



Leading Practice

Business Resource Groups—Your Force Multiplier

Part 1: Veterans Business Resource Groups: Return On Your Investment

When managed correctly, 100,000 Jobs Mission coalition members have found Veterans Business Resource Groups (BRG) to be an asset to the organization and all of its employees, both non-veteran and veteran.

If you are not familiar with Business Resources Groups, this section of the Leading Practice, Part 1, will help you quickly understand the strategic role and the value resource groups provide to all stakeholders in organizations.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Business Resource Groups (also called Employee Resource Groups (ERG), Networking Groups, or Affinity Groups) provide employees with opportunities to meet and take action to address common interests, issues and concerns. In addition these groups may act as strategic partners for the organization and provide employers with input about business issues or opportunities.

100,000 Job Mission's coalition partners believe BRGs are a benefit to their veteran initiatives. They describe the value of these employee-led groups in terms of their positive impact on the company, the individual veteran or service member, and the organization's general workforce.

Mission members indicate improving veteran recruitment and retention were key benefits for the company. These groups provide BRG participants with opportunities for skills enrichment that many BRG participants may not have access to otherwise. Because of their strategic quality, these groups are also impacting the market presence of the organization, enhancing the brand image and positioning the company as 'veteran friendly.'

The themes of recruitment, retention, and professional development also describe the value of the BRG to the individual veteran and to the rest of the organization's workforce. Veterans and other employees describe how opportunities to be mentored and to act as mentors have enhanced both their personal lives and professional careers. Because BRGs include individuals from across the firm, BRG members can build organization-wide networks. These networks help to bridge the gap between veterans and civilian employees and provide opportunities for open communication and feedback, critical to continuous improvement.

WHAT IS A BRG

Business Resource Groups (also called Employee Resource Groups (ERG), Networking Groups, or Affinity Groups) began as a response to American business' diversity initiatives. Originally BRGs were formed to provide employees an opportunity to meet, discuss and address common interests, issues, or concerns. These groups have expanded beyond their initial purpose to provide input to employers about key business issues or opportunities while utilizing a formalized process and remaining employee led.

According to *Employee Resource Groups that Drive Business*, a study published by Jennifer Brown Consulting, such groups have evolved "from being event-driven, internally-focused groups to serving as critical strategic partners for various business units throughout an organization." (Hastings, 2011) With this expanded purpose BRGs provide a competitive advantage and are considered strategic assets by many organizations. 100,000 Jobs Mission members have seen positive results from group interaction in terms of both workforce recruitment and retention as well as customer and supplier relations.

Whether organizations implement BRGs as part of a business strategy or at the request of employees, these groups should have a common structure with metrics to assess their impact. "All groups should be employee led, but there should be criteria that must be met before the group is recognized as an ERG at the company," according to Tracy Brown, president of Diversity Trends, LLC in a recent article published by the Society of Human Resource Management (SHRM). These types of groups should have a common structure, a charter articulating their purpose, and clearly stated requirements based on the business' rules and regulations. These requirements may address building membership, using company resources, and adhering to reporting and/or communications protocols.

In research conducted by the National Center for Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, Department of Veterans Affairs, *Veterans in the Workplace: Recruitment and Retention*, companies identified having several different types of affinity/employee resource groups for employees; which include the following:

- For Veterans (34%)
- For members of the National Guard and Reserve (23%)
- For family members or spouses of Veterans or those in the military (including National Guard and Reserve) (19%)
- For Veterans and members of the National Guard and Reserve with mental health needs (16%)
- For Veterans and members of the National Guard and Reserve with physical disabilities (17%)
- For any employees with physical disabilities (21%)
- For any employees with mental health needs (18%)

Employees are informed about affinity groups that might match their needs or interests in a variety of ways beyond those which take place at onboarding, including posters in the workplace (38%), company emails (59%), hardcopy company newsletters or mailings (39%), periodic announcements at meetings (44%), word of mouth (41%), and via a formal mentoring program (22%). (*Veterans in the Workplace, 2013*)

By applying a systematic approach to BRG implementation organizations can effectively bring employees together to address common goals or issues. (See Figure 1: Implement a Systematic Approach to Form a BRG.) Businesses can avoid some of the concerns about forming BRGs; concerns include the potential to polarize employees or have groups devolve into 'gripe sessions.'

