
Online representations of employee resource groups inhibit employee engagement: A critical/cultural analysis of corporate websites

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Abstract

It has frequently been argued that corporations must demonstrate a commitment to workforce diversity. This article addresses a practical approach some corporations have taken to convey their commitment to workforce diversity: Employee resource groups. The authors employed textual analysis, using critical/cultural studies as a guiding framework, to examine the representation of employee resource groups on 61 corporate websites. The sites were characterised by recognition of corporate diversity awards and initiatives unrelated to employee resource groups, as such, the sites do not appear to fulfil the tacit expectations of employee stakeholders. The authors contend that more attention should be paid to employee needs rather than corporate image in these online representations of employee resource groups. The findings point to the need for further investigation of how corporate image might supersede professional development efforts corporations provide for individual employees.

Introduction

United States (US) corporations have long struggled to determine how best to foster healthy relationships with the multiple publics they serve (Hon & Brunner, 2000; Meares, Oetzel, Torres, Derkacs, & Ginossar, 2004). It is essential that senior-level executives build long-term and mutually beneficial relationships with their stakeholders to succeed in the competitive marketplace (Maak, 2007). Arguably the most significant stakeholder relationship corporate executives must cultivate is with their employees. Thus, the purpose of this study is to explore how corporations ethically engage with diverse employees via company websites.

Executives use various means of communication to engage with their employees. Bruce and Shelley (2010) define ‘stakeholder engagement’ as: “the interaction between an organisation and those individuals and groups that are impacted by, or influence, the organisation” (p. 1). Successful employee engagement can have long-lasting benefits for employees as well as corporations. Mishra, Boynton, and Mishra (2014) assert that public relations professionals recognise the importance of strengthening internal communication with employees in order to build a culture of transparency. The executives with whom employees interact have also begun taking notice of the value of engagement. Some executives are changing their behaviour accordingly.

“Responsible leaders weave durable relational structures and ultimately networks of relationships to otherwise unconnected individuals or groups” (Maak, 2007, p. 329). ‘Workforce diversity’ has been the tangible result in many workplaces. Originally viewed as an external mandate—requirements for corporations to meet hiring quotas, for example—workforce diversity has since expanded to encompass a business strategy that can aid the competitive status of a company (Day & Greene, 2008; Jayne & Dipboye, 2004). Workforce diversity specifically refers to: “the composition of work units (work group, organization, occupation, establishment or firm) in terms of the cultural or demographic characteristics that are salient and symbolically meaningful in the relationships among group members” (DiTomaso, Yost, & Parks-Yancy, 2007, p. 474).

Employee engagement is a central focus for resource groups that share racial, gender, or sexual identities. It should come as no surprise, then, that several corporations now offer ‘employee resource groups (ERGs)’,

“communities of people within a corporation who share ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, or other aspects” (Douglas, 2008, p. 13).

The perspectives of employees who belong to underrepresented groups might not be fully articulated in the organisations to which they belong. Employee resource groups, then, are designed to foster engagement between and among all employees. Some groups were developed to help members navigate the often white-dominant workforce where they are employed (Digh, 1997); others are there to assist with company diversity efforts such as retention initiatives (Jayne & Dipboye, 2004; Mercer Group, 2011).

Despite the reported business value of ERGs, some executives state that such groups can foster divisiveness, leading to employee conflict (Digh, 2001). Hon and Brunner (2000) reported that companies might be perceived as under- or over-utilising ERGs. Additionally, ERG members might experience discrimination from non-member employees. Employees at an organisation who do not belong to the dominant culture have reported experiencing mistreatment (Meares et al., 2004). Such employees can become muted or disengaged, or may even disavow membership (DiTomaso et al., 2007). Some diverse groups have utilised online communities to build connections (Brennen, 2013).

One of the most powerful engagement tools corporations have is their website. These “unique expressions of contemporary culture” (Pauwels, 2012, p. 247) provide executives and employees a channel to exchange dialogue and, potentially, build relationships. The dual role websites can serve for internal and external stakeholders could expand corporate capabilities. Communication via the web has the power to bring together individuals to recognise common interests (Kent, Taylor, & White, 2003). Corporations have had some success with workforce diversity and employee engagement; nevertheless, we argue in this study that online representations of employee resource groups can inhibit engagement when they focus primarily on company image and present employee accolades in the context of company success.

