more likely to be in an organization with a Women’s Network (80% versus 62% for the sample as a whole), were more likely to be actively involved (58% versus 23%) and were more likely to believe that the network was very effective in both meeting its goals (36% versus 21%) and in promoting women (30% versus 16%). No other demographic differences of note were detected.

Network Structure. Our first set of questions sought to learn about the networks themselves. We asked about the history, contextual setting within a larger initiative, financial and executive support, leadership, and rank of membership. Sixty-two percent of the organizations represented by the respondents have Women’s Networks, which is less than the nationwide percentage of 81%.⁷ At least 38% reported having Networks in place for six or more years and 32% were established in the past five years, indicating that the creation of new Women’s Networks continues to be seen as of strategic importance to organizations.

Almost three-quarters of the Women’s Networks are in place as part of larger organizational strategies for women and other groups, or for women specifically. Full or partial funding for the Women’s Networks is provided by 69% of the supporting organizations. Information on the levels of activity that the funding supports was not requested. Leadership for the networks was determined by appointment of top executives, consensus of network members, or election of network members, with no one approach dominating the others. In the vast majority of the Women’s Networks (85%), membership was open to all ranks of employees. Finally, we found that the reported Women’s Networks are quite active, with 75% holding meetings three or more times per year.

We asked about membership and participation of men in Women’s Network groups and were interested to find that 70% of the groups offer membership for men; however, men constituted less than 5%

Table 2: Overall Involvement in Women’s Networks

Level of Involvement	Percentage
Member, Actively Involved	23%
Member, Occasionally Involved	32%
Member, Rarely Involved	16%
Not a Member/Other	29%

of the active membership. Further, very little negative impact was seen as a result of male membership, and 40% of the respondents indicated male members increased the emphasis upon the advancement of women (44% saw no impact either way). This opens up a future field of inquiry regarding the ranks and roles of the men in Women’s Networks that lead to advancement of women.

When analyzed by subgroup, interesting differences were noted on the measures of funding, eligibility, and meeting frequency. Women who rated themselves as actively involved in their network and women who rated their network as “very effective” were more likely to have networks that meet frequently, with open eligibility, and with partial/full funding. These results are summarized in Table 3.

Table 3: Selected Network Characteristics by Level of Involvement and Effectiveness

Characteristic	Overall Sample	Actively Involved with Network	Network Very Effective	Network Not Effective
Membership Eligibility: All	85%	92%	94%	69%
Meeting Frequency: 7+ times per year	42%	58%	69%	25%
Funding: Partial or Full	69%	92%	81%	69%

Network Goals. Respondents were asked to choose the goals for their Women’s Network from a provided list as well as to identify other goals not included on the list. The most commonly indicated goals included networking, developing women professionally, and retaining and promoting women. Respondents were also asked in an open-ended question to choose the single most important goal of their Women’s Network, with networking and the advancement and career development of women both frequently listed.

For those respondents who were actively involved, *all* goals were more common than for the overall sample, sometimes dramatically so (see Table 4 on the next page). This was even more apparent for those who felt that their network was very effective. The consistency of these trends across all goals is interesting, but it is unclear if these results reflect a lack of specific goals by less effective networks, a lack of communication of goals, or just less attention paid to goals by those that are less interested in the network.

Network Activities and Value of Network. In order to better understand the value provided to its members by Women’s Networks, respondents indicated which of a list of eight specific activities were offered by their networks. As above with network goals, “actively involved” respondents reported all activities more frequently than did the overall sample, and those with “very effective” networks reported even greater frequency. Again as above, the “not effective” group reported the lowest frequency. Results are summarized in Table 5 on the next page. In addition to the availability of activities and services, the personal helpfulness of each was measured on 1-5 scale, with 1=not at all helpful and 5=extremely helpful. As expected, percentages varied by group (see Table 6 on the next page).

Table 4: Frequency of Goals by Level of Involvement and Effectiveness

Frequency of Goals	Overall Sample	Actively Involved with Network	Network Very Effective	Network Not Effective
Networking	83%	90%	94%	54%
Develop women professionally	80%	90%	91%	46%
Retain/promote women	71%	74%	84%	46%
Address issue of work-life balance	58%	66%	84%	15%
Build strategic relationships	58%	74%	72%	8%
Help women plan careers	52%	53%	69%	8%
Facilitate women assisting women	52%	63%	72%	8%
Advocate for women in the organization	44%	50%	66%	15%
Recognize talent and leadership potential	43%	55%	72%	0%
Create visibility with upper management	42%	61%	72%	0%

The questions raised by this analysis are similar to those noted in the analysis of network goals. Are the differences in activities and services offered reported above “true” differences or are they perceptual? Regardless of the answer, clearly members of Women’s Networks who are actively involved and/or who find them to be valuable and effective are more aware of a variety of activities and services available to them than are other groups. Of particular value are those services directly related to skill-building (training, sharing best practices, mentoring, coaching) and to visibility (exposure to senior management). Social events and assistance with family issues are rated least valuable by all groups. When asked (in an

Table 5: Frequency of Activities and Services by Level of Involvement and Effectiveness

Frequency of Activity/Service	Overall Sample	Actively Involved with Network	Network Very Effective	Network Not Effective
Sharing best practices of successful women	67%	76%	81%	33%
Training opportunities	66%	68%	88%	33%
Exposure to senior management as role models	57%	71%	78%	8%
Social events	55%	66%	78%	33%
Mentoring programs	50%	61%	66%	8%
Coaching	26%	29%	50%	0%
Personal sponsors/champions	26%	26%	47%	17%
Assistance with family issues	13%	18%	31%	0%

open-ended question) what additional useful services were provided by their network, respondents listed seminars or webinars about their company or product lines, community service and volunteer activities, and book groups related to career development.