Figure 1: Implement a Systematic Approach to Form a BRG

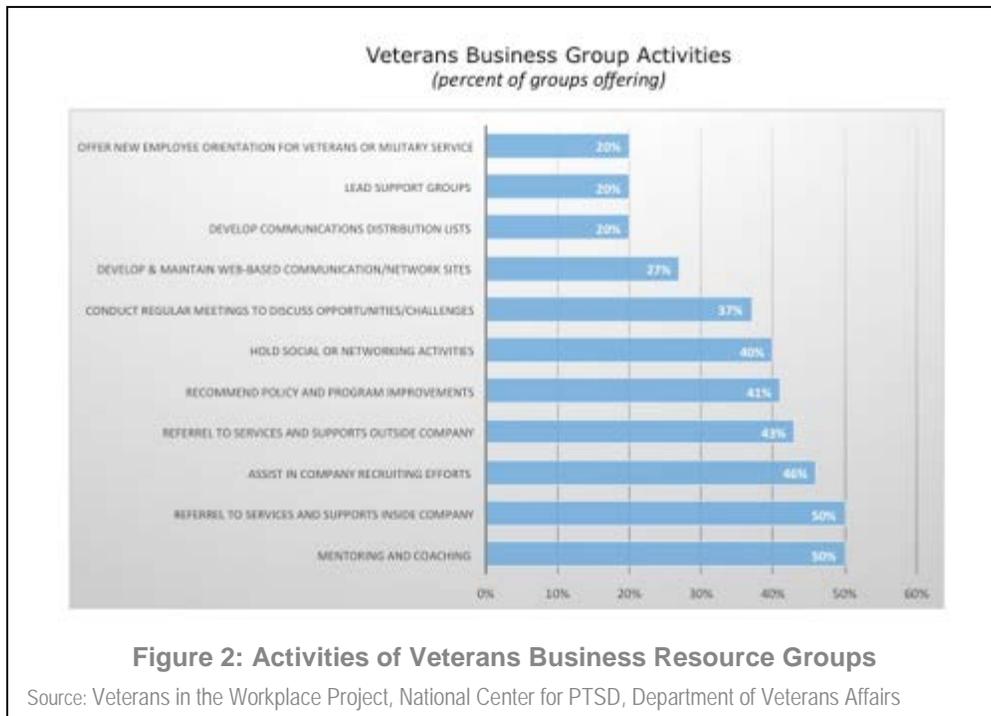
- Be able to state the business reason for their existence.
- Have a minimum number of documented members.
- Develop and maintain an annual plan of activities and events.
- Have a leadership team with built in leadership succession (i.e., from vice chair to chair) to ensure continuity.
- Assign an executive sponsor and implement a sponsor evaluation process for continuous improvement and sharing lessons learned

Source: Rebecca R. Hastings, SPHR, Measure Employee Resource Groups to Yield Business Results, 2007

100,000 Jobs Mission members consider Veterans BRGs a proven practice to sustain their organizations' veteran's initiatives. The groups provide local intelligence for Mission members in support of veteran recruitment, hiring, onboarding, and retention activities. Existing Veterans BRGs may benefit by expanding their membership beyond just those who have served in the military. Groups with both military and civilian membership can leverage member experience and expertise to implement projects that help ease the transition between military service and the civilian workforce and increase advocacy for the company's veteran initiatives throughout the organization.