This study has significance because public relations executives are increasingly positioning employee engagement as an organisational priority (Mishra et al., 2014). Significance also lies in the potential for corporations to lose credibility among multiple constituencies if the diversity efforts they highlight online do not reflect the experiences of their employees of diverse backgrounds. Corporate communicators often share responsibility for upholding policies that guarantee fair treatment in the workplace. These communicators must be prepared to work alongside executives on behalf of employees to ensure that everyone in the organisation shares the same advantages (Douglas, 2008). This study also holds significance for practitioners who encounter challenges to website maintenance (McAllister-Spooner, 2009). Study findings could reveal techniques for communicators to overcome obstacles through technological capabilities.

Literature review

Employee resource groups

Employee resource groups (ERGs) have been under-studied in the academic literature. One of the most comprehensive studies of ERGs was conducted by Mercer Group, a global consulting and investment group, with a goal of enhancing the value of diverse workforces. Mercer Group (2011) conducted interviews and surveys with respondents from 64 corporations about the progress of ERGs. Respondents reported renewed interest in ERGs, especially among groups whose goals align with company business objectives. The report indicated that ERG members assist companies with diversity initiatives for the constituencies each group serves. These groups are typically assigned an ‘executive sponsor’, a senior-level executive who acts as a liaison between the group and senior-level company officials: “The sponsors bring inside-business knowledge to the ERG, help determine ways the ERG can contribute to the business, and champion the ERG’s activities to the rest of the leadership team” (p. 16). The report predicted strengthened ties between ERGs and corporate social responsibility; indeed, respondents said their

ERGs participate in community service to enhance company brands.

In 2012, Out & Equal Workplace Advocates, a non-profit organisation working for safe and equitable workplaces for LGBT individuals, conducted survey research with respondents from 113 corporations about lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) employee resource groups. Its report revealed increased corporate brand visibility in the LGBT sector as well as accountability for business impact. Further, the report indicated that LGBT groups are expanding through social media to reach employees company-wide.

In a study of LGBT employee resource groups, Githens and Aragon (2009) found that the groups focus along a continuum between social change and improving organisational effectiveness, employing different approaches for problem solving. Day and Greene (2008) said LGBT groups can be crucial contacts for job candidates seeking information about a corporate culture and Ramirez (2000) called for larger companies to be active promoters of gay and lesbian resource groups, but other scholars reveal potential limitations of employee resource groups. In a United Kingdom-based study by Colgan and McKearney (2012), individual workers rather than company-level executives pushed for LGBT equality in the workplace. Bierema (2005) found similar power inequities in research about an ERG for women. The group had been established in response to alienation the women experienced in the patriarchal corporate culture, but its members remained ineffective at voicing concerns because of organisational culture-determined constraints. According to Jayne and Dipboye (2004), success can only be achieved with high-level support.

Corporate websites

Company websites were previously viewed solely as corporate-controlled channels solely focused on communicating outward so that stakeholders and media understand the company (Kent et al., 2003, p. 63). An expansive line of research has explored various aspects of corporate sites beyond the classic Kent and Taylor (1998) focus of building dialogic relationships. Scholars have explored functionality (Esrock & Leichty, 2000);

interactive features (Gustavsen & Tilley, 2003); relationship building components (Park & Reber, 2008); cultural characteristics (Tian, 2008); dialogical features (Killoran, 2005; Pettigrew & Reber, 2010), and corporate social responsibility (Bravo, Matute, & Pina, 2012; Smith & Alexander, 2013) of corporate websites. Space does not allow for a complete review of scholarship about corporate websites, so the authors have selected a few studies to focus on next.

Uysal (2013) explored how public corporations communicate about diversity on their websites. Results suggested that corporations positioned diversity as a competitive advantage, and sometimes connected it to corporate social responsibility (CSR) efforts. Smith and Alexander (2013) studied website headings to investigate how *Fortune* 500 companies cover CSR activities online. Results indicated that activities were labelled individually rather than under the broad CSR heading. The scholars suggested that corporations should tailor their reports of CSR activities to individual stakeholder groups.

Mixed results have emerged from research about online representations versus offline company realities. In studying the relationships between website design and organisational responsiveness to stakeholders, Kent et al. (2003) found that the more dialogically oriented an organisation appeared to be, the more likely that organisation was to actually respond to its stakeholders. According to the scholars, dialogic features in website design could help organisations build relationships with their publics. Conversely, Waters, Friedman, Mills, & Zeng (2011) found that despite transparency online, religious organisation websites did not use interactive strategies necessary for long-term relationships. The scholars suggested that organisations should use online and offline activities to sustain stakeholder relationships. Basil and Erlandson (2008) conducted longitudinal research on representations of CSR in Canada-based company websites. The scholars did not find a causative relationship between company success and socially responsible policies, but they suggested that publicly presenting such policies could enhance company success.