Respondents were also asked to list what additional activities and services they would like to see provided by their networks. Networking, mentoring, and coaching were mentioned again and again by those respondents whose networks did not provide these activities. While these were by far the most frequently listed, others mentioned the need for training in the areas of career development and planning, gender differences, and building relationships; more external speakers; and more frequent activities of all types.

One final open-ended question asked respondents to share ideas on how to make their networks more effective. Three key themes emerged. The most frequent theme was the need for increased involvement by senior management, both male and female. Second was the need for more concrete, planned programming, with sponsorship, mentoring, and networking mentioned along with the general desire for more activities. Third was the need for better organization and communications. One respondent expressed frustration with the “ad hoc” nature of network activities, another with the lack of communication, another with the lack of clear network goals and metrics, and still others with the difficulty of participating from satellite offices.

Table 6: Percentage of Participants Rating Activity/Service as 4 or 5 on 5-Point Scale (5=extremely helpful) by Effectiveness and Level of Involvement

Rating of Activity/Service	Overall Sample	Actively Involved with Network	Network Very Effective	Network Not Effective
Training opportunities	67%	81%	93%	29%
Sharing best practices of successful women	65%	74%	89%	29%
Exposure to senior management as role models	63%	63%	85%	43%
Mentoring programs	50%	65%	70%	33%
Coaching	47%	52%	73%	17%
Personal sponsors/champions	46%	56%	69%	17%
Social events	41%	49%	56%	14%
Assistance with family issues	29%	41%	52%	0%

Conclusions

Women’s Networks are common in today’s organizations, but there is a large degree of variation in terms of real and perceived value based upon the reported levels of participation and engagement. The combined ranking we found of “somewhat effective” or “not effective” in meeting goals by 79% of the respondents, and combined rankings of “somewhat effective” or “not effective” in effectiveness of promoting women by 84%, are not a resounding affirmation of success, but neither do they indicate that Women’s Networks have

run their course as a strategy for the advancement of women in organizations. Rather, our study indicates that there are several key areas that are essential to strengthening the engagement of and impact for women. These include funding for the Network and its activities, which indicates that the organization values the concept enough to make a monetary investment; commitment and presence of senior leaders, again indicating a concrete investment of time and effort; and well-organized, frequent meetings on topics deemed to be of the most value.

There is a clear indication that the activities of Women’s Networks should address the programs that are seen as most important for the advancement of women in organizations. Those identified in our survey are sharing best practices of successful women, training opportunities, mentoring programs, personal sponsors or champions, coaching, and exposure to senior management. In organizations where there are multi-faceted programs for advancement, the role of the Network would complement other specific initiatives in these areas. In some organizations, however, the Network may be the only place where one or more of these activities are taking place, making it even more important that it be supported and structured in ways that enable the engagement of as many women as possible. Women’s Network meetings need to add value and not been seen as “add-ons” to daily work.

Organizations measure what they value, and it is a well-known adage that what gets measured gets done. Organizations with Women’s Networks are indicating that they see a strategic value in the retention and advancement of women. Therefore, concrete goals and specific metrics that align strategies for women’s advancement and organizational success are required to ensure that both are accomplished.

Women’s Networks: panacea or placebo? The answer is neither. It is beyond the scope of Women’s Networks to address all of the ways in which organizations need to change the culture and gendered nature of the structures and practices that continue to be barriers for women.⁸ But when time, resources, and effort are put into creating a Network that is visible and well-organized, that provides programming where specific ties to advancement are measured and clear, and that has evident top-level support in terms of both financial and time commitments, Women’s Networks can and should be more than just another meeting.

Vitally important to the success of Women’s Networks are the strength of their ties to the talent management strategies of organizations. When they are in place as part of a larger organizational strategy to support both the advancement of women and the goals of the organization, the investment is evident through steady results. They cannot, however, be a panacea; they are one part of a multi-pronged strategy for women’s success and organizational effectiveness.

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Endnotes

¹Pomeroy, E., & Foust-Cummings, H. 2009. *Catalyst Member Benchmarking Report*. New York, NY: Catalyst. Retrieved from http://www.catalyst.org/file/306/bench_web.pdf

²We gratefully acknowledge Hewlett-Packard’s support in the administration of this electronic survey.

³Pomeroy & Foust-Cummings, 2009.

⁴Kolb, D., Fletcher, J.K., Meyerson, D., Merrill-Sands, D., & Ely, R. 1998. *CGO Insights* No. 1: Making change: A framework for promoting gender equity in organizations. Boston, MA: Center for Gender in Organizations, Simmons School of Management.

⁵One male respondent also completed the survey.

⁶Respondent characteristics (n=166):

Category	Percentage
Work Experience	31%: 11-20 years experience 46%: > 20 years experience
Highest Position Held	41%: middle management 14%: senior/top management
Highest Position Aspired To	22%: middle management 56%: senior/top management
Total Household Income	24%: \$100-150K; 16%: \$151-200K; 28%: over \$200K
% Contribution to Household Income	31%: 50-74%; 13%: 75-99%; 33%: 100% (sole income)
Education	42%: Bachelor's degree 46%: Post-graduate degree
Race/Ethnicity	75%: White/Caucasian 6%: African American 6%: Hispanic/Latina
Age	26%: 30-39; 32%: 40-49; 25%: 50-59; 5%: 60 or over

⁷Pomeroy & Foust-Cummings, 2009.

⁸For a concise and comprehensive discussion of this topic, see Trefalt, S., Merrill-Sands, D., Kolb, D., Wilson, F., & Carter, S. 2011. *CGO Insights* No. 32: Closing the women’s leadership gap: Who can help?. Boston, MA: Center for Gender in Organizations, Simmons School of Management.

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