



Diversity Ideologies and Employee Resource Groups: C-Suite Perspectives

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Abstract

Social and political attention to whether organizational diversity initiatives promote exclusion and divisiveness has increased. In this study, rare access to Chief Human Resources Officers (CHROs) of leading organizations allowed the gathering of their perspectives on how to navigate implementation of one identity-conscious diversity initiative, employee resource groups (ERGs). Following a descriptive survey ($N = 107$), a thematic analysis of interviews with 24 leaders indicated how awareness of potential advantage or exclusion signaling with identity-conscious practices was coupled with embracing more identity-blind or multicultural ideological approaches. Additional themes related to whether ERG goals were seen as aligned with those of the business, how organizations managed spillover of external conflicts into the workplace, and how stage of maturity with regard to ERGs impacted performativity. Implications for research on ERGs as well as practical implications for management of identity-conscious practices are provided.

Keywords Employee resource groups · Diversity ideologies · Diversity initiatives

Enhancing diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) is a common goal of organizations (Kirby et al., 2023), and typically multiple initiatives are implemented to achieve those goals (e.g., training, targeted recruitment, employee resource groups; Leslie, 2019; Roberson et al., 2017). Recently, popular media and political activists have focused on whether employer DEI efforts are more likely to have divisive and exclusionary effects than to increase inclusion (D’Innocenzio, 2024; Segal, 2024). Proposed and recently enacted legislation in some locations has been associated with reductions in support for DEI initiatives (Bickerton, 2024; Cliburn, 2023; Follmer et al., 2024; White House, 2025). Debates over DEI initiative effectiveness and anti-woke rhetoric have arisen among organizational science scholars (e.g., DiTomaso, 2024; Foss & Klein, 2023; Prasad & Sliwa, 2024; Roberson et al., 2024; Thomason et al., 2023; Waldman & Sparr, 2023). Media reports that

some corporations have undertaken repositioning or relabeling their DEI efforts (e.g., Ray & Melaku, 2023), although observers have noted that an evolution or update is often described in the headlines as a rollback or removal of DEI (Melville, 2025).

One particular DEI initiative that has been singled out by anti-DEI activists and the media as potentially divisive is employee resource groups (ERGs)¹ (Catalino et al., 2022). ERGs vary somewhat across organizations, but they are most often defined as structures to support employees of particular social group identities (e.g., women, veterans, Hispanic employees). Examining the current debate over DEI efforts, contextualized within organizational leaders’ thoughts on the pros and cons of emphasizing or deemphasizing social group differences, may provide new practical insights as to how to best support organizational goals regarding representation and inclusion without backlash on perceived divisive impacts.

Additional supplementary materials may be found here by searching on article title <https://osf.io/collections/jbp/discover>.

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¹ Employee resource groups may be referred to by other names (e.g., Business Resource Groups, Employee Networks, Affinity Groups). While recognizing that the choice of nomenclature by an organization is made to convey a specific meaning, for consistency’s sake the most common term, ERG, is adopted throughout this paper.

This paper makes several practical contributions. First, how organizational people leaders (Chief Human Resources Officers or CHROs) navigate the current landscape² of divergent public perceptions of DEI efforts (Atkinson, 2023) is examined, focusing specifically on ERGs and how emphasis and deemphasis on social group differences are reflected in rhetoric about ERG purposes and activities. The approach here was exploratory rather than theory-driven; however, research on diversity ideology, or beliefs about being more aware of or blind to differences (Gundermir et al., 2019) served as a lens for interpreting organizational stances and actions with regard to ERGs. Second, the data illustrate how ideological tensions around how differences should be viewed (e.g., identity consciousness v. blindness) plays out in ERG implementation (aims, structures, messaging). In particular, the data provide a deeper look at what ERG support signals to employees. Finally, the approaches organizational leaders have enacted to address identity-related tensions are highlighted and practical guidance is provided. In particular, how ERG implementation and pressures from external events affect what approach is embraced is described.

To ground the reader, a brief review of empirical research on the impacts of diversity ideologies or beliefs about how social identity differences should be considered (Wilton et al., 2019) is given. Then, the small body of empirical work on ERG effectiveness is discussed. The motivating context for this specific inquiry is then described, and a presentation of key findings of a survey and interviews with CHROs of leading organizations describing their ERGs in the context of the current varied public sentiment regarding DEI efforts follows.

Ideological Approaches: Similarity and Difference Emphases

The field of psychology has a long history of studying how emphasizing or deemphasizing group differences impacts how those with different social identities view each other and interact (e.g., Intergroup Contact Theory, Allport, 1954; Robbers Cave Experiment, Sherif, 1956, 1958; Minimal

Group Paradigm, Tajfel, 1970). Two broad ideologies as to the way group differences and similarities should be viewed, discussed, and emphasized have been presented in scholarly research. *Multiculturalism* (also referred to as identity-conscious or identity-aware) ideologies are beliefs in the value of recognizing and valuing group differences, whereas *identity-blind* ideological views focus on minimizing the salience of differences and emphasizing commonalities (Wilton et al., 2019). Some researchers have noted variants on identity-blind ideologies: *colorblindness*, ignoring group differences completely and emphasizing individual uniqueness; *meritocracy*, focused on minimizing differences in treatment; and *assimilation*, minimizing differences by encouraging those in non-dominant groups to become like the dominant group (Leslie et al., 2020). Dang et al. (2023) posited that leader diversity ideologies suggest what “ought” or “should” be done in diversity management.

Considerable research on diversity ideologies concludes that multiculturalism is effective in reducing bias and promoting inclusion (e.g., Apfelbaum et al., 2010; Plaut et al., 2009; Purdie-Vaughns et al., 2008; Richeson & Nussbaum, 2004; Wilton et al., 2019; Yi et al., 2022). Indeed, Leslie et al.’s (2020) meta-analysis on diversity ideologies found multiculturalism is associated with higher quality intergroup relations (less prejudice ($p = -.32$) and discrimination ($p = -.22$)). Despite these findings, there is also evidence that in *some* cases multiculturalism can lead to increased stereotyping (Guitierrez & Unzueta, 2010; Wolsko et al., 2000), greater race essentialism (race group differences as immutable), less concern about racial inequality claims (Gundermir & Galinsky, 2017; Wilton et al., 2019), feelings of exclusion on the part of majority group members (Plaut et al., 2011; Stevens et al., 2008), and changes in how minority group members manage their social identities (Kirby et al., 2020). In some ways, these results should be unsurprising as some of the earliest social psychology theories and research on discrimination and group differences noted that there can be negative consequences when there is an overemphasis on social identities such as race or gender (e.g., Allport, 1954; Tajfel & Turner, 1986).

Research on the effects of identity-blind approaches also suggests some nuance in findings. In Leslie et al.’s (2020) meta-analysis, identity-blind ideologies had mixed effects. Specifically, colorblind ideologies are associated with less stereotyping ($p = -.19$) and prejudice ($p = -.07$) but were unrelated to discrimination. Meritocracy was unrelated to stereotyping and prejudice and negatively related to discrimination ($p = -.48$). Assimilation was positively related to stereotyping ($p = .17$) and prejudice ($p = .34$). Some effects were dependent upon membership in a dominant v. non-dominant group. Such findings suggest that how ideologies impact outcomes is complex. Dang et al. (2023) found that followers saw leaders who embrace multiculturalism as more

² Data in this paper was collected in 2024 and thus prior to the issuance of Executive Order 14173 (White House, 2025) which banned “illegal DEI” in government agencies and contractors. Subsequent technical assistance from the EEOC (2025) defined unlawful DEI and specifically mentioned that ERGs would be interpreted as unlawful if they limited membership only to employees of certain groups. None of the ERG efforts described herein would have been unlawful at the time of data collection, and as CHROs generally mentioned membership was open to all employees, they would likely meet current guidance on lawfulness.

ethical than those who endorsed colorblindness or assimilation, but followers also responded positively to leaders who endorsed meritocracy. Additionally, research specifically on gender-blind versus gender-aware ideologies that stem from multiculturalism approaches indicates that gender blindness produces more positive consequences for women (Gundermir et al., 2019; Martin & Phillips, 2017, 2019), suggesting that whether one is focusing on gender, race, or some other social group categorization might make a difference in whether recognizing or deemphasizing differences is a more effective strategy.