Technological aspects of websites have been the focus of some academic scholarship. For example, Hilyard, Hocke, and Ryan (2011) employed website usability criteria to analyse disaster preparedness websites for children. They found poor usability resulting in limited dialogic communication, especially when compared with other sites tailored for children. Outdated technology and content in the study dataset suggested a lack of consideration for children as stakeholders. Defining ‘net relations’ as “the management of relationships between an organization and all its relevant publics through the use of the Internet and Web technology”, Kazoleas and Teigen (2006, p. 422) posited the technology-image expectancy gap as a new theory of public relations. Although the theory was introduced when new media was in its infancy, its consideration of relational development in an online platform is of note. In a related stream of research, O’Neil and Schieffer (2014) studied how corporations and non-profits foster effective employee relationships via social media. Worth mentioning is the fact that the vast majority of corporations in their study provided a link from Facebook to their corporate websites.

Methodology

Critical theory/cultural studies framework

The authors approached their analysis of online representations of employee resource groups (ERGs) from the critical theory/cultural studies framework. Although critical theory denotes a variety of theoretical positions, “critical theorists consider reality and truth to be shaped by specific historical, cultural, racial, gender, political and economic conditions, values and structures” (Brennen, 2013, p. 9). Given that self-segmentation along those very lines is among the hallmarks of employee resource groups, the critical tradition was deemed appropriate for the present study.

Critical researchers believe knowledge is constructed through communication and power relations (Tracy, 2013). In the work environment, corporate executives have status which they can reinforce through stakeholder interactions. Corporate websites are one of

several communication vehicles corporate executives have at their disposal. Qualitative communication research in the critical paradigm seeks to “support subordinate groups in their humane pursuit of interests such as voice, dignity, justice, and autonomy” (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011, p. 11). In the context of corporate websites, employees—underrepresented employees in particular—belong to the groups for which critical scholars advocate.

The cultural studies tradition holds that [media] texts are complex, contested artefacts of ideologies (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011) that create meaning in society, situating conflicts between cultural groups (Fürsich, 2009). In qualitative research, texts are “cultural artefacts, material documentary evidence that is used to make sense out of our lives” (Brennen, 2013, p. 193). Website texts, in particular, enable companies to aid their various publics in the sense-making process through information (Pettigrew & Reber, 2010, p. 404). Research suggests that corporate websites can function as a virtual environment whereby social reality can be constructed (Young & Foot, 2006). By analysing the online representations of employee resource groups (ERGs) as cultural artefacts, this study could reveal a new understanding of engagement in specific social contexts through the following guiding research questions:

RQ1: How are employee resource groups represented in corporate websites?

RQ2: How is workforce diversity represented in corporate websites?

Method

Study dataset

The dataset was derived from employee resource group (ERG) texts accessible on publicly available corporate websites. The particular websites in the dataset were deemed an appropriate starting point for the present study because each company was included in the Mercer Group (2011) employee resource group report, in which executives at 64 companies participated in interviews and surveys.

Table 1: Dataset companies

Abbott	ADM (Archer Daniels Midland Company)
ADP, Inc.	Air Products & Chemicals, Inc.
American Airlines, Inc.	Anheuser-Busch
AOL, LLC	AstraZeneca Pharmaceuticals
AT&T	BAE Systems
BD	The Boeing Company
BP plc	Bristol-Myers Squibb Company
British Airways	Charles Schwab & Company, Inc.
Choice Hotels International	Cisco Systems, Inc.
Citibank N.A.	Corning Incorporated
Daimler	Dell, Inc.
Deutsche Bank	DIRECTV
Fannie Mae	Gap, Inc.
*Goodrich Corporation	Greater Manchester Police
H.J. Heinz	Harley-Davidson Motor Company
Honeywell	HSBC
Humana, Inc.	Hyatt Hotels Corporation
ING Group	Intuit, Inc.
Kellogg Company	Leicestershire Constabulary
Lend Lease Corporation	Marsh & McLennan Companies, Inc.
Mattel, Inc.	McDonald's USA
Medtronic, Inc.	Newell Rubbermaid Incorporated
Newham University Hospital Trust	The New York Times Company
Northern Trust	Northrop Grumman
Novartis Pharmaceuticals Corporation	Pacific Gas & Electric Company
Pratt & Whitney Rocketdyne	Sodexo, Inc.
Southern California Edison Company	Steelcase, Inc.
*Textron Systems	Toyota Financial Services
The Travelers Companies, Inc.	Turner Broadcasting System, Inc.
Unilever	Visa, Inc.
W.L. Gore & Associates	*Walt Disney Parks & Resorts
WellPoint, Inc.	Wells Fargo & Company