A 2012 study by the Center for a New American Security (CNAS) found that "To leverage the talent of employees who are veterans, some companies not only create initiatives to hire veterans but also develop programs to meet the specific needs of these employees. Roughly half of the companies that formally seek to hire veterans also provide support programs specifically for their veteran employees. The programs are designed to ensure that veterans have the resources and opportunities necessary to succeed at their jobs. Some companies offer mentoring programs, whereas others have large affinity groups that offer both networking and support." (Harrell, 2012)

In its Veterans in the Workplace Project, the National Center for PTSD, Department of Veterans Affairs found Veterans Resource Groups engaged in a variety of different programs to support veterans and military service personnel in their transition to the civilian workforce (see Figure 2: Activities of Veterans Business Resource Groups). (Veterans in the Workplace, 2013)



WHY ARE BRG'S IMPORTANT?

When implemented as part of an organization's strategy to support veterans, Veterans BRGs provide value to the company, the veteran and military service employee, and the company's workforce as a whole.

Value to the Company

As part of a company's business strategy for growth, a Veterans BRG not only serves as a forum for veterans to interact and engage in social activities, but also provides the company with a competitive advantage in terms of veteran recruitment and retention and enhancing stakeholder relationships. (See Figure 3: Stakeholder Relationships)

100,000 Jobs Mission coalition members describe a number of ways in which Veterans BRGs have a strategic impact (See Figure 4: Veterans BRGs Provide Strategic Impact) and benefit their business, including:

- **Recruitment** -- An increasing number of 100,000 Jobs Mission members use Veterans BRGs in their recruitment initiatives to continuously reinforce their organization's Veteran workforce pipeline. Based on their experience Veterans BRG members can recommend peers and can suggest web sites or locations on military installations where it is likely to find veterans searching for employment. BRG members can represent the company at job fairs and host networking events for veterans who will or have recently separated from military service or for those veterans who have successfully completed college or a post-secondary education program. Members are able to meet with veteran job candidates to discuss their personal involvement, opportunity for growth, and perception of the culture within the organization. Companies find recruitment is enhanced as veteran employees share their impression of their employer as a *veteran-friendly* place to work.

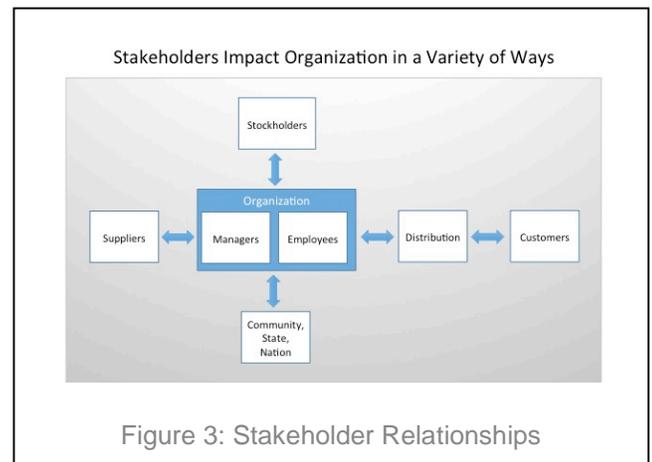


Figure 4: Veterans BRGs Provide Strategic Impact

- Act as liaisons to and provide investments in communities across the country
- Positively reinforce the firm's reputation and good will
- Support business development and customer/supplier relationships
- Bridge civilian/military gap positively impacting firm's ability to attract, recruit, hire, and retain veterans
- Assist in development of veteran workforce pipeline
- Improve overall employee satisfaction, pride, and morale
- Enhance organization's relationships with legislators in support of veterans' initiatives and increased veteran employment
- Builds organizational capacity through best practice sharing and implementation
- Acts as central repository for veteran information

Source: 100,000 Jobs Mission Members

- **Retention** -- The employee retention study conducted by Gallup Organization provides evidence that employee retention is enhanced when employees feel engaged; are acknowledged by their peers and supervisors; and believe there are opportunities to develop and advance. Veterans BRGs help to improve retention by identifying and taking action to close gaps in these critical areas.

- **Talent Development** -- SHRM reports that resource groups are among the best sources of discovering leadership talent and finding ways to nurture it. Employees who might not have the “right” credentials to move up in management or into another area of the business may find opportunities to excel and be noticed as they assume leadership roles in the resource group. As this talent is recognized, the BRG can help identify both external and internal programs to further develop the individual’s skills and prepare them for advancement.