Thus, meta-analytic work supports that embracing multicultural ideologies can reduce stereotyping, prejudice and discrimination (Leslie et al., 2020), but evidence also indicates that negative effects of an emphasis on social identity differences can emerge in some instances and for some outcomes (see Brannon et al., 2018; Dover et al., 2020; Gundemir & Galinsky, 2017; Gundemir et al., 2019; Rios & Cohen, 2023 for related reviews). Despite these nuances, Leslie et al. (2020) conclude that overall multiculturalism is “more consistently associated with improved intergroup relations than any identity-blind ideology.” (p. 462). Of importance in the current context of concern over DEI initiatives and divisiveness, Leslie et al. (2020) also note that a consistent finding across all identity-blind ideological variations is less support for DEI initiatives and policies.

In a similar vein to ideologies, the literature on diversity practices most typically categorizes them into identity-conscious and identity-blind groups (e.g., Konrad & Linnehan, 1995; Leslie et al., 2019). Note that this broad categorization may not capture variation in practice as to how the initiatives are enacted or perceived. In this study, how ideology is discussed in relation to ERG purposes, implementation, and effectiveness was specifically probed in questioning and in coding of the data. That is, as organizational leaders discussed ERGs and their impacts and challenges, we might expect rhetoric to align with whether the organization was engaging in movement toward or away from the identity-conscious, multicultural ideology that is assumed to underlie the practice.

RQ1: How is an organization’s diversity ideology discussed in the context of the implementation of the identity-conscious practice of ERGs?

ERG Effectiveness

Because of their structure and purposes, ERGs are categorized in the literature as identity-conscious practices, although it is important to note that membership is typically not restricted by identity (i.e., any employee can join). Definitions of ERGs vary somewhat across organizations, but they typically have aims such as to strengthen the voice

of employees of a given identity group, contribute to career development and networking, and increase inclusion and belonging across the organization (Colgan & McKearney, 2012; Friedman & Holtom, 2002; Friedman et al., 1998; Green, 2018; McNulty et al., 2018; Welbourne et al., 2017). It has been estimated that 90% of the Fortune 500 companies have some form of ERGs (Catalino et al., 2022).

There is a small body of scholarly writing on ERGs to turn to for answers on the specific question of ERG impacts on the organization, but this has largely focused on ERG members and outcomes for those members. For example, Friedman and Holtom (2002) found joining an ERG was linked to lower levels of turnover for racial and ethnic minority employees at higher organizational levels. Studies have documented developmental benefits for ERG members (e.g., Green, 2018) and greater member work engagement (Cenkci et al., 2019), but, for the most part, studies do not assess non-member outcomes or intergroup outcomes (i.e., stereotyping, prejudice, discrimination). Gutierrez and Saint Clair (2019) found that the impact of an identity-linked employee resource group on attraction to a job depended on attitudes about how people’s status in society should be determined, and this was true for both minority and majority group members. Friedman et al. (1998) found no impact of ERGs on perceived discrimination.

Given that this corpus of research on ERG impacts is not large, focuses on outcomes for members but not as much on non-members, and often involves small samples, making strong generalizations about the effects of ERGs on any intergroup or organizational outcome in either a negative or positive direction is premature. Indeed, making general conclusions is particularly problematic given the variety in social identities of focus (e.g., for women, racial minorities, LGBTQ employees), ERG goals (i.e., member networking and development, supporting consumer marketing efforts, recruiting diverse employees), ERG activities (e.g., training programs, mentoring, cultural celebrations), and the outcomes under study (e.g., member satisfaction, organizational representation).

Theoretical work does provide some suggestions as to when an identity-conscious practice like an ERG might fail to lead to positive intergroup outcomes. In Leslie’s (2019) typology of diversity practices, she suggests that identity-conscious practices can have unintended consequences when practices signal that “targets need help” (such as when ERGs emphasize additional training and development for members) or when practices signal “targets are likely to succeed” or have an advantage (such as when ERGs are seen as giving opportunities or access (e.g., to organizational leaders) not available to non-members). That is, ERGs might be viewed in unintended negative ways and thus might fall short in having positive impacts on intergroup outcomes. Relatedly, Iyer (2022) described how opposition to DEI policies may be

shaped by three types of threats to group interest: resource threat (concerns about losing outcomes), symbolic threat (concerns about new values and expectations), and ingroup morality threat (concern about their group's role in perpetuating inequity). Bryan and Lyons (2024) considered both resource and symbolic threats as falling under the broader label of social identity threat. ERGs might be viewed as threatening in each of these ways (i.e., members seen as gaining resources that others lose, introducing expectations and ways of operating in the business that are new, and their existence suggesting that bias from dominant groups exists within the organization). In this study, what signals and threats were discussed when describing decisions about ERG practices are documented.

RQ2: What signals and threats do organizational leaders describe when discussing ERGS and how are those addressed?

As might be expected with any HR initiative, research has shown that DEI initiatives that are not well designed or implemented can have unintended negative consequences (e.g., negatively received brand initiatives. Holman & Creswell, 2023; Holpuch & Creswell, 2023; Jungblut & Johnen, 2021). The practical "gray literature" on ERGS as well as review papers and case studies provides suggestions of other factors that might influence ERG effectiveness (e.g., consistency of policies related to ERG formation and activities (e.g., Catalino et al., 2022; Scully, 2009); sufficiency of support for ERG leader development (e.g., Schlacter et al., 2024)). One of the commonly discussed influences on ERG effectiveness — misaligned goals — specifically connects to diversity ideology and the signals and threats mentioned by Leslie (2019), Iyer (2022) and Bryan and Lyons (2024). In their review of research on ERGs, Welborne et al. (2017) noted that ERG purposes generally fell into the categories of increasing inclusion and access for those belonging to marginalized groups or enhancing the organization's goal achievement, whether that be diversity-related goals such as in recruitment or overall business success. While having multiple goals is not inherently problematic, a relative emphasis on individual outcomes for ERG members (e.g., learning, networking) compared to other goals might be interpreted as signaling that ERG members need additional help and/or that ERG members are recipients of advantages. Further, Gremman and Benschop (2024) found that some women's networks in their study actively resisted the organization's desire for them to focus only on certain activities related to the organization's diversity strategy, and Dennisen et al. (2019) found that network leaders were focused on career development and community building rather than removing barriers to inclusion throughout the organization.

In this study, how CHROs discussed goals of ERGs in relation to the goals of the business as well as how they evaluate ERG effectiveness in the context of the broader zeitgeist is documented.

RQ3: How do CHROs describe alignment of ERG goals and metrics for success in the context of ideological differences and perceptions of social identity threats?