*Excluded from dataset due to lack of employee resource group on website

Mercer Group's (2011) report indicated that corporations typically have different designations for ERGs; some are called business resource groups, others employee networks, etc. To ensure that the dataset for the present study included all employee groups regardless of designation, the authors conducted keyword searches using the terms 'diversity' and 'employee' on each website. Because the authors were unable to locate employee resource groups on the websites of three corporations in the initial dataset (Goodrich Corporation, Textron Systems, and Walt Disney Parks & Resorts) these companies were removed from the dataset. The website

text from the remaining 61 corporations was copied into a Word document categorised by company name, resulting in a 215-page dataset.

Analytic approach

In qualitative research, analysis involves breaking apart data and then bringing it back together according to key concepts (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011). The authors approached the analytical stage with no predetermined categories in an attempt to understand, from a critical/cultural perspective, how employee resource groups would be construed by readers solely from the website texts. However, the authors did review the cultural analytic approach Pauwels (2012) developed to study

websites, focusing primarily on the stages in which the researcher performed “in-depth analysis of content and formal choices” and “embedded points of view or voice and implied

audience and purposes” (p. 256). These stages helped the authors make preliminary categorisations based on content choices that set certain dataset text apart from others.

Table 2: Non-traditional employee resource groups

Company	Employee resource group
BP plc	Working Parents and Parents to Be
The New York Times Company	Executive Assistants Resource Network
Toyota	ToyoPets (For pet owners and supporters)
WL Gore & Associates	White Men Supporting Diversity network

The specific approach the authors employed to analyse the dataset was textual analysis to focus on the ideological and cultural assumptions underlying the text (Fürsich, 2009). This process involved the authors reading the document all the way through to gain an overall understanding of the information. Then, they reread the entire document, this time highlighting segments of the text and writing paraphrases that referenced employee perspectives. The next stage of analysis involved rereading the highlighted portions and paraphrases in order to create conceptual groupings of the data by category.

After that, the authors read through the conceptual groupings to label repeated ideas, words, and phrases for classification purposes. They also used an inductive approach (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011), alternating between preliminary themes and the data, to allow for additional concepts to emerge. Any final concepts were added before labelling the sections by thematic category. Themes that emerged from this study are identified in the next section alongside descriptive illustrations from corporate websites.

Table 3: Dual-meaning employee resource group titles

Company	Employee resource group
Abbott	Flex Network (part-time and flexible schedules)
Air Products & Chemicals, Inc.	EDGE (Ethnically Diverse Gulf Employees)
Anheuser-Busch (Producers of Budweiser beers)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • CROWN (Creating Real Opportunities for Women’s Networking) • EAGLE (Employee Alliance Group of Leadership and Engagement) • BUDSAVE (Bud employees Supporting Armed Forces & Veterans Everywhere)
AstraZeneca Pharmaceuticals	SAGE (Succeeding Through our Ability to Gain from Experience)
AT&T	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • IDEAL (Individuals with Disabilities Enabling Advocacy Link) • OASIS (The Organization of Asian Indians at AT&T)
British Airways	EDEN (Ethnically Diverse Network)
Dell Inc.	BRIDGE (Building Relationships in Diverse Group Environments)
ING	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Silver Lions (representing older professionals)
Newell Rubbermaid Incorporated	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • BEACON (Black Employees Achieving, Connecting & Operating in Newell Rubbermaid)
Pacific Gas & Electric Company	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • InspirAsian
Sodexo	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • SOAR (Sodexo Organization for disAbilities Resources) • SOL (Spanish for <i>sun</i>): Sodexo Organization of Latinos • HONOR (Honoring Our Nation’s Finest with Opportunity and Respect)
WellPoint, Inc.	VOW (Veteran’s Organization of WellPoint)

In order to ensure data quality, the authors employed ‘reflexivity’ to recognise how their worldview, history, and culture inform research (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011). This stage enabled them to think critically about how background shapes interpretations (Creswell, 2014), allowing the authors to situate their interpretations in critical/cultural context. In the current study, the lead author acknowledges intersecting identities as a woman and a person of colour and her professional background as a corporate communication manager and employee resource group member. The second author acknowledges areas of interest in corporate social responsibility and sustainability.

Results

In the dataset, diverse employees are described in terms of their physical and social characteristics as related to the company, suggesting that the capabilities of employees as members of given employee resource groups (ERGs) is more valuable to corporations than the employees themselves. Companies are represented as bottom-line oriented and focused on the external stakeholders who shape their image. These representations of companies suggest that the marketplace remains more important than those in the workplace who enable the corporation to achieve its business goals.

