The Power of Staff Networks:

A literature review of the evidence

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Foreword from Cherron Inko-Tariah MBE:

As a proud advocate for staff networks, I am excited about this literature review by Affinity Health at Work.

I have seen how staff networks improve outcomes for employees and contribute to the bottom line of their organisation. They build empathy, provide support to colleagues, challenge mindsets, influence policy, increase employee engagement, demonstrate frugal innovation, boost productivity and so much more. And yet despite the wealth of benefits, too many staff networks are under resourced and operate on the periphery of their organisation.

As part of our commitment to transform the conversation around employee networks, the Power of Staff Networks commissioned a literature review looking at three core themes:

1.   The prevalence of staff networks and the aims they attempt to address

2.   The business relevant outcomes

3.   The processes and strategies employed to establish and maintain effective staff networks.

The findings in this research tell us that, despite a kaleidoscope of skill, the rich examples of good practice, and the passion of those leading staff networks, there is still more work to do on this agenda.

The research provides a set of recommendations and I hope you will collaborate with the Power of Staff Networks as we take these forward.

Let's continue making work better.

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Introduction

This report is designed to provide a clear, evidence based review of the benefits of staff networks. The review considered evidence from academic and practitioner literature in order to investigate the benefits of staff networks to employees and organisations.

What are staff networks?

Staff networks first emerged in organisations in the United States in the early 1970s, before migrating to British corporations around a decade later (Colgan and McKearney, 2012). The earliest networks were established to represent specific groups of employees who were at risk of discrimination including lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) as well as black and ethnic minorities. These early groups were involved in generating organisational change by encouraging corporations to tackle discrimination and improve working conditions for their members. These network groups are thriving in organisations today, existing widely across the country in the public and private sector, and typically exist for people who are at risk of discrimination or who have protected characteristics.

The prevalence of staff networks in UK organisations is difficult to ascertain, with no clear indication found in the practitioner or academic literature. However, it is clear they do exist in many different forms, in a range of large public and private sector organisations. Staff networks have typically been established for those who have protected characteristics (including age, disability, gender reassignment, marriage and civil partnership, pregnancy and maternity, race, religion and belief, sex and sexual orientation). That said, there are staff networks for non-protected characteristics e.g carers or new parents

Below are two case studies of large UK organisations and their staff networks:

Case study 1: EDF Energy

Women's network:

Support women in career development

Influence the culture to be supportive of women

LGBT supporters' network:

Support employees on LGBT issues

Champions inclusion and celebrates diversity

Disability and Carers' network:

Support employees affected by disability or caring responsibilities

BAME network:

Identify challenges affecting BAME employees

Run cultural events

Promote EDF as a supplier to ethnic minority communities

Working parent's network:

Works with the business on issues related to working parents and families

Forces support network:

Provide a support network to former Armed Services personnel who work or are about to join EDF

Portray EDF as employer of choice to service leavers

BAME network:

Supports ambitions of BAME staff

Increase number of BAME leaders

Run cultural events

Carers network:

Raise awareness of caring needs

Works with Carers UK

Helped to launch carers' guidelines

Disability:

Improve working conditions for disabled staff

Support disabled staff and customers

Faith and Wellbeing:

Upholding beliefs and values

Improving working life for faith communities

OUTbound (LGBT+) network:

Ensure LGBT+ staff are represented fairly

Enable LGBT staff to connect, support and develop

Women:

Promote women's interests across TfL

Learning, developing, mentoring

Support pregnant employees

Definition of staff networks

'Networks' by definition can mean different things to different people, therefore it is important when considering the academic and practitioner literature to be clear about what we mean within this review.

Formal staff network groups:

The focus of this paper is on formal staff networks which are set up internally in organisations to represent specific groups of employees e.g. ethnic minorities, women and employees with a disability. There is no agreed definition of staff networks, however they have been variously described as having the following characteristics:

- Formally established groups of employees that get together for various activities (Friedman and Craig, 2004).
- Internal to organisations and initiated by the employees themselves (Friedman and Holtom, 2002).
- Their role is to focus on the concerns or needs of the employees based on social identity (e.g gender, ethnicity). They are identifiable as an organisation which distinguishes them from informal social networks that always exist in organisations (Friedman, Kane and Cornfield, 1998).
- Provide useful information, organise social events and group meetings to discuss topical issues (Colgan and McKearney, 2012).
- Provide mentoring (Friedman and Holtom, 2002).
- The purpose of most groups is to enhance the careers of members by providing social support, information and leadership opportunities (Friedman and Craig 2004).

Informal staff networks:

There is a separate and large body of academic literature that examines informal networks in organisations. These networks consist of a set of individuals with connections between them and are characterised by the ability of their members to collaborate across functions, geographic barriers and cultures (Ballinger, Craig, Cross and Gray, 2011).
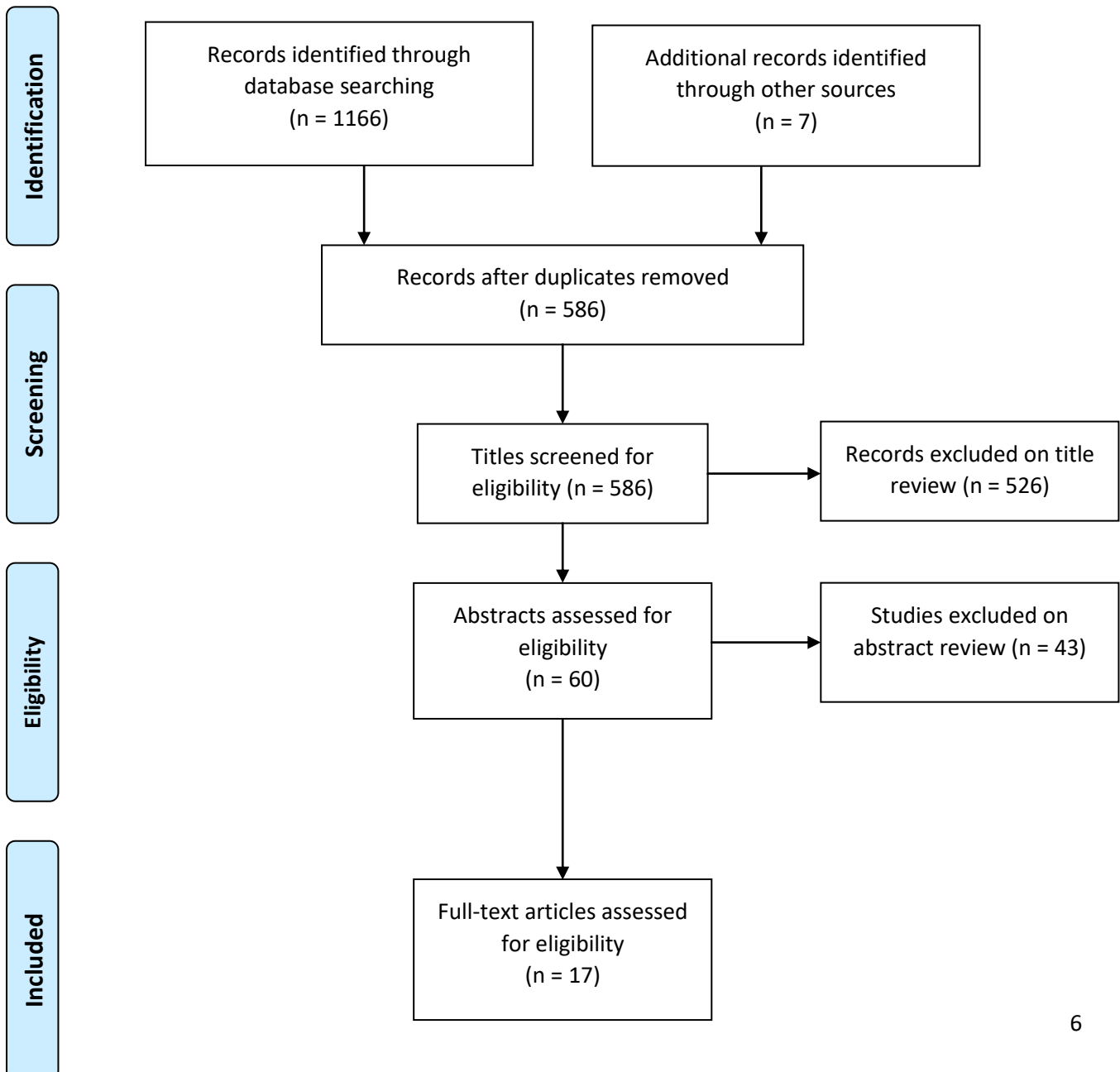
Informal networks have been found to have specific benefits to organisations and employees including: finding information, solving problems and delivering results, promoting well-being by providing social support and friendships (Cross, Gray, Gerbasi, Assimakopoulos, 2012; Ibarra, 1993); reducing turnover (Ballinger, Craig, Cross and Gray, 2011); and managing one's career (Blickle, Witzki and Schneider, 2008). Such is the strength and success of these informal networks, that it is thought that they may also be the cause of the barriers to advancement experienced by women and minorities in breaking into 'old boys' networks' (Hollenbeck and Jamieson, 2015; Ibarra, 1993).

While informal social networks are outside of the scope of this review, there are some useful findings within this body of research which are also worth considering when examining staff networks and making recommendations for the future. These are noted where relevant.

Our approach:

This review aims to synthesise practitioner and academic evidence to support the business case for staff networks. Evidence was gathered using three sources of information:

1. Practitioner guidance and position documents (e.g. company statements on staff networks, guidance documents).
2. Practitioner evidence. Empirical studies of publishable standard in the practitioner domain (including published reports, case studies).
3. Academic evidence. Following established protocols for systematic reviews of the literature, the research team identified search databases and search criteria. Searches were conducted in three databases (ABI, EBSCO and Science Direct) using the terms 'staff network' or 'employee network' or 'employee support group' or 'staff support group' or 'employee resource group'. The inclusion criteria were: journal titles published in English, between 2000-2017. Exclusion criteria were 'not Information Technology'.

Identification

| Records identified through database searching (n = 1166) | | Additional records identified through other sources (n = 7) |

Records after duplicates removed (n = 586)

Screening

Titles screened for eligibility (n = 586) → Records excluded on title review (n = 526)

Eligibility

Abstracts assessed for eligibility (n = 60) → Studies excluded on abstract review (n = 43)

Included

Full-text articles assessed for eligibility (n = 17)

Summarising the literature:

This review considered evidence from academic and practitioner literature in order to investigate the benefits of staff networks to employees and organisations. To present the findings from this literature review in a coherent and easy-to-access way, it has been sub-divided into the following categories:

1) How to set up and maintain a staff network
2) Benefits of staff networks, specifically:
    2.1 Employee voice
    2.2 Career management
    2.3 Promoting diversity and inclusion
    2.4 Turnover
    2.5 Social support
    2.6 ROI

Table 1 below provides a quick view summary of the sources of evidence found in this review. Each category is discussed in more depth in the sections that follow, however the table below highlights two important observations from the review: First, the practitioner guidance is largely focused on how to set up and maintain a staff network; and second, despite the wide spread use of staff networks there is limited empirical evidence of what benefits they bring, and how these are brought about.

Table 1: Summary of evidence from practitioner and academic sources.