ERGs, Intergroup Conflict, and Identity-Related Voice

Recently questions of whether ERGs can be seen as segregating, dividing, and fostering competition have been amplified by the news media and political attention to identity-conscious DEI initiatives as potentially divisive (Follmer et al., 2024; Segal, 2024). Given the context of broader societal debates on diversity ideologies, how ERGs affected corporate responses to identity-linked external and internal conflicts was a primary focus of this inquiry. In recent years, pressure for corporate activism on social issues (e.g., LGBTQ+ laws, Black Lives Matter movement engagement) has become more prevalent (Maks-Solomon & Drewry, 2021; Parcha, 2022). Here, CHROs were specifically asked about ERGs and activism (both internal and external to the organization) because of their potential link to viewing an identity-conscious practice as divisive or to viewing ERG support as performative (Levi & Fried et al., 49" 2025). Advocacy by companies on issues (e.g., LGBTQ+ rights, gun control, immigration) has been tied positively to corporate reputation and financial outcomes (e.g., Dodd & Supa, 2014, 2015; Hong & Li, 2020; Hydock et al., 2020; Kim et al., 2020; Rim et al., 2020), but also to negative consequences such as boycotts (Jungbut & Johnen, 2021; Rim et al., 2020). A lack of advocacy can also have effects, serving as a signal about how an identity is valued in the workplace (Corrington et al., 2022; Leigh & Melwani, 2019; Wang et al., 2023). Li et al. (2024) noted that attributed motives for corporate activism around identity issues need to be examined to understand when backlash may occur. Here, CHROs discussed ERG pressures for activism and explained how choices to advocate or to not engage on an issue are determined.

External events can also lead to internal conflicts among employees who embrace different viewpoints on an identity-linked issue (e.g., war in Gaza, social justice protests; Rosen et al., 2024). Internal actions such as discussion forums, speakers, and other activities may be requested, hosted, or promoted by ERGs, with the potential of reducing or escalating internal tensions as well as signaling inclusion or conveying a lack of identity affirmation. During interviews, the role of ERGs in organizational internal responses to external

events that are strongly identity linked was probed, as those also would tie into views of ERGs as beneficial or divisive.

RQ4: What is the role of ERGs in responses to internal and external identity-linked conflict?

In summary, this study considers ERG's roles in organizations at a time of scrutiny of DEI initiatives. The specific focus was on what CHROs indicated about (a) diversity ideology and ERGs; (b) signals regarding social group advantages, exclusions, or other threats associated with ERGs; (c) business goal alignment or misalignment; and (d) ERG roles in responses to external and internal identity-linked events and conflicts.

Method

The Society for Industrial and Organizational Psychology (SIOP) Foundation formed a partnership with the CHRO Association³ to provide evidence-based practice information to member organizations. The CHRO Association is only open to large, leading firms; as their website notes: "the Association's approximately 400 members employ more than 20 million employees worldwide and have a market capitalization of more than \$7.5 trillion. In the United States, Association members employ over 9% of the U.S. private sector workforce" (hrpolicy.org/about-us/overview/). As an initial focus of the partnership in 2024, perspectives on the current and future states of ERGs were chosen by the CHRO Association as a topic of interest to the CHROs who desired to learn more about evidence on best practices for effective implementation. As part of a multi-step effort, the SIOP Foundation aided the CHRO Association in designing, conducting, and analyzing results from a brief survey and interviews to provide information for CHRO Association members.

Sample

Participants were recruited from member organizations in the CHRO Association, which consists of nearly 400 large US-based corporations to complete a brief general descriptive survey about their ERGs (e.g., how many, what type), with 107 providing responses. From this set of respondents, 30 were interviewed; 26 consented to data use; and 24 to recording of the conversation; the focus here is on an analysis of those 24 interview transcripts. Of these, 2 CHROs had a diversity lead (e.g., VP) sitting in the interview as well, 5 of the interviews were with individuals who held the CDO

(Chief Diversity Officer) title either solely or in conjunction with an executive HR title (e.g., EVP or SVP), and 2 were with high-level diversity officers (e.g., VPs) without an additional HR executive title. For simplicity, we refer to respondents as CHROs and call out any differences in responses by title when they occur. Organizations represented in interviews came from a variety of industry sectors (e.g., manufacturing, retail, healthcare, restaurants, energy). All participants were guaranteed anonymity and assured that data would be presented in an aggregate form only; thus, quotes in the text are not labelled with any organizational identifiers but with an assigned participant number.

Survey

The survey and subsequent interview protocol were developed through an iterative process between teams from both the CHRO Association and the SIOP Foundation. The 16-item survey was administered by the CHRO Association and focused on descriptive questions. Respondents were asked how many ERGs their company had, what types of ERGs (from a checklist), when the oldest and newest ERGs were established, the extent of participation in the most active and least active ERGs (1–5 scale from little or no extent to a great extent), the job level of ERG corporate sponsors, criteria for forming ERGs (checklist), extent of ERG engagement with external stakeholders and allies (1–5 scale), the three most important goals of ERGs (checklist), measures of ERG success (checklist), extent of alignment of senior leader expectations with purposes of ERGs (1–5 scale), provision of an operating budget (yes/no), changes made in the last 12 months or under consideration (checklist), the extent an ERG will fulfill an important need 3 years from now (1–5 scale), and what is the top challenge with respect to ERGs (open-ended). A final question asked about willingness to participate in a follow-up interview.

Interview

Structured interviews of 30–40 min were conducted shortly after survey completion by a team of I/O psychologists with CHRO Association assistance over the course of a 3-week period in the summer of 2024. Results of the surveys were presented by the CHRO Association to its membership along with practical guidance derived from the interviews. After the project was completed, a separate, iterative coding of the transcripts was conducted to extract themes. Specifically, the focus was on extracting quotes that reflected organizational espousal of ideology in how ERGs are discussed and presented to those in the organization and their role in

³ Formerly known as HR Policy Association (HRPA)

identity-related conflict. The categorization of quotes⁴ and theme and subtheme labelling was then reviewed by a second researcher from the project team who validated these decisions, suggested more precise labelling of some themes and subthemes, and suggested a separation of one theme into two distinct areas for clarity.

Results

Survey Results

Survey respondents ($N = 107$) indicated their organizations had multiple ERGs, with 98.1% having 5 or more. The most common types of ERGs were women's (96.3%), LGBTQ (85.0%), veterans (84.1%), Black/African American (83.1%), Hispanic/Latino (72.0%), Disabilities (67.3%), and Asian (67.3%). The oldest reported ERG was established in 1920 (i.e., a precursor group to a current ERG, as the term was introduced much later) and 41.1% had added at least one additional ERG in the previous year. In response to questions about participation rates in activities of their groups, 89.6% reported moderate or higher member participation rates in the activities of their most active ERG and 41.9% in their least active ERG. Corporate sponsors were typically C-suite level (79.25%) or one level below (68.87%), and 84.47% provided an operating budget for their ERGs. The most common formally stated criteria for forming an ERG were consistency with company principles or values (81.73%), demonstrated employee interest (76.92%), alignment with company mission or strategy (75.0%), and to a lesser extent the creation of a distinct group that does not overlap with existing ERGs (55.77%).

The most commonly noted goals of ERGS were the potential to improve employee engagement (65.09%) and recruitment/retention of talent (53.77%). Networking and individual development were noted as important goals but to a lesser extent (48.11% and 44.34% respectively). Most reported considerable or great alignment of senior leader expectations with these goals (51.29%), but notably 8.74% indicated little or no alignment. Few (23.58%) described their ERGs as engaged with external stakeholders beyond a moderate extent. Success of ERGs was most typically assessed by event participation (77.67%), membership levels (65.05%), successful completion of annual plan and initiatives (54.37%), positive survey feedback from participants (52.43%), and membership growth (52.43%).