- **Market Outreach** -- Understanding the potential of BRGs, especially in *business-to-consumer* firms, allows organizations to use resource groups strategically to enhance the organization’s brand and its customer and supplier relationships. Resource groups can assess the marketplace; develop consumer understanding about products and product placement; and act as focus groups for consumer opinion. Further, Veterans BRGs can support the development of supplier relationships with veteran-owned businesses and, because of the global experience of many service members, can help the organization build cultural-competency with multi-national suppliers and global customers.

This active engagement and advancement of Veterans in organizations demonstrates a clear alignment with company values and enhances the business’ brand. CNAS found that companies seek veterans’ expertise, finding:

More than one-third of the companies interviewed hire veterans specifically for their expertise...Still others hire veterans because of their understanding of the military environment, stating for example, “across the board many of our customers are in the military. Having veterans just makes sense.” Some companies enjoy a public relations benefit from hiring veterans. In some instances, this benefit is perceived as related to government business. For example: “Building a reputation as an employer who hires veterans helps [our company, which] works mostly for the government, win customers. Many customers ask what we are doing for our veterans, and by having veterans at our company, it helps our customers feel an affinity to us – that we are not just corporate America, but representative of America’s soldiers, sailors, airmen and Marines.” One company with a well-developed program to recruit veterans described how being perceived as a veteran-friendly employer can help all large businesses. “We think it’s good to associate our brand with the military brand, which is our country’s most trusted institution. It’s good for our brand’s reputation. Our analysis shows [that] veterans have higher net worth than nonveterans. So I look at hiring veterans as part of operating in the military and veteran space. So I look in terms of our bottom line.

I was at [a large company] the other day with their CFO. He said, “We’ll never have a full-time resource for military veteran recruiting.” I told him, from a business case, if you can quantify the value to [the company] in aligning with supporting the troops, the reputation that you get, if you can quantify the brand value, then that is a good business case. Because I’m involved in the veteran space, I can sell more of our products. So why wouldn’t it make sense to dedicate one or two full-time resources [to hiring veterans]? For big companies, it requires only a very small increase, like a fraction of a percentage [in company revenues] to pay the salary of that individual focused on hiring veterans.” (Harrell, 2012)

Importance/Value to the military and veteran employee population

Veterans BRGs are not only valuable to the business, but to the individual veteran or military service member as well. Whether they are a potential new hire, a long-term employee, or a member in the community, Veterans BRGs provide benefits cutting across a wide-range of opportunities and challenges facing veterans, military service members, and their families. These benefits include the following:

- **Mentoring** – Veterans mention mentoring as the single most important benefit of being involved in a Veterans BRG. Whether the program is formal or informal the advice shared during mentoring conversations helps veterans understand what it takes to be successful in a business environment versus a military one. Often that means helping veterans understand how to navigate and ‘manage up’ in a matrixed management structure, a structure quite different from the one they experienced in the military. Conversations about how to establish a veteran’s ‘professional brand’ may seem antithetical based on his or her military experience. However, learning how to balance developing their personal brand while supporting and advancing their work team is key to success in a corporate culture.
- **Subject Matter Expertise** -- One of the benefits of a resource group is the depth of expertise and experience of its membership. Chances are if a question is raised or a challenge is being faced by one of the group’s members, another member has the expertise to address it or knows who to contact. This benefit may extend outside of the organization if veterans and military personnel in the community know about the group and can take advantage of the members’ subject matter expertise.
- **Recruiting support** – For enlisted personnel, transitioning into the civilian workplace may seem like a daunting task. As the transitioning military service person researches an organization, a Veterans BRG may provide him/her with an opportunity to talk with someone who understands how their expertise and experience may meet the company’s open jobs and if the culture of the company is ‘veteran-friendly.’ Members of the BRG could support the company’s recruitment efforts and help other service members at the same time. These supports may

include referring colleagues who could provide expertise to the company or suggesting locations or websites to find veterans seeking civilian employment.