	Practitioner guidance	Practitioner evidence	Academic evidence
1. How to set up and maintain a staff network	✓✓	✓	✓
2. Benefits of staff networks	✓✓	✓	✓
• Employee voice		✓✓	✓✓
• Career management		✓	✓✓
• Promoting diversity and inclusion		✓✓	✓
• Build employee loyalty		✓	
• Testing products or services	✓	✓	✓
• Encourages compliance with employment law	✓		
• Recruitment (attracting candidates and onboarding)	✓	✓	
• Turnover		✓	✓
• Social support	✓	✓	
• ROI	✓	✓	

Key: ✓ Limited evidence; ✓✓ Moderate evidence; ✓✓✓ Robust and consistent evidence

1. How to set up and maintain a staff network:

The majority of the practitioner guidance focuses on how to set up and maintain a staff network. Across the practitioner community, there is broad consensus on the steps needed to set up and maintain a network. Further, practitioner guidance reports a wide array of activities which are undertaken by staff networks. These include social events, book clubs, regular meetings to share concerns and ideas, increase understanding across the organisation of relevant issues and regular communication via an intranet page or newsletter. These steps are summarised in Figure 1.

Table 2 provides further information on each step and activities, combined with learnings from the academic literature.

There is virtually no academic literature examining the processes involved in setting up and maintaining a network. However, some of the evidence looking at why people join, or don't join is useful to look at in this section.

Friedman and Craig (2004) explored why people joined and participated in network groups. In a survey of employees working for a US company with over 100,000 employees, they found that:

- Those who join employee network groups are usually driven by the benefits they estimate they will gain.
- Employees higher in the organisation are more likely to join the network than those lower down the hierarchy.
- Dissatisfaction with work is not a reason why people join networks.
- Employees who perceive the 'costs' of joining as too high, for instance fearing they may be cast as 'a radical,' will be less likely to join the group.
- People do not join network groups if they perceive it to be riddled with politics and in-fighting.
- Managers can be fearful about the power of these groups and what their demands on the organisation might be.

Colgan and McKearney (2012) interviewed 149 LGB employees and 55 managers working in public, private and voluntary sector organisations in the UK. They found that frontline, non-managerial staff often struggled to get time off work to attend events and that LGBT networks often felt skewed towards male managerial workers. The language and format of events were perceived to be non-inclusive and so some employees chose not to become involved.

Figure 1: A sequential approach to setting up and maintaining a successful staff network.

1. Planning	Context of your organisation	Membership
2. Implementation	Goals, resources, sponsorship	Logistics, links to other networks and organisation
3. Evaluation	Recruitment, retention, diversity goals	Employee survey, recognition by external agency

Table 2: Considerations and activities for setting up a staff network

Stage	Consideration/Activity	Academic	Practitioner
Plan	Think about the size of your organisation – are there enough people to make up a staff network?		✓
	Are other processes, policies and systems in place which can support the staff network?	✓	
Implement	Who is your membership? If you are targeting a particular group e.g. women, consider opening the group to everyone. However, also consider if people need a 'safe place' to talk to make provision for this too.	✓	✓
	What level of employee are you targeting? If it is all employees, think about how they can attend meetings and events. Also consider communication tone and style and make sure this is inclusive	✓	
	Identify tangible goals for the individual members and the organisation. Aligning goals of the staff network with those of the organisation will help to secure senior support.	✓	✓
	Identify resources: facilities, time off, materials, finance		✓
	Consider how your network will link into other internal and external bodies e.g. a trade union, corporate diversity committee, external charities and opinion leaders, other networks around the organisation	✓	✓
	Who will be your sponsor? This is important to gain credibility and visibility for your network. It will also help to obtain the resources you need. It is helpful to gain the support of powerful figures in the organization who can provide the traction needed to fulfil objectives	✓	✓
	Think about how to communicate with members who may work in remote and disparate locations		✓
	Consider having a terms of reference. Ensure you have clear roles and responsibilities and representation from regional areas if relevant.	✓	
	How often you will run meetings or events? Where will they be held? Think about the members who want to attend – can they travel to the venue or get time off from their work? If not, how can you keep them up to date and include them?	✓	✓
	Consider what activities are relevant and appropriate for the group.		✓
Evaluate	It is important to evaluate the goals you set for the network. This will help to gain credibility and resources and ensure you stay on track, Consider looking at retention, ease of recruitment, achieving diversity goals. Consider including group members' participation in the network in annual performance reviews	✓	✓

Practitioners included: James E Wright PHR, Transform Work UK, The Home Office, Jeito Consulting, Stonewall, NHS, Nationwide

2. Benefits of staff networks:

Across the practitioner literature, it is evident that public and private organisations as well as leading charities and opinion makers perceive staff networks as having multiple positive business relevant outcomes. In her recent wide ranging review of race in the workplace, Baroness McGregor-Smith made the setting up of professional staff networks a key recommendation to government in order to improve diversity. Other nationally recognised organisations including Stonewall (representing LGBTQ) also recommend staff networks as a way of improving diversity and inclusion and enabling the employee voice to be heard.

Some examples of the perceived benefits taken from freely available guidance include:

Organisation	Perceived benefits
Nationwide	• Shape the D+I agenda • Retention and recruitment, (fundamental to reputation) • Challenge discrimination and promote equality
Stonewall	• Promotes diversity • Encourages compliance with employment law • Builds employee communication channels • Enhances customer reputation • Provides peer support • Promotes career progression • Improves products and services
UK Civil Service	• Build a sense of community across geographic barriers • Be a collective voice • Consult on people policy changes • Promote career progression • Provide peer support

The following section explores the academic literature on the effectiveness of network groups and examines whether the perceived benefits have any empirical evidence to support them. Specifically, the benefits are examined in relation to the following six categories:

2.1 Employee voice
2.2 Career management
2.3 Promoting diversity and inclusion
2.4 Turnover
2.5 Social support
2.6 ROI

2.1 Employee voice

Employee voice is *"the means by which employees communicate views on employment and organisational issues to their employer. It's the main way employees can influence matters that affect them at work. For employers, effective voice contributes toward innovation, productivity and business improvement. For employees, it often results in increased job satisfaction, greater influence and better opportunities for development."* CIPD, 2017.