In terms of changes or improvements recently implemented or under consideration, the most commonly mentioned were

providing consistent resources across ERGS (54.26%); updating ERG charters, missions, or strategies (53.19%); and expanding internal ERG marketing (53.19%). Most also agreed that ERGs will fill an important need 3 years hence (68.27% to a considerable or great extent).

Interview Results

A portion of interview response content focused on descriptions of ERG implementation such as chartering processes, leader selection, and sponsorship. This content is described briefly first to provide contextualization for analysis related to the thematic areas related to ideological stances, signals, goal alignment and ERG impact, and their intersections with current societal ideological tensions which is the focus of this paper. Figure 1 illustrates the themes and secondary subthemes that emerged, which are supported further in ensuing sections and tables. First, CHROs discussed ERGs vis-à-vis an ideological stance that they were upholding or ways in which they were enacting changes to align with an ideology. This theme was labelled as leaning into versus leaning away from multiculturalism. A second theme that emerged related to the signals sent by ERGs and the unintended consequences or threats related to them. A third theme related to ERG business goal alignment and demonstration of impact. Fourth, CHROs spoke at length about how external social events impacted employees and described how they addressed identity-related conflicts and assured voice on identity-related social issues. While less frequently mentioned, a fifth theme was a discussion of what "stage" the organization was at in terms of maturity of their ERG efforts.

ERG Structures and Processes

While ERGS are not a new initiative for any of the organizations in this study, structures and processes were often described as evolving or being refreshed, and the interview protocol contained several questions asking about what was emerging or being reimaged. Specifically, questions probed criteria for how ERGs are formed, chartering and governance processes, and leadership and sponsorship.

Consistent with the survey findings, criteria for forming new ERGs focused on business values and goals alignment, and also on employee interest. New groups arising from employee interest included "a interfaith kind of multi-religious employee resource group is one that there's a lot of interest in" (Participant 21, Energy), "our neurodiversity ERG had been kind of a subgroup of disability inclusion and they've kind of breaking off into their own entity" (Participant 16, Financial Services), and "during COVID, we had employees who said could we form an employee resource group focused on parents and caregivers" (Participant 6,

⁴ For readability and conciseness, quotes have been edited to remove filler words and phrases (e.g., you know, so, I think) and unrelated context (e.g., as I mentioned before).

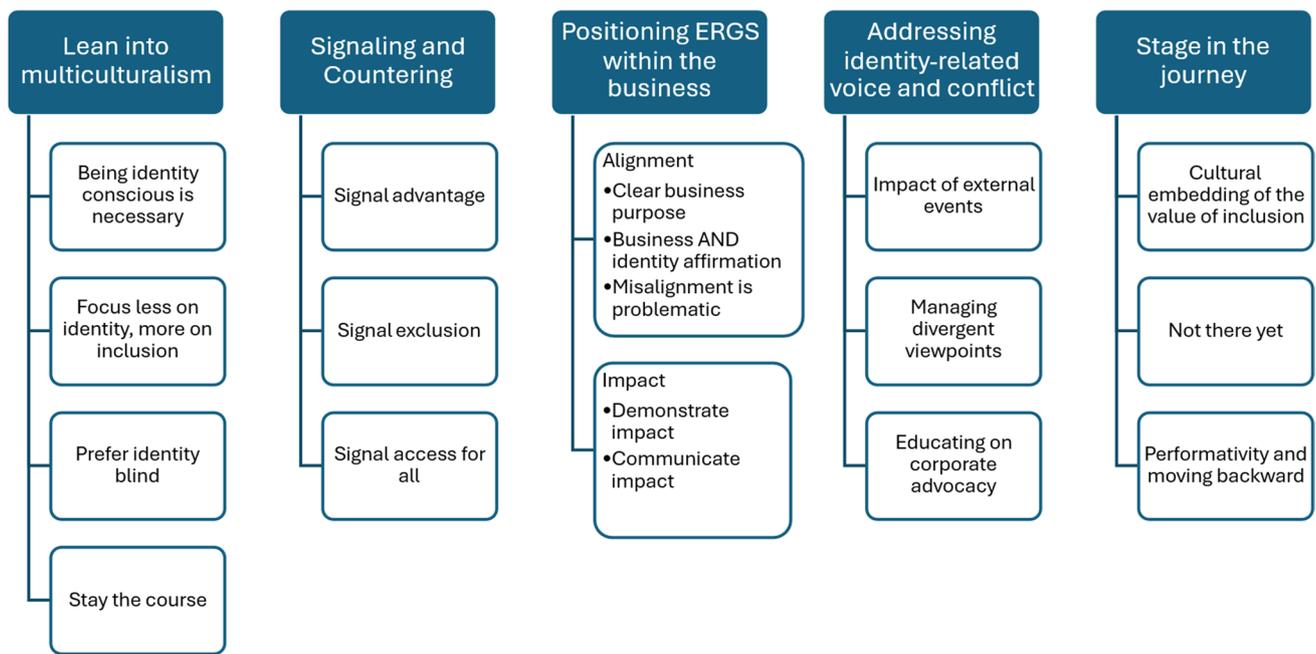


Fig. 1 Themes and subthemes

Agriculture). A few (12.5%) mentioned specific instances of turning down employee requests for new ERGs:

We often get requests to have a maintenance employee network, which we have turned down...we just have to have an honest conversation, tell them what you're not really facing ...challenges someone from an under-represented group is...And sometimes companies need to build a strong muscle of saying, No, we're not going to do that. (Participant 19, Energy).

...I think where others have went awry is everyone wants to have a network, and before you know it, you have gobs of networks. (Participant 15, Food and Beverage)

The criteria for ERG formation included having a charter, an executive sponsor, internal leadership, and a business or strategic plan. Multiple organizations mentioned a desire to refresh or refine criteria to make it clear what is and what is not an ERG versus an interest group (e.g., environmental/sustainability interests), with the latter not receiving the same funding and focus from the organization. As Participant 11 (Financial Services) noted: "...so many things that were dumped into that bucket of BRG [Business Resource Group] and ERG...we need clear understanding of what is a BRG? Because right now the guardrails are so wide."

In addition to continually working to define criteria for formation (mentioned by 33.3%), participants (45.8%) talked

about the need for clear guidance (e.g., SOPs, playbooks, guidelines) for ERG leadership. For example, "our ERG leaders are basically like, what am I allowed to do? What am I not allowed to do? What is our role? What is the business's role?" (Participant 10, Apparel Manufacturing) and "Moving from a bunch of activities to the critical few, making sure that they're aligned to our DEI framework so that they're not just completely innovation without a framework and guardrails and guidelines" (Participant 17, Manufacturing). The importance of providing structure was mentioned as a way to ensure ERGs thrived ("we don't want to form ERGs that wither on the vine" (Participant 16, Professional Services)), and had some consistency across time and across different ERGs ("having some common framework that they're all working under so that the expectations are similar" (Participant 5, Food and Beverage); "ERGs are not a platform for individual agendas. What we have seen in the past frequently is that you get one to two leaders of an ERG and their idea becomes the idea for how the ERG feels." (Participant 10, Manufacturing Apparel)).