Asking Veterans BRG members to mentor veteran job candidates can benefit the candidate, the company, and the BRG member. Some veteran jobs candidates may struggle to translate their military experience or way of speaking into the civilian workforce. Suggesting the candidate speak with a member of the company's Veterans BRG who can coach and assist with interview preparation can help address translation concerns and prepare the candidate for the next steps in the interview process. Thus, the job candidate, the company and the BRG member benefit by helping the company find the right candidate to *build the team*.

- **Networking** – Veterans BRGs help members network across the units in an organization. In large organizations this often means connecting with individuals in different states or countries. While garnering support for and working together on BRG projects, members learn about the processes through which the organization makes, markets, and sells its products and services; how the organizational structure supports the business and its employees; how the firm interacts with its customers and suppliers; and who is leading the various business units and strategic initiatives.

In 2011 the Global Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion practice of a human resources firm, Mercer's, analyzed the employee networks of 64 mostly global, for-profit companies. In the report, *ERGs Come of Age: The Evolution of Employee Resource Groups*, business leader respondents noted, "Those ERGs that are helping the business succeed get recognition and support from business executives, which, in turn, leads to more developmental opportunities and visibility for the members." (Hastings, 2011) This opportunity to learn about the organization and to interact with leaders and veterans from across the business is key to enhancing the veteran's career advancement.

- **Volunteering** – As the Veterans BRG matures and builds its capacity, the BRGs frequently engage in volunteer activities that support other veterans within the company or the community. These activities may include social events such as picnics or Memorial Day programs; support of deployed company or community military personnel; and involvement in community events. Participation in these activities builds the veteran's experience and enhances his/her growth both personally and professionally. This involvement increases the veteran's visibility across the organization, enhancing opportunities for recognition and advancement.

Importance/Value to all employees

In its report, *ERGs Come of Age: The Evolution of Employee Resource Groups*, Mercer found many companies find value in their resource groups. "The more the groups get involved in solving real-time business problems, the more visible they

become in the organization, the more excited employees become about participating and the more they benefit from their involvement.” (Hastings, 2011)

Veterans BRGs benefit from the same value proposition. Because of the work they do and the way they engage employees inside the company and community members outside of the firm, Veterans BRGs provide value to all employees. (See Figure 5: Veterans BRGs add value across the organization)