Some authors have suggested that staff networks provide a new form of employee voice in the workplace. This has coincided with the decline of the traditional employee voice - trade unionism – which has created a void for new employee relations 'actors' to come to the fore (Colgan and McKearney, 2012). In addition, research has established that minority groups experience some structural and cultural barriers to participating in trades unions (Bell, Ozbilgin, Beauregard and Surgevil, 2011). Indications are that because white, heterosexual men have dominated unions for many decades, they influence policies and practices to reflect their own interests and therefore do not promote equality and diversity effectively across minorities, sexual orientation or gender (Bell et al, 2011).

In their research examining LGBT staff networks, Colgan and McKearney (2012) found that network groups were perceived to fill a vacuum within organisations by providing representation for LGBT employees. The reasons given for this were:

- The networks were all represented on equality and diversity committees and so were consulted on and able to influence the development of policies and practices.
- In global corporations included in this study, the countries with more developed LGBT networks were able to help with advice and contacts, colleagues in countries who were just getting started on their networks.
- Networks have been able to influence organisations in the development of external services to the LGBT community.

Bell et al (2011) suggests that networks can help to identify and resolve issues related to workplace dissatisfaction. They also recommend that networks build effective ties with external organisations e.g. Stonewall, which will help to provide avenues for employee voice outside of the organisation and which can then help to transfer progressive practices back into the organisation.

However, some studies contradict this position. Friedman and Craig (2004) found that employees do not join networks because of feelings of dissatisfaction, therefore this appears to mitigate the idea that people join groups to advocate to change their lot. Colgan and McKearney (2012) also found that while unions are able to negotiate and campaign on issues at national and international level, staff networks are not. They recommend that union structures should remain intact but allow for greater ability for networks to link into them to effect change.

It is also worth noting here that the substantial body of literature looking at employee engagement maintains that employee voice is one of the key pillars of engagement (Truss, Delbridge, Alfes, Shantz and Soane, 2014). Indeed, there is compelling evidence that the use of multiple voice channels has the strongest effect in building organisational commitment and engagement (Purcell and Hall, 2012). If other avenues of employee voice like trade unions are not available or adequately representing certain minority groups effectively, then staff networks have an opportunity to step in and fill this chasm.

2.2. Career management

It is well recognised that networks in general are essential for career advancement (Brass, 1984). Networks are also associated with other occupational benefits including increased salary and career satisfaction (Seibert, Kraimer, Liden 2001). Friedman, Kane and Cornfield (1998) explain that: 'an employee's ability to socialise into organisations, learn the political ropes and have mentors and political support, all influence career achievement.'

So, do staff networks facilitate the progress of minorities in the careers? Some research appears to indicate that they do, although no longitudinal studies have been conducted to verify this relationship over a long period of time.

Friedman et al (1998) found that amongst male black employees, staff networks had a positive impact by significantly increasing their optimism about their careers. This was mainly because the network gave them greater access to mentors who could help them with career advancement.

O'Neil, Hopkins and Sullivan (2011) studied female managers in a women's network in a large male dominated U.S. corporation. They found that the women in the network perceived opportunities for mentoring and skill development to be a benefit of membership, and that subsequently this would bring an increase in the number of women in leadership roles. The authors also examined the perceptions of the corporation's top executives towards the women's network. Although they were supportive of the network and talked of doing more to support women in providing them with resources and opportunities for career advancement, they did not have any specific plans or actions to do so. Instead, they appeared to put the onus for advancement on the women themselves rather than the organisation proactively helping them.

There are very few studies looking at the impact of staff networks on career progression, so it is difficult to draw assumptions from the studies above. Although it is outside the remit of the systematic review, the authors believed it was useful to look at other research which has been conducted on the impact of informal social networks on career progression, as there is some useful data within these studies which may help to inform future work on staff networks.

Some researchers have pointed out that networks may be part of the reason why ethnic minorities and women face more limited mobility in advancing their careers. Ibarra (1993) helpfully deconstructs networks and provides a clear understanding of their properties, thereby helping us to understand more fully why networks are limiting the career mobility of certain groups of employees. This information also helps to facilitate the building of a future model of a successful staff network.

Networks vary in the function they provide to the people within them. Some networks provide psychosocial benefits such as role models, acceptance and friendship, while other networks can provide instrumental benefits including the exchange of information and advice, as well as access to senior managers or advocacy for promotion (Ibarra 1995, 1993). 'Multiplexity' is the degree to which networks are multidimensional in nature thus providing both functions simultaneously. For instance, in a network that is multiplex in nature, there may be strong interactions with people at work to fulfil certain occupational needs, while also interacting socially with the same individuals after work for recreation. These multiplex relationships are strong and are characterised by having a high degree of trust and reliability

because these individuals have grown to know each other in a variety of contexts. They are also known to be of benefit in career advancement (Kram and Isabella 1998).