Consistent with the literature, ERGs typically have an executive sponsor as a requirement for formation and to provide guidance and mentoring of ERG leaders. Interestingly, participants (20.8%) noted that sponsor selection and term limits were areas where they were becoming much more intentional in response to inconsistency across ERGs and to sponsor engagement levels ("it happens more by chance and

circumstance than plan...we've got a lot of variability in the level of engagement, interaction, and so forth" (Participant 21, Energy)). Sponsor authenticity was mentioned by one participant as important to embedding inclusion into the culture of the organization:

it can't just be 'yes.' Why? They have to have their personal why for why they believe this is important. If they can't get that narrative down and speak authentically about that, employees are going to see right through it, and this is all going to fall apart. If they don't believe it in their soul and it's not something they will personally take a stand on, it's going to be really hard to make a part of your culture. (Participant 15, Food and Beverage)

CHROs talked about the need for greater structure in relationship to ERG leadership as these are discretionary roles. Topics like ERG leader burnout (mentioned by 25%; "ERG leaders were feeling really burnt out, feeling like gosh, I'm volunteering all of this time, I'm not paid for it. What do I actually get out of this?" (Participant 10, Manufacturing Apparel) "Extra work for them can make them feel burnt out and make them not feel like doing the things that they're already doing out of passion" (Participant 4, Manufacturing)), leader selection (mentioned by 45.8%; "One of the challenges that we have had that we've addressed through better process is having the right leaders for the network groups because with the wrong leaders they take on the network group leadership role to create the platform for their own personal perceptions." (Participant 22, Pharmaceuticals)), and how to better address leader development (mentioned by 50%; "we found our ERG leadership coaching program is going to be key to their success" (Participant 14, Manufacturing)) were brought up as areas organizations were thinking about or where they were enacting improvements.

While 37.5% mentioned that ERG leaders need to be rewarded and recognized, whether to provide formal compensation for the role was brought up explicitly as an issue that was unresolved. For example, "We're struggling a little bit with is there additional compensation? Is there something that we would do in the incentive plan to recognize their efforts? Would we make it formally part of our performance evaluation, giving them official credit annually towards helping the organization meet DEI goals?" (Participant 21, Energy). Another noted "People raise their hand for things they're passionate about across [organization name]. So, the minute we take something like ERGs and put them into a different comp model, then we've got all these things that are similar that we then have to ask the same question." (Participant 16, Professional Services).

In summary, organizations in this sample expressed ways in which they had established or were refreshing or evolving various structural elements of ERGs (e.g., formation criteria, governance documents) as well as attending to who the leaders and sponsors were and the processes around selecting and supporting those individuals.

Leaning into Versus Leaning Away from Multiculturalism

In interviews, CHROs described their organization's positioning of their ERGs with regard to emphasizing, highlighting, or addressing identity differences versus downplaying or ignoring differences and emphasizing similarities across employee identities (i.e., diversity ideologies) (RQ1). Table 1 highlights quotes that indicate how CHROs discussed identity differences within their efforts to support ERGs and to increase employee inclusion. CHROs offered a range of thoughts as to how to achieve inclusion that reflect a continuum of ideologies: increasing the organization's focus on awareness of differences and their value (multiculturalism), emphasizing that ERGs are open to everyone (valuing difference while attending to potential concerns regarding exclusion), or deemphasizing identity (choosing more identity-blind efforts).

Many expressed a clear or strong focus on multiculturalism (subtheme of identity-consciousness; $N=14$; 58.3%). The importance of acknowledging identity-related differences that exist and impact experiences was mentioned. For example:

We could have said one ERG for everybody. And that's not going to work ... all ERGs are not the same, each have different issues, different solutions to those issues, different approaches that actually could benefit all. (Participant 14, Manufacturing)

Just understanding each other's differences and that we all come to the discussion with a different lens, because of our seats that we sit in are different. My experiences are different than your experiences as a woman, very different from a black woman's. (Participant 1, Healthcare)

Some organizations noted that while they retain an identity-based focus to ERGs, they were seeking to emphasize "allyship for all." ($N=6$; 25%). A subtheme here was "threading the needle" of retaining ERGs as a key component of a multicultural viewpoint while simultaneously backing away from other identity-conscious practices that are very visible (e.g., focus less on identity and more on inclusion). CHROs described retaining their core ERG structure around demographic groups (e.g., underrepresentation as a criterion for formation) and moving away

Table 1 Leaning into or away from multiculturalism, example quotes

Quote	Subtheme
Individuals -- we want them to perform and if they feel that they can be themselves and not walk around with the weight of whatever it is, whatever identity they have, that causes them to not be themselves at work. If they feel as though I have to behave a certain way, then it's hard for them to deliver because they're expending some energy not being themselves or worried that, "I'm not out at work. So therefore, I don't want anybody to know I'm not at work. So therefore, I gotta be cautious about everything I say, which doesn't allow me to perform my best." We think it's all connected. (Participant 20, Finance)	Being identity conscious is necessary
It served us very well to be able to say we understand that your faith identity is an important part of who you are. We understand that things are happening in the world that affect you with respect to that identity, just like they do if you're Black, just like they do if you're queer. We are going to embrace these conversations the same way that we embrace these other conversations about our differences and our identities. (Participant 16, Professional Services)	Being identity conscious is necessary
The decision to focus more on inclusion and belonging than diversity has been well received all the way around. Prior to just this last year, when we would look at our inclusion and belonging surveys, it was our white males that were the lowest scores because they felt like they were being excluded. That has shifted. I think that's partly because they don't hear us talking about representation as much. (Participant 9, Food and Beverage)	Focus less on diversity and more on inclusion
I joke around... if you just had people who stay with their own identity, you would be back in high school with cliques. You'd have all the chess club together and the band together. The beauty of inclusion is when you can get people with different backgrounds to interact with one another. That's what we strive for, right? So come in with your identity, but that's not your end game. That's your starting point. How do you integrate with everyone else? (Participant 20, Finance)	Focus less on diversity and more on inclusion
My wish is that ... we would have one BRG* and it will just be focused on topics and not people at all... but that's not reality...because people are very tribal. People love to be with other people that look like them. They do. And you can't take that away. (Participant 11, Finance)	Would prefer identity blind
If I had been here, I would have tried to encourage us to have it be geographically oriented and more about driving inclusion versus starting out in a way where individuals have a tendency to hyper focus on the differences and the challenges they face versus having a conversation where they talk about those differences with people who have other differences. I think finding common ground on how those differences make us more alike [would be useful] (Participant 8, Chemical)	Would prefer identity blind
The prevailing thought is, do the right thing, treat people with respect, and anybody can come work at this business, regardless of anything. And that should be the focus on how we treat people, versus singling out different groups (Participant 13, Building Supply)	Would prefer identity blind
We're not changing anything based on what's happening in the external environment (Participant 19, Energy)	Stay the course
I feel like people are running scared now. And we have said this [ERGs] is the right thing to do for our business...It just seems like a no brainer to us (Participant 15, Food and Beverage)	Stay the course

Note: Quotes in all tables have been edited to remove filler words (um, like, right, you know), unneeded contextual information, and to remove any identifying information.

*BRG, business resource group

from identity-conscious foci in other DEI initiatives (e.g., removing diversity metrics from performance scorecards and leader compensation decisions). For example:

Anything that we were overt on regarding diversity goals, or numbers, we have backed away from both internally and externally...in our annual incentive plan for our top leaders, we did have a diversity and inclusion goal. For this fiscal year, we got rid of the numeric diversity goal and went strictly on our inclusion and belonging questions from our engagement survey (Participant 9, Food and Beverage)

Another CHRO similarly noted:

We did have an ESG metric in our annual incentive strategy through last year. We pulled back from that this year. (Participant 18, Restaurant)

A few respondents ($N=4$; 16.7%) expressed that they were considering or were already moving toward more of a belonging and identity-blind focus (subtheme of preferring identity blindness):

If I have my way, which I don't know that I will, we'll be having inclusion and belonging groups

more geographically oriented, and there'll be a cross section of individuals. So, it won't just be the Black ... group, it won't just be the LBGQTQ Group (Participant 8, Chemical)

Of note, for those organizations that were moving toward an identity-blind structure (e.g., geographic groups, general programming on belonging), one noted this was a necessity due to poor business fiscal performance and another noted that fiscal considerations due to acquisitions combined with the performative nature of past efforts made this more of a necessary path. Perhaps not surprising, none of those who discussed moving toward a more identity-blind structure held a CDO title.