At first glance, online representations of ERGs seem to function as true resources for employees. The Air Products & Chemicals, Inc., website text states that: “Our Employee Resource Groups focus on interests of a particular group and serves as a two-way communication channel between company leadership and the network members. They communicate with and educate employees through events, literature and special programs.” Preliminary analytic stages also indicated that popularisation of the term ‘pride’ among gay and lesbian activist organisations has transitioned into the workplace, with pride a frequent designation for gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender employee groups. Further analysis revealed that such terminology was not reflected in executive behaviour, however. The focus on the business needs of

the company throughout the dataset revealed a pervasive inhibitor to potential engagement.

The inclusion of quotes from employees and executives in the dataset suggested potentiality for engagement. Noorjehan Javed of the Muslim Employee Resource Group at American Airlines, Inc. said: “We do more than just organise activities around our constituency groups, we want to use our awareness and insight to build bridges to our communities that will advance the mission of our Company.” Although this employee mentions the stakeholder group to which he belongs, his overt reference to the company mission empowers the corporation rather than the employees.

The fact that federal and government guidelines are included on corporate websites suggests that workforce diversity is a mandate first and foremost. For example, the Boeing Company website states that: “The Diversity professionals and specialists cover Affirmative Action, Cultural Diversity and inclusion, and Equal Employment Opportunity.” Abbott includes a similar statement on its corporate website:

Abbott will continue to recruit, hire, train and promote into all job levels based solely upon job-related qualifications with our regard to race, colour, religion, creed, age, sex, national origin, gender identity or expression, sexual orientation, disability, marital status, veteran or military status, genetics or citizenship status.

While such statements demonstrate company adherence to policies, they also position diversity as a responsibility to meet rather than as a social reality. Instead of fostering engagement between and among diverse employees, online representations of ERGs seem to reinforce the presumption of mandated diversity instead of what it could be: An opportunity for engagement.

Texts in the dataset also indicated that all employees were welcome to all ERGs, namely, advocates/allies. These invitations might have been developed to keep potential resentment of other employees at bay; if so, these corporations could be expending effort on

employees who are not in need of support that ERGs provide. In allowing all employees to join all ERGs, corporations are not fulfilling the stated intention of ERGs: Engaging with underrepresented employees. Employees join such groups in part because workplaces continue to reflect heteronormativity.

The near universal inclusion of awards and accolades in close proximity to online representations of ERGs seems to shift the focus of diversity from employees to corporations. One could argue that inclusion of best places to work for mothers, women, or other groups is of benefit to employees. Indeed, such markers likely generate employee loyalty. The problem of such accolades is the reconstruction of employee identity in service of company image. These awards help the company recruit other potentially loyal employees. In this sense, ERGs are helping the company rather than the employees. The cycle of benefit for the company image could continue without consideration of the workplace realities employees—especially those in ERGs—encounter every day.

One interpretation of these findings is that even in the context of employee resource groups, corporate websites must focus on multiple publics. The public accessibility of the dataset certainly supports this assertion: Shareholders, customers, and media professionals have equal access to company information through corporate websites. In their attempt to engage with multiple stakeholders, corporations in the study dataset seem to provide breadth, rather than depth, of information, restricting the potential for drawing in would-be stakeholders. Employees seeking out ERGs for engaging with the company could be disappointed by online positioning of such groups as mere dimensions of workplace diversity.

Some companies in the dataset were more successful than others in establishing direct connections between brands and the construct of diversity. American Airlines, Inc. did so as follows:

Today, with flights to more than 250 cities in more than 40 countries around the globe and the broadest reach in the

industry, American Airlines and its people understand the fundamental links among diversity, inclusion and business success. As we expand our global presence, we continue to redefine and adapt our approach to diversity.

Harley-Davidson Motor Company employed metaphor to connect its company to diversity:

Diversity is the engine that powers our success, providing a wealth of talent, experience and perspective that enriches everything we do... Different points of view, all watching asphalt fly by. Steel is strong because it's made from a combination of elements like iron, carbon and nickel. Likewise, we are strong because our employees come from many different backgrounds and bring ideas, perspectives and experiences that are unbreakable.

Contradictory messages regarding the role of diversity were evident in dataset websites. The New York Times Company's statements about diversity held employees accountable for fulfilling certain obligations:

Our Executive Team holds each business unit accountable for setting and achieving diversity and inclusion objectives based on the unique needs of their businesses. There is a committed effort to make greater, faster, measurable strides toward creating the diverse and inclusive workforce that is so crucial to our continued success.