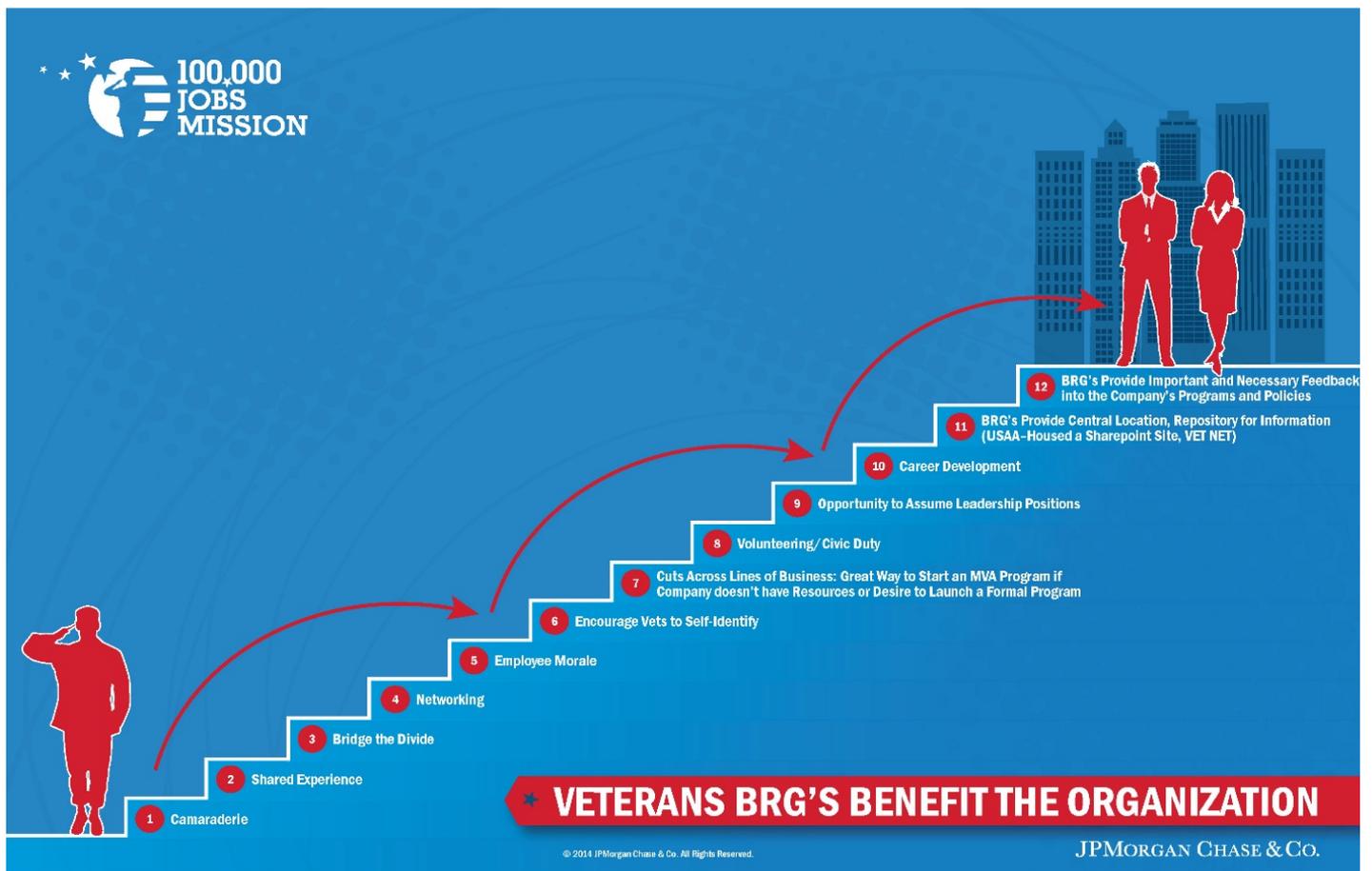


Figure 5: Veterans BRG's Benefit the Entire Organization

- **Bridges the divide** – Not every employee has the opportunity to serve or have a family member serve in the military. They may find it difficult to understand the military experience, having not encountered it themselves. Veterans on the other hand may feel 'alone' or 'isolated' when co-workers are unable to relate to what they have

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gone through. Veterans BRG sponsored programming helps to build understanding and rapport between the veterans and the civilians in the workforce.

- **Networking** – Building a network is important for all employees, not just veterans. As members of Veterans BRGs mature in the organization they are often called upon to share their experiences and act as mentors for other employees regardless of their military background. Helping individuals build networks and personal relationships across the organization strengthens the ability of an organization to develop talent within.

- **Feedback** – When BRGs are structured with a clear business purpose, report measures of success, and use clear communication systems they are well positioned to provide important feedback on not only the group's progress, but on the implementation of company programs and policies effecting all employees as well. This ability to provide fact-based comments supports continuous improvement, benefitting everyone.

CONCLUSION

100,000 Jobs Mission coalition members find Veterans BRGs bring real value to the company and its veteran, military service, and civilian employees. With forethought during implementation these groups can provide not only a means to recruit, develop, and retain veterans and military service employees; but can help build mentoring and networking opportunities for all employees supporting a stronger, more resilient organization. BRG projects provide impactful results inside the company, in the community, and often with customers, suppliers, and other stakeholders who view such activities as positive demonstrations of the organization's values and brand.

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RESOURCES

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ABOUT THE 100,000 JOBS MISSION

Launched in 2011, the 100,000 Jobs Mission brings together companies committed to hiring U.S. military veterans and military spouses. The 182 companies now involved have pledged to hire 200,000 veterans by 2020. They hired 190,046 veterans through the third quarter of 2014. For more information on the 100,000 Jobs Mission, visit jobsmission.com.

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