While some CHROs discussed further leaning into an identity-blind approach as a response to the external environment or because of limited financial resources, as Table 1 shows, others explicitly noted that they were sticking with their current approach and staying on course. Some went a bit further to describe their response to the external environment as “doubling down” on efforts to educate and to celebrate differences internally (Participant 17, Manufacturer). Another participant noted the question of how to respond to these pressures was one the organization was grappling with:

There's been certainly a movement to attack and to question the validity of the need for the ERG. How should companies respond and prepare for that? Do we

stay the course? Do we bow to pressure? (Participant 3, Food and Beverage)

Thus, CHROs across a range of industries discussed ERGs — arguably an identity-conscious practice that is more in line with multicultural than identity-blind ideologies — in nuanced ways. That is, they discussed being identity conscious as important and expressed clear support for some identity-linked purposes of ERGs (i.e., to provide space for and developmental resources for those of certain identities) while simultaneously emphasizing ERGs are open to all employees. A key insight is that organizations were grappling with removing or lessening the focus on some identity-conscious practices (e.g., representation metrics) while retaining the practice of ERGs as valuable.

Signaling and Countering Social Identity Threats

DEI initiatives such as ERGs can be implemented to counteract unfair disadvantages related to social identity (e.g., a lack of a network or mentoring) but can then, somewhat ironically, be perceived as conferring unfair advantages, even if their membership is not restricted by identity. RQ2 focused on illuminating perceived threats from ERGs and how people leaders address those signals. Table 2 provides some exemplar quotes illustrating subthemes of signals of advantage and signals of exclusion (mentioned by 37.5%), as

Table 2 Signaling and countering social identity threats, example quotes

Quote	Subtheme
Where we get really polarized is when... one group feels like another group is being elevated over them, and only their needs are being considered. And the other group feels left behind. And it's unfortunate. (Participant 8, Chemical)	Signal advantage
When I started, there were two ERGs that had been established, one for veterans and one for women. The women's group was called ... It was an acronym I honestly can't even remember what it stands for. We are a very, very heavily male dominated organization, and that did not land well with most. Right out of the gate, that ERG was not well accepted. I should say, the veterans ERG, of course, everyone was fine with, however. (Participant 13, Building Products)	Signal advantage
What we were hearing from our employees who were basically mostly white men, “I don't know where to belong. I don't know where to play here. I don't have a role at any of these networks,” and they either were like checking out because they just didn't see like they had a role or in some cases getting a bit defensive about it. (Participant 15, Food and Beverage)	Signal exclusion
Sometimes that's where some of those external issues come in, when it feels like other employees other than me are getting attention. Why aren't I getting attention? Or why can't I have something that's available to me? (Participant 3, Food and Beverage)	Signal exclusion
When we set up our ERGs ... , we named them all “and allies.” It's the women and allies ERG. It's the LGBTQ and allies ERG. It's always” and allies.” I think that has been particularly helpful for us to make it an invitation to others. It's not exclusive to this group... the way they got positioned has given us a little bit of a different opening. Again, I've worked in other companies where it felt much more for the group and only for the group. (Participant 5, Food and Beverage)	Signal access for all
We try to make them not feel so exclusive, that it's just for one specific group. Obviously, if you've got an ERG, and it's focused on Asian American employees, there's a certain focus that they're trying to meet for that employee group. All of our ERGs, quite honestly, a number of the activities that they plan and things they do are open to the whole organization. They're focused on awareness, celebration of culture, in a way that is open to everyone, and doesn't create a feeling of exclusiveness or specific focus. (Participant 3, Food and Beverage)	Signal access for all

well as quotes that relate how organizations are countering those signals by signaling access and inclusion (discussed by 54.2%).

In terms of advantage and exclusion signals, participants explicitly noted that the external environment was impacting how identity-conscious initiatives are viewed. For example:

I think in the last 12 months, we've seen an acceleration of particular groups coming out and saying, what about me? (Participant 11, Financial Services)

To counteract unintended signals, CHROs discussed emphasizing the non-exclusionary membership criteria (i.e., anyone can join; $N=3$; 12.5%), while others noted the need to ensure programming sponsored by the ERGs was open to all ($N=6$; 25%). This balancing of addressing existing inequities without creating other inequities (or perceptions of inequity) was also noted, as one CHRO described:

I think the average employee is looking for their company, to be supportive of opportunity for all without giving someone else an unfair advantage and creating a dialogue for how they can be a constructive part of that. (Participant 8, Chemical)

Another described this balancing act as:

In the spirit of trying to create community [there is a need] to be very cautious not to create division. There is a delicate balance between birds-of-a-feather and doing things that are divisive or stereotypical (Participant 23, Technology)

Further examination indicated how themes crosscut. Those who discussed accessibility for all as a way to counteract advantage signals also emphasized allyship as an ideological focus (Table 1), whereas those who mentioned a concern about ERGs signaling advantages for one group were the same leaders who noted leaning toward a more identity-blind approach. Seeking to address perceptions of exclusion was mentioned by both those who espoused multicultural approaches and those who espoused allyship for all approaches.

While Iyer (2022) discusses opposition to DEI initiatives as shaped by resource, symbolic, and ingroup morality threats, 25.0% of CHROs spoke directly about resource threat perceptions (whether exclusion or advantage) and how to address them while 16.6% spoke more about other threats in more indirect ways, mostly in the context of discussing learning and education as activities of ERGs. For example, Participant 1 (Healthcare) noted "Just come and learn. You don't have to become an advocate but come with a sense of curiosity to learn other perspectives." In these cases, CHRO comments fit with Bryan and Lyons' (2024) model of dominant-group employees' learning in response to threat as they saw that social identity threat can not only lead to backlash but, for some employees, lead to learning

and growth. However, one participant noted that mandating learning creates threat:

If you don't want to go to the allyship training...I'm not going to force you to do that. I think companies went awry where they have mandated training...we've got to meet employees where they are and give them what they need when they need it. If we try to push them early, bad things will happen. (Participant 15, Food and Beverage)

Resource threats are not just experiences of dominant-group members. Although not a prominent theme in the data, combatting signals of advantage of one ERG over another was mentioned, particularly in relation to budgets and programming. In discussing why they do not approve every request for ERG formation (e.g., multiple specific Asian groups), Participant 15 (Food and Beverage) noted "They may actually compete against each other." Participant 24 (Food and Beverage) described going from awarding resources similarly to all ERGs to now requesting budgets accompany plans and allocating differentially, which may lend itself to resource threat perceptions. In terms of programming, organizations noted things like forming councils or other structures to bring all ERGs together to share ideas and resources. Participant 17 (Manufacturing) described the need to convey to ERG leaders that they "work differently in silos versus partnering with each other" and to encourage examining intersectionality on issues.

Positioning ERGs within the Business

A common theme in discussions of how ERGs should be positioned and viewed in the current social and political climate was the need to ensure, publicize, and assess alignment with the goals of the business (RQ3; mentioned by 41.7%). A strongly related theme is the demonstration and communication of achievement of these goals (62.5% discussed), so these two themes are bundled together here. Table 3 provides example quotes and subtheme categorization.