Other representations of employee resource groups in the dataset advanced a positive corporate image and did not convey support for individual employees. For example, the AT&T website description of diversity efforts for employees focused on building up the company senior leadership:

The Leadership Development Program (LDP), AT&T's flagship talent management program, focused on building extraordinary, innovative leaders to successfully direct the business. The program is designed for recent college graduates with diverse backgrounds, proven academic

achievement, and demonstrated leadership abilities from highly rated institutions.

The above description suggests that senior company leadership retain their status even as they are purporting to expand opportunities for employees.

Employee resource groups in the dataset are classified according to particular sociocultural markers, but online representations include statements welcoming all employees to all groups. For example, the Greater Manchester Police offers two tiers of membership in its Disability Support Network:

The aims and objectives of this network is to provide support and advice to disabled staff within GMP, also to promote understanding of disability issues within the force... Full membership is open to all staff of GMP with a disability and associate membership is open to all staff of GMP who are carers for a disabled person and/or who work with a disabled staff member.

A similar example was evident in the employee resource group EDEN at British Airways: “British Airways’ Ethnically Diverse Network (EDEN) was set up in June 2010. Since then its membership levels have increased to over 200, reflecting the many different ethnicities represented amongst colleagues and customers.”

Multiple diversity initiatives were housed in a single location in websites examined for this study. Despite no obvious linkage between ERGs and supplier diversity, for example, Steelcase, Inc. used artful language to establish a connection between the two: “As a global company, Steelcase is dedicated to creating relationships with diverse businesses. We promote cultural acceptance through fair recruiting and hiring processes; raising awareness among employees of diversity issues, and creating partnerships with other companies that support diversity.”

Employee resource group representations suggested that groups are having a positive business impact. According to Novartis Pharmaceuticals Corporation: “While our

ERGs have always contributed to creating an inclusive environment and culture at NPC, their activities are increasingly showing a positive impact on our business.” Nevertheless, the connection between employees and business impact on the Newell Rubbermaid Inc. website was tenuous: “Our purpose as a Company to help people flourish every day must first be applied to our own people before external stakeholders can successfully realize the benefits.”

Employee resource group efforts were sometimes minimised in regards to company-wide diversity initiatives. For example, Southern California Edison Company noted that its workforce was as diverse as Southern California: “Here’s a glimpse into the makeup of our employees in 2013: 57% of our employees were minorities; 64% of the new hires were minorities; 44% of our elected officers were minorities or women.” Similarly, BP plc announced its efforts toward workplace diversity by stating that: “Over 30% of our graduate hires are female in the UK through continued efforts to highlight the depth and breadth of careers available in BP which include science, trading, business and engineering.” The focus repeatedly shifted back to the corporation.

Many companies analysed in this study positioned representations of ERGs in close proximity to pronouncements of broad-based workforce diversity achievements. Indices referenced in the study dataset included the Human Rights Campaign Corporate Equality Index (which rates U.S. workplaces for LGBT equality); Diversity Inc. Top 50 (which assesses talent pipeline, equitable development, leadership commitment, and supplier diversity at U.S. companies); the Lord Davies Report (2014) (which assesses women on boards in the U.K.), and the Stonewall Workplace Quality (which ranks U.K. workplaces regarding LGBT employees).

The focus on potential employees rather than current employees was evident in diversity statements about the quality of job candidates. Archer Daniels Midland Company (ADM) noted:

ADM is committed to attracting, retaining and developing highly-qualified veterans, guard members and reservists who can make valuable contributions to our company.”

British Airways also emphasised qualification of diverse candidates:

“When recruiting talent (either from outside or from within our organisation) we are strongly supportive of the principles of diversity and inclusion... All candidates are considered strictly on merit and in relation to assessment criteria for the role.

Corporations in service industries regularly interact with diverse publics, thus, their online representations of diversity seemed appropriate for their multiple stakeholders. Of particular note is the following statement from the Hyatt Hotels Corporation website:

Diversity and inclusion is about more than simply finding acceptance; it’s about relating in unique and personal ways to people of all nationalities and from all walks of life, whether they are guests, co-workers, vendors, suppliers or members of the community.

In this text, the company refocused a discussion of the connection between diversity and the business to the profit side of the corporation. Workforce diversity was also represented as a business imperative at American Airlines: “Today, with flights to more than 250 cities in more than 40 countries around the globe and the broadest reach in the industry, American Airlines and its people understand the fundamental links among diversity, inclusion and business success.”