Another characteristic of networks which is important is that of 'homophily.' This describes the degree to which people who are similar in identity (e.g. ethnicity or gender) or organisational group affiliations interact (Ibarra 1995). Fundamentally, people tend to feel more comfortable and interact more with people who are like themselves (Tsui and O'Reilly 1980). This provides an inherent problem for minority employees who will numerically have fewer 'similar others' in the organisation, thus resulting in the accumulation of fewer contacts (Friedman et al 1998). This can also mean that a minority employee can have multiple networks fulfilling different needs, as opposed to strong multiplex networks. This may lead to more superficial relationships where there is greater potential for bias and stereotyping (Allport 1954). Homophilous ties may be prone to disruption particularly for women when they leave the workplace for maternity leave or to raise a family (Ibarra 1993), but they can also be advantageous to Black and minority ethnic workers in that they provide mutual support particularly in developing strategies to manage racial barriers (Ibarra 1995).

The status of those in a network is also important because powerful contacts are needed who can be useful and provide access to higher echelons of an organisation (Ibarra 1995). Blickle, Witzki and Schneider (2009) found that for early employees their career supporter's power is an important element of their career success.

McGregor-Smith's (2017) report on race in the workplace describes how 14% of working age people in the UK are from a Black and minority ethnic background (expected to rise to 21% by 2051) but many of these people are concentrated in lower paying jobs and struggle to achieve the same career progression as their white counterparts. One of the main reasons for this identified in her report was a lack of connections to the right people. If minorities are less likely to be in senior roles as these statistics suggest, minority employees are less likely to have 'similar other', powerful contacts at the higher levels of the organisation (Friedman, Kane and Cornfield, 1998).

It appears that career progression is a business relevant outcome where staff networks could really make a difference. Although there is not a great deal of empirical evidence supporting this outcome, the evidence that networks in general are good for career progression is so strong that the properties of homophily and multiplex ties should be considered in designing a model for staff networks. In particular, providing mentors within these networks seems to be a key element of facilitating career progression. Ibarra (1993) also points out that given the limited time and energy that is available for network development and maintenance, the requirement to seek out multiple networks can put a strain on employees. Providing them with a ready-made network which fulfils many of the needs they are seeking would go some way to alleviating this.

2.3 Promoting diversity and Inclusion

Many organisations propose that networks are a tool to promote equality in the workplace (Stonewall 2012). Some theorists actually suggest that the opposite may also be true and that network groups enhance discrimination by creating resentment towards the minority group.

A few studies have investigated if employee network groups do affect changes in attitudes towards discrimination. The results are mixed:

- Freidman, Kane and Cornfield (1998) found no effect of the network group on discrimination towards black employees i.e. the network group did not make discrimination any worse, but nor did it make it any better.
- Colgan and McKearney's (2012) study of LGBT employees, found that the LGBT network was seen as a key indicator of inclusion. The network also provided a resource to the organisations by advising on LGBT issues for training and running workshops. It was also a community at work within which they were willing to be 'out' about their sexual orientation. The internal websites which some organisations provided also were a source of important information for those 'not out' or for those who worked at remote locations and were therefore unable to attend meetings or social events. Another function of the group is that members provided a resource for internal diversity and inclusion training programmes.
- O'Neil et al's study (2011) on women's networks cautioned against creating unrealistic expectations about how much a women's network could promote greater gender diversity. They found a large disconnect between the women's perceptions and the executive team's perceptions of the outcomes of the group.
- Practitioners also suggest that groups should be an open invitation to all employees so that staff networks are inclusive to all. An example of this is the PwC Glee network – Gay, lesbian, and everyone else.

The extent to which network groups can really change attitudes to minority employees is somewhat limiting (Friedman et al 1998). It should be pointed out that most studies in this area are US based where legislation covering discrimination is very different, thus possibly changing the context and culture in which the network groups exist.

2.4 Turnover

Organisations often seek to minimise the turnover of staff due to the high costs this can cause (Ballinger, Craig, Ross and Gray, 2011). These authors also point out that one of the hidden costs of turnover is the disruption to productive informal networks and collaborations.

Friedman and Holtom's (2002) research on turnover indicates it is affected by several factors including job satisfaction, availability of alternative work and social connections. They found that amongst black employees, joining a network group reduced turnover intentions for higher level managers, though not for lower ranked employees. In addition, this effect was strongest where top managers were in the network. It was suggested that this is because their participation gave the group legitimacy as well as access to strategic decision making and more powerful contacts in the organisation.

2.5 Social support

Many staff networks highlight social activities and social support as a key part of their function. Despite this, the impact of social support from staff networks has not been widely studied in academic research. Colgan and McKearney (2012) found that amongst LGB staff, the network provided a work community where they were willing to be 'out' and a place to share concerns and problems. There were also limited findings in Friedman et al (1998) that social support is a benefit of staff networks.

What is evident is that relationships in general are essential for social support by providing friendship and acceptance as well as a sense of identity (Ibarra 1995). A new study recently commenced by the University of York in conjunction with the NHS and Stonewall, seeks to identify the benefits of staff networks including that of creating a supportive environment.

2.6 Return on Investment

There has been no robust research done to examine the return on investment of staff networks. However, authors cite demonstrating a return on investment as a key way to influence senior executives to support the development of networks in the future (O'Neil et al 2011).

What is not in doubt is the compelling body of evidence that diverse work forces have tangible financial and economic benefits:

- The potential benefit to the UK economy from full representation of Black and minority ethnic individuals across the labour market through improved participation and progression is estimated to be £24 billion a year, which represents 1.3% of GDP (The McGregor-Smith Review 2017).
- Companies in the top quartile for racial and ethnic diversity are 35% more likely to have financial returns above their respective national industry medians (McKinsey 2015).
- Companies in the top quartile for gender diversity were 15% more likely to have financial returns that were above their national industry median (McKinsey 2015).
- In a study of Fortune 500 firms in the US, Catalyst (2004) found that companies with the highest representation of women on their top management teams experienced better financial performance than the group of companies with the lowest women's representation.