Stating a clear purpose for ERGs was a subtheme. While CHROs noted one purpose of ERGs was employee networking and having a space for those of the same identity to share, a common phrase was the need to continually ensure that ERGs were not (or were not seen as) just "social clubs" and to articulate clear business goals.

I think a lot of people are like "Oh, yeah, that's a social club," and "yeah, kind of a 'nice to have.'" (Participant 5, Food and Beverage)

[Companies] They see it as this social club. Even in the best ones that leverage ERGs effectively, there is that sentiment held by some. (Participant 17, Manufacturer)

Table 3 Positioning ERGs within the business, example quotes

Quote	Theme	Subtheme
We have really narrowed down on ERGs are not affinity groups or clubs. We really want to differentiate that an ERG is an established group of 30 or more people to whatever affinity and that have a strategy they want to put in place. Clubs are more like informal groups -- we all have dogs, and we love to talk about dogs or pictures of dogs. People can feel super connected about being pet owners. That's fantastic, but there's not really a strategy around how are we going to make people who are pet owners feel more included in the workplace. Just ensuring that your ERGs don't get conflated with that, and that you really are intentional. If you are going to have ERGs, they are going to have a strategy for what good they're doing for each other and for the business. (Participant 10, Apparel Manufacturing)	Alignment	Aligning ERG to business purposes
I know other companies have been so overt as to change the name to Business Resource Group. Ours is: how do we get them more connected to company initiatives? How do we use ERGs as a resource to the business? We're in consumer products. These are consumers of our products. How do we use them in that way? How do we engage them in solving different business problems than we're really using them for today? Also, just moving from this place of not fully understanding the value to the business. What is the unique value that ERGs can add? It's maybe diverse perspectives for product or for a service that the company offers. We're not moving to business resource groups yet, but we're trying to say, hey, there's more to it than just getting together and just enjoying each other's company and broadening your network, but there's also value in employee development, to business impact, all of those types of things. (Participant 17, Manufacturing)	Alignment	Aligning ERG to business purposes
This is a typical ERG stigma. It's a balance between being a business resource and a place where you just go gather and make nice food and have parties. There's that whole continuum. For us, we want to make sure that it is a gathering and a network place and a place to honor heritages, but it also makes good business sense too and helps people feel like they have help with their professional development as well as their social networking and culture of belonging. I would say DEI is so core to us. (Participant 12, Manufacturing/Technology)	Alignment	Aligning without deemphasizing identity affirming value
I think we all have a lot to do to help people see the business connection and also the value of some things that are not tangible to the bottom line. Creating that sense of belonging, that sense of community for people that otherwise would not have that, or establishing a network for people coming in. (Participant 17, Manufacturing)	Alignment	Aligning without deemphasizing identity affirming value
The original women's group were told they would have influence in hiring decisions and who we hire and where we target. Well, that's not an ERG's responsibility. Their charters were not even set up well. There was huge pushback, because people said, "these people don't know what our business needs. We're not just going to hire women for the sake of hiring women or hiring know, a black person just for the sake of hiring a black person." It's more of looking at what is the right thing to do for our organization. That charter piece, that the setting up the charter, and what they're responsible for is, very important. (Participant 13, Building Products)	Alignment	Misalignment is problematic
One of the things we've been really trying to clarify for ERGs and for leaders is what they are meant to be and what they aren't meant to be. ERGs are not a platform for individual agendas. What we have seen in the past frequently is that you get one to two leaders of an ERG and their idea becomes the idea for how the ERG feels without ... the total picture from the whole membership. It is not a substitute for your DEI strategy. It is a part of it, but it cannot be ... a standalone solution to workforce challenges. It is a part of the solution, but it's not going to fix everything. I think sometimes people put a lot of faith in ERGs being able to do that, and that's a pretty huge ask. (Participant 10, Apparel Manufacturer)	Alignment	Misalignment is problematic

Table 3 (continued)

Quote	Theme	Subtheme
From what I've heard, especially from other ERG folks, is, a lot of us don't have really strong talent pipelining. We often talk about ERGs as this hotbed of great, diverse talent [that] will be such a fantastic way for us to help feed our businesses that are often lacking a diverse talent pipeline, but I very rarely ever heard of any business connecting them very well..... We just don't have it, and we don't have the capacity across our teams to build it right now, but that is a future hope. I think it's such a miss across many companies. We all talk about that being a really big opportunity but never quite make that bridge connection. (Participant 10, Apparel Manufacturer)	Impact	Demonstrate impact
It's a little more challenging to see that direct connection to, "Did I generate more revenue and generate more profitability that this year based on what I did with an ERG?" I think it's harder to make that connection. ... What was challenging over time was there was a lot of activity, but it was always hard to tie it to what was the achievement from that activity...It can be challenging to show the "so what?" What's the outcome of doing this? (Participant 3, Food and Beverage)	Impact	Demonstrate impact
We have proven some correlations between participation in a network group and higher engagement or higher retention...but that's not the sole way they're there and that's not the success. (Participant 22, Pharmaceutical)	Impact	Demonstrate impact
Quantifying impact can be a little challenging and then communicating that, like how can we effectively communicate the data that we do have so people can see, ... it's just like, how do we effectively show other people? How do we communicate that to our executives and deliver that component? (Participant 4, Manufacturing)	Impact	Communicate impact
How do we help the business recognize the value of them? We're in the midst of revamping. How do leaders support employee involvement in the ERGs as well and help them see the value? It's not an extracurricular activity that takes them away from work. It really helps them do their work even better (Participant 17, Manufacturing)	Impact	Communicate impact

A second subtheme was that one's ERG positioning can be for both business and belonging purposes. Of note, CHROs (20.8%) indicated that alignment with the goals of the business needed to be undertaken without disregarding that members of ERGs were seeking identity affirmation and developmental support. While specific business-related goals (i.e., recruitment and retention of diverse talent, increased inclusion and engagement) were mentioned in passing in response to several questions, some CHROs explicitly expressed concerns that reflected other subthemes: (a) their ERGs were insufficiently aligned with business purposes (20.8%), (b) they were not doing an adequate job of demonstrating their business impact (20.8%), or (c) there was inadequate communication of those purposes and impact to others in the organization (12.5%). For example,

The more that the ERGs are connected to multiple things, the stronger they will be. If your company has a purpose, and the ERGs are connected to the purpose, great. The company certainly has a business strategy; if you can get the ERGs connected to the business strategy, great. A company has a talent strategy. The more the ERGs can be connected to the talent strate-

gies, the better. ERGs that sit on their own as a community of interest have value but could be quickly discarded. If they're integrated into the other things, if we want sustainability, and if you want them to survive, then they have to be connected to the real work of the organization. In many cases, they are, but they might not be so overt about it. Some of the paths of the future are: how do we more overtly connect the activities of the ERG to the work of the organization? (Participant 5, Food and Beverage)

Impact was mentioned directly or indirectly by most interviewees, likely because of the nature of the interview questions; however, 75% of those leaning toward an identity-blind ideology ($N=3$) did not discuss measuring impact, perhaps having already decided that impact was not sufficient to continue the current approach. Also, only one of these organizations discussed alignment with the business, perhaps suggesting that misalignment had already led to reconsidering ERGs. Views on alignment were also related to perceptions of signals that measures of impact sent. For example, Participant 18 (Food and Beverage) noted pulling a metric from their incentive structure for managers because

“we’re a publicly traded company...there would be some heightened scrutiny on that.”