Online representations of employee resource groups did not sufficiently engage with the employees who make up their key stakeholders. The following example from ADM introducing its military recruiting efforts illustrates insufficient engagement:

Veterans, guard members and reservists bring valuable capabilities to private sector employers: proven leadership, exceptional reliability, mission-focus and the ability to work well in teams.

When employers take the necessary steps to support and accommodate them, the benefits can be tremendous.

Statements like these reinforce the authority of senior leaders rather than provide a voice for underrepresented employees.

Discussion

Corporations have the capability of using their websites to extend and expand various company messages. The accessibility of websites means that company messages about important topics such as diversity are no longer limited to one-way print and broadcast communication vehicles. One of the practical implications for tech-savvy employees, the so-called ‘digital natives’, is the potential perception of ongoing access to company executives. Most company websites contain messaging systems so users can send and receive information. Despite the established importance of engagement (Maak, 2007; Waters et al., 2011), employees expecting engagement with corporate executives via company websites could end up disappointed. According to Uysal (2013), a majority of public companies do not provide live chats or other opportunities for feedback on their websites.

In the present study, the authors examined online representations of employee resource groups (ERGs) on 61 corporate websites. Results align with previous scholarship recognising the dual role of ERG members as consumers and employees (Jayne & Dipboye, 2004; Mercer Group, 2011). Results also indicate that corporations inhibit engagement of diverse employees because their websites focus primarily on workforce diversity resulting from company efforts.

Listening to the voices of employee publics is an important aspect of dialogue which corporations are expected to fulfil (Killoran, 2005; Pettigrew & Reber, 2010). However, analysis indicated that dataset representations advance a positive corporate image rather than convey support for individual employees (Uysal, 2013). With few exceptions, perspectives of senior leaders in the dataset were positioned more prominently than those of employees in ERGs. By placing these

executives at the forefront, corporations were able to convey their commitment to the cause of diversity. Unfortunately for ERG members, comprehensive descriptions of the groups and the employees they serve are situated as less important than other diversity initiatives. These findings do not bode well for dataset corporations: “Those organizations that see publics as merely means to ends, that is, simply as ‘customers’, will have difficulty building lasting relationships with their publics” (Kent, Taylor & White, 2003, p. 75).

Employee resource groups have traditionally operated as vehicles through which underrepresented groups of employees can interact with one another while building strong ties to the company. Dataset analysis of ERGs aligns with research indicating the potential for fostering employee engagement via executive sponsors. Employees who might not otherwise have a venue for expressing their opinions can occasionally interact with senior-level executives who serve as sponsors of ERGs (Mercer Group, 2011). Employees who would otherwise stay silent might raise vital issues in the context of an ERG (Meares et al., 2004). Company loyalty could be a natural result for active group members.

The ethical implications of study dataset representations merit consideration. As noted in previous reports (Mercer Group, 2011; Out & Equal Workforce Advocates, 2012), dataset employee resource groups can serve as early warning systems through which corporate executives can discover business issues of concern to their employees. Existing research suggests that ERG members operate as valuable company ambassadors for recruiting purposes (Day & Greene, 2008). According to Ramirez (2000), LGBT employees would be keen to join an organisation that operates ERGs. Using ERG members as advisors or ambassadors when outside consultants could perform the same duties constitutes an ethical lapse. Conversely, corporate executives could rightfully question the ethics of individual employees who reap benefits of ERG-provided professional development without regard for advancing overall business goals. According to Digh (2001), companies that are regularly recognised for their commitment to the

business case for diversity are also industry leaders in ethics.

Study findings indicate that ERG members can interact with others whose life experiences are similar to their own (Mercer Group, 2011). Executive sponsors, on the other hand, can interact with employees whose life experiences differ from their own. Such interactions help companies initiate strategies to address issues of concern to multiple publics, thus enhancing their profile in multiple communities.

Mercer Group (2011) and Out & Equal Workplace Advocates (2012) advocated for transparency among corporations who sponsor ERGs. Unfortunately, the authors found a lack of transparency of purpose regarding company commitment to ERGs. Rather than transparency in the dataset, the authors found contradictory information. Many companies articulated support for diversity efforts because it was the right thing to do, but the inclusion of specific policy guidelines suggested they were actually abiding by regulations. Other contradictions emerged with designations of ERGs as open to any employee. Scholars have cited complaints of unfairness that block diversity initiatives (Jayne & Dipboye, 2004). This strategic tactic of openness to all could lessen the perceived value of the groups and lead to questions about the importance of marginalised employees. Extending invitations to all employees could render ERGs powerless to effect change in workforce diversity.