Due to their benefits supporting career progression and diversity goals, staff networks have the potential to provide a return on investment, particularly given they are run mainly on a voluntary basis in organisations and do not require the hiring of additional staff. A thorough examination of ROI is needed in future research

Conclusion:

Staff networks are widely used in the UK throughout public and private sector organisations.

It is somewhat surprising that given the prevalence of staff networks across the UK, there is limited academic literature in this area. The literature that does exist cannot yet readily demonstrate the full return on investment that staff networks bring.

In summary:

- Many of the studies emanate from the United States and are conducted with LGBT or ethnic minorities including African Americans and American Chinese employees. There is no U.S. federal law protecting LGBT employees from discrimination in the workplace, therefore the function of network groups and the motivations of employees to join and participate in them may be very different to the UK where

employees are protected by law. In addition, the racial context and ethnic minority mix in the US is different to the UK.

- Most of the research is case study based and sample sizes are small, therefore caution must be applied in making wide ranging inferences from the study results. Studies using larger sample sizes across a range of public and private sector industries are needed to thoroughly examine the utility of staff networks.

- Where studies do draw from larger sample sizes, they are cross-sectional (taken at one point in time). At the time of writing, the authors could not find any longitudinal studies examining the long-term impact of staff networks to establish if causal relationships can be found between networks and their proposed outcomes.

- Most research focuses on networks involving management level or above in organisations. It is not clear the reasons for this. It is possible that more managers join networks than lower ranked employees because they are motivated by career benefits. Or as Colgan and McKearney (2012) found, because of the managerial content of the network events other employee were put off attending or were unable to get time off from 'front line' duties.

- No practitioner or academic research considers the challenges for people who may face multiple discrimination or who may have several of the protected characteristics under the Equality Act (2010,) e.g. someone who is an ethnic minority, female, lesbian and disabled). Ibarra has called for research on intersectionality particularly the intersection of race and gender, but other factors such as sexual orientation could also be included in this.

- Network groups also need to consider how they work with other areas within the organisation. This includes Human Resources, internal communications, occupational health, trade unions or diversity/inclusion teams. There is scope for duplication in work between these areas and networks need to ensure they are syncing with other teams.

- Most staff networks appear to emerge from organisations and do not have a formal design or structure in place. It may be useful to look at the wide body of evidence on informal networks, the benefits of which are well known, and use the properties of these networks to create a model of staff networks for the future. The design could include helping employees to easily identify and meet 'similar others,' and also to encourage senior leaders from under-represented groups to participate in the staff network, thus providing 'similar other' individuals with power and influence. Future network design could also focus on supporting women returning to work from maternity leave, or other employees whose networks have been disrupted to quickly reform relationships and ties which provide them with instrumental and psychosocial benefits. This could help staff networks to focus on what it is they are trying to achieve and to structure themselves accordingly.

The organisational context in which networks are situated is also an important consideration. The size of the organisation is key, simply because smaller organisations will not have the volume of people to make networks possible. It seems a logical conclusion that staff networks are only of benefit to large corporations or public bodies which comprise several hundreds, if not thousands, of people. However, most networks are formed around one issue (e.g. LGBT) and within one single organisation. It is worth considering how networks could perhaps operate in a more inclusive way across organisational boundaries and

encompassing employees across a range of issues and characteristics. These could also link into national organisations or wider professional networks.

Several authors, both academic and practitioner, point out the importance of obtaining senior backing, as well as ensuring other organisational systems and processes support the employees being represented. If the prevailing culture of the organisation is one that does not value diversity then tools in addition to staff networks may be worth considering. Without support and systems, the networks are almost doomed to fail, or to operate in a vacuum that achieves very little. Demonstrating a return on investment, supporting organisational objectives and helping the organisation to fulfil their legislative requirements would appear to be ways of getting top executives on side. This, combined with the multiple resources which go into these networks on a daily basis, and the perceived benefits as described by many practitioners, understanding the true impact of staff networks should be a priority.

Recommendations for future research:

Staff networks are thriving across UK workplaces but research is lagging behind. There are many possible avenues for research, however this review points to four priority areas:

1.   Understanding the prevalence of staff networks in the UK

In order to advance the evidence, there is need to develop a comprehensive picture of staff networks in the UK. Which organisations use them; what staff networks have been established; how are these networks established, structured and maintained (events run and frequency, location of meetings); who do they work for and under what circumstances?

2.   Understanding the motivations for membership and benefits experienced by members of staff networks

The benefits of staff networks are discussed widely within the practitioner literature however there is limited understanding of why employees join staff networks, how they become members, what benefits they are seeking and whether these are realised. Gaining member perspectives of how they are maintained and the perceived benefits will add much to our understanding, as well as offering an opportunity to explore the experiences at the intersection of characteristics, for example race and gender; sexual orientation or disability.

3.   Building the business case.

It may be the case that organisations track the benefits of staff networks however there is little evidence, in the practitioner or academic spheres, which clearly links the presence of staff networks, or the membership of a staff network, to outcomes. Relevant outcomes may include:

- Individual outcomes such as increased confidence, perceived inclusion and support, employee voice, job satisfaction, general wellbeing, career management;
- Network outcomes such as reduced discrimination, parity of opportunity, employee voice, representation across organisational levels; and
- Organisational outcomes such as reduced turnover, absence, compensation costs, talent pipeline, recruitment pool, reputation.

4.   In-depth, multi-perspective analysis of the planning, implementation and evaluation of staff networks

There are no robust studies that examine the planning and implementation stages of staff networks, rather our understanding relies on retrospective accounts offered through interviews by key stakeholders in the process which may be subject to errors of memory and may miss components of the journey. Further, no studies follow employees over time from the point of joining a staff network and therefore the true benefits to the employee (and therefore to their membership group) remain unknown.