The location of ERGs alongside other initiatives in the dataset was problematic. Such positioning would seem at first to help ERG initiatives be viewed as business obligations as Mercer Group (2011) recommended. But employee-focused diversity programmes like ERGs might not lend themselves to the numbers-driven measures utilised in other corporate strategies. As has been noted elsewhere (Douglas, 2008), assumptions about quotas in diversity efforts can become a hindrance. Employee resentment and executive fear are too often the result of quantitative-oriented diversity (DiTomaso et al., 2007; Meares et al., 2004). Employees and employers alike would do well to differentiate ERGs from other diversity initiatives.

Results of the present study support Digh (2001) who counterintuitively noted that ERGs not officially recognised by a company can foster shared identity among members. Informal networks can help diverse employees navigate corporate careers (DiTomaso et al., 2007); thus, these ERGs seem poised to play a pivotal role in employee retention. The ethical implications of employees serving as recruiters is concerning, however. Employees could feel pressured to participate in recruiting activities, possibly at the expense of completing their customary job duties. Employees are at a distinct disadvantage in weighing the professional benefits and drawbacks of recruiting other employees.

The fact that companies analysed in this study place all their diversity information in one place online stands in stark contrast to research which suggests that such efforts should be integrated into the business (Jayne & Dipboye, 2004; Ramirez, 2000). This study finding could be due to the fact that online representations of ERGs must appeal to multiple publics. External publics might be considering purchasing stock, contributing funds, or simply ascertaining information about a given corporation. The stand-alone placement perpetuates the notion of diverse employees as a monolithic group whose myriad issues can be addressed simultaneously (Meares et al. 2004).

As Mercer Group (2011) reported, the most common kinds of ERGs in companies analysed in this study continue to be related to race, gender, and sexual orientation. The presence of these groups is indicative of the inroads that ethnic minorities, women, and LGBT employees have made in the workplace (Hon & Bruner, 2000).

Companies analysed in this study used several strategies to convey the business case for diversity. Corporations that situated diversity in close proximity to government guidelines appeared to be taking a defensive posture to build their case. As other scholars have noted (DiTomaso et al., 2007; Meares et al., 2004), employee resentment and executive fear are too often the result of such notions. Other corporations employed a semblance of transparency by identifying where the company rated on a given diversity measure. It is

unknown how employees viewed this statement, but the potential for disagreement from employees who perceive unfairness as a corporation focuses its efforts on a particular group does exist (Hon & Bruner, 2000; Jayne & Dipboye, 2004). Worse, those who are the beneficiaries of such programmes can be stigmatised as incompetent (Jayne & Dipboye, 2004), raising legal and ethical questions regarding employee interactions. Maak (2007) contends that building relationships among stakeholders is a necessary component of ethical leadership. According to the scholar, corporations that utilise ethical engagement can solve many of the problems businesses currently face. Additionally, employees expect that kind of leadership when they join corporations.

Conclusion

Online representations of employee resource groups (ERGs) impede employee engagement by focusing primarily on company image and portraying employee success as secondary to company-wide initiatives. Employees who seek out ERGs could be disappointed to find that such groups focus on corporations rather than individual employees. Corporate image could improve with external stakeholders at the expense of corporate identity among internal stakeholders.

The fact that the present study involved analysis of corporate websites rather than interviews with corporate employees is a limitation of the present study. True engagement only occurs when employee perspectives are equivalent to those of senior leaders. Unfortunately, initial study plans to conduct focus groups and interviews with ERG members were unsuccessful. Notwithstanding this limitation, future research should address how employees use corporate websites, how they understand the material, and what should be improved from their perspective.

Despite the exploratory nature of the present study, it builds a foundation for future research. Comparative analysis examining corporate websites and media-facing messages about diversity could yield valuable insights for corporate communicators regarding consistency

across platforms. Scholarship about ERGs has focused thus far on groups for LGBT (e.g., Colgan & McKearney, 2012; Day & Greene, 2008; Githens & Aragon, 2009) or female employees (Bierema, 2005). The academic body of knowledge could benefit from exploring the perspectives of those who make up the next largest focus areas of ERGs in the United States (Mercer Group, 2011): African-Americans, Latinos, Asians, and disabled employees. The fact that Europe-headquartered companies more often report religious groups (Mercer Group, 2011) was supported in the present study. Researchers outside of the United States could use this phenomenon as a starting point to explore how the socio-political context of a given country informs the development of ERGs (e.g., Tian, 2008).

Although ERGs are intended to facilitate support for either employees or their employers, study findings indicate that online representations of ERGs advance a positive corporate image rather than convey support for individual employees.

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