Supplementary Information: National Day for Staff Networks pre-launch event feedback:

The national day for staff networks pre-launch event was held to bring together stakeholders and leaders from staff networks across the UK. The event provided an opportunity to share knowledge and experience of staff networks. At this event, delegates were asked about their priorities, and specifically what questions they need answered to drive staff networks forward.

The three dominant themes raised by the delegates were:

1. Measurement of staff network outcomes

Delegates were keen to understand how staff networks improved a range of outcomes for their members and wider organisation. This included the impact on paternity leave take up, recruitment, retention, collective bargaining, improvements in equality, impact on values and behaviours, product and/or service user experiences, race perceptions/feelings and improvements to employee motivation and skills. These issues could be addressed by a comprehensive programme of studies to build the business case for staff networks as previously discussed.

2. Senior management buy in to staff networks and culture at the top of the organisation - this was also related to acquiring funding and resources

Many delegates indicated that senior management buy in for staff networks is a real challenge. This is in line with the findings of O'Neil et al (2011) that senior managers did not fully engage in a network aimed at supporting women. The delegates indicated that even when senior managers do engage in the networks, it can feel superficial and more akin to 'tick box' involvement rather than anything meaningful. This can also affect the ability of the group to secure resources and funding for the network.

Delegates suggested that building the business case, fully aligning staff networks with organisational objectives (e.g. diversity targets) and using the network to provide a 'think tank' functionality to improve inclusion. Need for a study to identify and understand the current perceptions of senior leaders of staff networks to help identify the barriers and inform action.

3. Maintaining Staff Networks

Delegates were interested to learn more about what works and what does not with regard to maintaining staff networks. This included acquiring finance and resources, governance, supporting employees based in remote locations, supporting/influencing strategy and policy, tools and technology utilisation, leadership skills/training and promoting success. The aforementioned analysis of the planning, implementation and evaluation of staff networks would provide relevant data to determine how best to set up and maintain staff networks.

It is clear from the pre-launch event that a considerable amount of work is going on in this area across the UK, powered by enthusiastic and passionate employees mainly on a voluntary basis. In order to really unlock the power of staff networks we need to demonstrate their value by identifying and quantifying the business relevant outcomes to build a robust business case for the future. We believe the recommendations provide the steps to achieving this.

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Suggested further reading:

Crafting an Identity: An Examination of the Lived Experiences of Minority Racial and Ethnic Individuals in the Workplace, Dr Jonathan Ashong-Lamptey (Sept 2016)

	Summary table of key academic literature					
	Reference	*Type of staff network*	*Study design (if study conducted)*	*Aims of research*	*Findings*	
1	Visibility and Voice in Organisations: Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgendered Employee Networks.	LGBT (UK)	Qualitative study based on semi structured interviews with 149 LGB employees within 14 UK organisations and 55 interviews with management, trade union and LGBT employee network group representatives. Also, included analysis of websites and publications.	Establish why LGBT network groups were set up in UK organisations, if LGBT employee network groups provide a route to voice for LGBT employees in UK organisations, and if so, how does this interact with trade unions.	LGBT network was seen as a key indicator of inclusion by respondents. Most respondents felt that LGBT networks provided a new route to individual and collective voice for employees. However, shortcomings were identified in that the networks did not have the same leverage as trade unions when it came to negotiating and campaigning at national and international levels.	Transgendered staff were not included, therefore study is not entirely representative of all LGBT employees. Only managerial level employees included. Interviews were conducted 2004-2006, 6 years before publication of this study. Organisations were chosen based on being perceived as a 'good employer' using Stonewall guidance on good practice. Therefore, this research may not be representative of UK companies as a whole.
2	Predicting, Joining and Participating in Minority Employee Network Groups	BME	Cross sectional study of 20 network groups in one large US company. Survey sent to members of networks – 424 Blacks, 180 Asian (primarily American born Chinese,) 239 Hispanics.	Why do some people join network groups? What motivates people to participate in network groups?	Those who identify with the ethnic or racial group being represented by the network are more likely to join. Employees join if they perceive a significant cost-benefit to membership e.g. if they see a career pay-off. If employees perceive a 'backlash' to membership of the network, they are less likely to join. Those who see the greatest pay off and receive support are more likely to be more active. Those higher in ethnic group identity are likely to participate more.	Cross sectional study in one company. No longitudinal data to measure causal relationships. Based on US ethnic minorities so not clear how these results translate to UK.

	Reference	Type of staff network	Study design (if study conducted)	Aims of research	Findings	
3	The Effects of Network Groups on Minority Employee Turnover Intentions	Ethnic minorities (US)	Quantitative (survey)	To assess the impact of employee network groups on the turnover intentions of ethnic minorities.	Joining network groups is associated with reduced turnover intentions for managerial level employees. Networks are more effective if they include senior minority managers among members.	Data collected from one US company. Minorities included African American, Asian and Hispanic. Limited in terms of drawing assumptions to UK workplace.
4	Do women's networks help advance women's careers?	Women	Qualitative (interviews)	To compare and contrast the perceived value of a women's network, by women participating in the network and top executives.	Women network members and executives had divergent views on the purpose and outcomes of the women's network. Executives placed the responsibility for the advancement of women on the women themselves. Women in the network viewed the network as a strategic advantage to the organization with direct impact on the bottom line. Executives did not share this view.	A small study with 27 interviewees in one organization (size = 20k globally.) Interviews lasted 30-45 mins. US based company.
5	Voice, silence and diversity in 21st century organizations: strategies for inclusion of gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender employees	LGBTQ	None	Explores future options for employee voice for LGBT employees	Discusses historical 'employee voice' and diversity issues for LGBT employees including trade union membership. Future employee voice options recommended are employee networks. Benefits include: collective organization, inclusion of sexual orientation issues.	Recommendations not tested
6	Social support and career optimism: Examining the effectiveness of network groups among black managers	African-American employees (US)	Qualitative (survey)	Explores if minority employees in network groups feel more optimistic about their careers and experience enhanced access to social resources.	Minority employees in network groups experience increased career optimism. This increase is linked to enhanced access to social resources including mentoring and social support.	US based study on African American employees all at managerial level.

	Reference	Type of staff network	Study design (if study conducted)	Aims of research	Findings	
7	Race, opportunity and diversity of social circles in managerial networks	Informal networks minority managers (US)	Qualitative (survey) and quantitative (interviews)	Explore the properties and characteristics of minority employees' networks.	Minority employees have a smaller proportion of a) same race ties and b) intimate ties than their white counterparts. Those with high potential for advancement had a higher proportion of minority contacts in their networks and a wider range network than other employees.	Conducted on middle managers in four US firms, therefore limited comparisons can be made to UK. Very small sample sizes. n=63 of which 17 = ethnic minority employees, High potential subgroup = 9 minority employees.
8	Personal networks of women and minorities in management: A Conceptual Framework	Women and ethnic minority	None	Discusses types of network relationships and characteristics. Discusses how organizational context produces unique constraints on women and racial minorities causing their networks to differ from white males.	Author proposes a conceptual framework for women and ethnic minority networks with implications for theory and future research	No study conducted.
9	Mentoring, support and power: A three year predictive field study on protégé networking and career success	German former business students	Qualitative (survey)	Explores the effects of mentoring and informal networking on early employees' career success.	Amount of employees' networking behaviours predicted income, position, and career satisfaction after one year. Mentoring promotes successful networking.	Study based on former students of German business schools, therefore may not be applicable to employees in other occupational sectors.
10	Early career academic staff support: evaluating mentoring networks	US academic employees	Qualitative (survey)	Evaluates a formal mentoring programme for new academic staff.	Developing the mentoring networks of new academics may increase their retention rates.	Based on US academic employees. Small sample size, n=26.

	Reference	Type of staff network	Study design (if study conducted)	Aims of research	Findings	
11	Building engagement from the ground up: How top organizations leverage networks to drive employee engagement	N/A	Review of organizational network analysis conducted on a range of different organizations	Explores how organizational network analysis (ONA) can be used to improve employee engagement	Using organizational network analysis (ONA) senior managers can be identified for coaching. It can also be used to identify key opinion leaders in a network who can then be targeted to support key engagement initiatives.	No study conducted.
12	Integrated or disconnected? Examining formal and informal networks in a merged non-profit organization	Employees of two merged micro-financing sector companies (US)	Quantitative (survey)	Explore the networks of employees pre/post merger.	Merged organisations should focus not only on integration of formal structure, but also the informal networks across employees. Formal mentoring programmes may be helpful.	This study is based on informal social networks and does not isolate people from under-represented groups.
13	A stitch in time saves nine: Leveraging the costs of turnover	Senior leaders in 5 industries (consumer products, life sciences, professional services, health services, high tech)		Demonstrate how network analysis can reduce the negative impacts of turnover.	1) 60% of managers used the results to identify early flight risks 2) 80% of managers developed ways of using the output of the network analyses to retain valuable employees 3) All managers focused on improving network connectivity to ensure resiliency in the face of turnover. Other: People leave when not well positioned in decision making and information flow networks and so struggle to accomplish their work. Lower performers often had underdeveloped networks and tended to be less efficient collaborators.	This study is based on informal social networks and does not isolate people from under-represented groups.

	Reference	Type of staff network	Study design (if study conducted)	Aims of research	Findings	
14	Harnessing your staff's informal networks	N/A	N/A	Article discusses the integration of employees' informal social networks into the organisations formal management practices. It references previously conducted research.	Setting up communities (informal social network): Focus on issues important to the organisation. Establish community goals and deliverables. Provide real governance, Set high management expectations. Set aside real time for community participation. Train community leaders in their role. Hold face to face events.	No study conducted. Paper focuses on informal social networks.
15	Human capital, social capital, and social network analysis: implications for strategic human resource management	N/A	N/A	To provide the background and history of social network analysis (SNA). To discuss the benefits of SNA to organisations	Organisations can use SNA for the following benefits: 1. Pinpoint which employees are best at developing strong relationships. 2. Determine which employees are most critical to the network i.e. what skills, experience and traits these employees possess and then hire future employees accordingly. 3. Identify talent pools outside the org and track the movement of skilled workers 4. Help in the socialisation of new employees and in the adoption of new training or management practices and policies 5. Find lapses or bottlenecks in the communication process. 6. One of the barriers to advancement of women and minorities is the difficulty experienced by these individuals in forming meaningful	No study conducted. Paper focuses on informal social networks.

					relationships or breaking into the 'old boys' network.' Orgs that are well informed about the networks and relationships among their employees will be better equipped to combat barriers such as glass ceilings and be able to ensure that all employees are given the same development opportunities.	
16	A social capital theory of career success	MBA and engineering students at a large private US university	Quantitative (survey)	To build a model of career success based on theories of social capital	Social resources are positively related to current salary, number of promotions over the career, and career satisfaction through their positive relationships with three measures of network benefits—access to information, access to resources, and career sponsorship. It may be beneficial for a person to invest in the development of 'weak ties' to increase the level of social resources in their network, and to invest in strengthening those ties. Developmental contacts at higher organisational levels were related to access to information and career sponsorship. People who have multiple mentors experience greater career benefits than those having only one mentor.	Paper focuses on informal social networks.