While respondents noted that they measured impact through participation rates, turnover and recruitment data, and employee engagement survey results, there was an appetite for increasing the range of metrics available to better demonstrate how ERG existence improves the talent pipeline, helps the organization better connect with a customer base, or achieves other business outcomes. As one CHRO put it:

Quantifying impact has been hard. We’ve done the post event surveys, but we are constantly having to advocate for why is DEI important and why is it needed. It’s really hard to quantify the impact. It’s hard to measure a heart change or perspective change. (Participant 4, Manufacturer)

In general, CHROs expressed that they truly saw impact but also recognized that — as with many other HR interventions — there is a serial mediation process between the activity and hard productivity and financial metrics that can make the impact seem quite distal. One summed it up this way:

You want to have a workforce that is representative of your prospects and customers. When you have that workforce, you want them to feel safe, acknowledged, seen, heard, that they have an equitable opportunity to advance their careers, that they feel that there’s a sense of fairness and enough transparency to give them trust. And if they feel trust, and a connection to what the company’s culture is trying to do, then they will produce. And if they produce, then you’re feeding that virtual circle out there. (Participant 20, Financial Services)

Assuring Identity-Related Voice While Addressing Identity-Related Conflict

CHROs were asked about how external societal issues created internal tensions around identity (RQ4), such as navigating ERG member requests for stronger corporate activism (e.g., issuing statements, providing financial support for an identity-linked cause or event), managing desires for workplace attention to identity-linked social issues (e.g., bringing in speakers or hosting events), and handling conflicts among employees with different viewpoints on an external identity-linked issue (e.g., the conflict in Gaza at the time of data collection). In general, CHROs discussed how they wrestled with providing support for employee concerns while simultaneously ensuring ERGs do not engage in corporate activism that was unaligned with the company’s stance.

Table 4 provides exemplar quotes on this theme of allowing for employee voice while curtailing divisiveness.

One subtheme was around the negative impact of external events on employees (12.5%). Those noting that external events have an impact on employees and their ability to do their work that cannot be ignored also leaned more into multiculturalism. For example,

There’s over 30 states right now where there is some kind of anti LGBTQ legislation. All of these things impact our employees, wherever they’re located. There’s an impact when they come to work because you can’t completely separate out all of those different things that are happening (Participant 6, Agriculture)

However, other CHROs noted sentiments like “we cannot talk about everything all the time... if we spoke about a societal issue every time they occurred, that’s all we would do” (Participant 7, Retail). A number pointed out that it was important to have clearly communicated guidance as to what constitutes appropriate or authorized company support of employees as well as what “mission-aligned” means. For example, one described the message they tried to send to employees as:

We can’t control what happens outside the walls of our organization. We’re going to control what we can do and that’s how we treat and care for each other... I know what is happening is much more nuanced than anything that we could put in an email. We will not take sides on this topic because the only side we’re going to take is to treat each other with dignity, respect, and humanity. (Participant 7, Retail)

There were multiple ways that the subtheme of managing divergent viewpoints was described (33.3%). CHROs pointed to their ERG governance documents, policies on institutional statements, and training programs for having discussions with coworkers as ways they are able to navigate these external pressures and internal employee tensions. CHROs discussed the importance of training leaders on how to best navigate conversations on social issues as well as providing established forums where issues that arise can be discussed. That is, ERGs were often valued for the role they played in managing disruptions in the workplace related to social issues, as spaces for communicating authentically (Participant 14, Healthcare Manufacturing). For example, Participant 19 (Energy) noted that they had a structure for having challenging conversations that probably helps their organization have an easier path when these disruptions occur. Others highlighted a need for better ways of handling employee differences:

We have a lot of interest amongst employees to tell their side of the story and getting out facts that support

Table 4 Addressing identity-related voice and conflict, example quotes

Quote	Subtheme
If you come to work, you're not a machine. You can't just leave that stuff outside the company. Now, the flip side of it is the company can't solve those things. Those are deeper, bigger societal issues. What the company can do, however, is acknowledge that we know that's going on. We see you; We hear you. If it's so distressing, we can point you to the mental wellness resources we have that someone never thought about before. We'll make sure that their leaders understand, "hey, you know what, I just need me like a 30 second timeout, because this thing has me rattled." (Participant 20, Financial Services)	Impact of external events on employees
We've had to have really honest dialogues internally with the ERG and among our leadership team to say," we are in this for the support of our employees regardless of what's going on outside of here, and in fact, maybe even more so because of what's going on, outside of here." (Participant 17, Manufacturing)	Impact of external events on employees
We know that there's a lot of things that happen outside of the office that can nevertheless impact how you show up at work....like what's happening in the Middle East and Hamas and Israel has impacted a large swath of our employee base.... Unfortunately, we've had so many mass shootings...it's just hard to predict when you're going to be tapped...to have the discussion (Participant 24, Restaurant)	Impact of external events on employees
There's a lot of divisiveness.. if you weigh in on social issues like abortion or affirmative action, you risk alienating some and delighting others (Participant 8, Chemical)	Managing divergent viewpoints
We had to have a good conversation about how do we support you and how do we still have this activity, but without putting it in the faces of our employees who maybe don't share the same [views].... (Participant 5, Food and Beverage)	Managing divergent viewpoints
When I watched and I listened to some of the social unrest that shows up at work, and their lack of awareness or understanding in terms of what's really beneath it all, It's just basic life skills and tools that we all need. I feel like that's a big part of what we're trying to teach. We're having to reparent some of these people in a very, real way. (Participant 8, Chemical)	Managing divergent viewpoints
You have customers who have points of view on things and maybe they see a wall sign in our restaurant or a flag and they have a comment or a point of view. We have to educate our employees and managers on how do you manage that? How do you make sure that for people who work for us that we've got a uniform standard. They're not representing some political view, or whatever their group of choices that they might be representing that on a shirt, a hat, a badge... It's just having a clear sort of set of principles, a framework, proactively communicating it, and then having clear process when you need to manage it. (Participant 18, Restaurant)	Managing divergent viewpoints
Especially with hot button topics, you get people who are really personally passionate about it, and you don't want to diminish what they're personally passionate about. But you do want to help them be heard for the message they're trying to say. Sometimes because they're so personally passionate, they can't come down on the emotion scale. We're able to work in between and go "okay, I think this is what you're getting at. I can tell you really, really care about this thing, but I don't think you're going to be heard if you come at it at 100. Let's try and distill it down to like the core message for you and work in between you and that partner to try and help make that happen." (Participant 10, Apparel Manufacturing)	Managing divergent viewpoints
You cannot be acrimonious and vitriolic with your peers. We've been doing a lot more remedial training around civil conversations. (Participant 8, Chemical)	Managing divergent viewpoints
I understand the mindset of a lot of our employees that are" let's just burn the ship." "We're going to march on Washington." At the heart it's how do we affect change and how can you do it where there's organizational readiness? And what's the process to be able to do it? And what are the systems? And we've been in the workplace for a while. So, it's like we've learned how to do that. And so, we are really trying to help our ERG leaders figure that out....we want to really have them focus their energies on how they can best affect change. (Participant 6, Agriculture)	Educating on corporate advocacy stance
For example, on the election front, I would say we double down on everyone's right to vote as the means to go voice your opinion. We allow for time off to do that, and all of those pieces. This is how we can publicly support you without coming out and saying something that's divisive. (Participant 17, Manufacturing)	Educating on corporate advocacy stance

Table 4 (continued)

Quote	Subtheme
They want to move faster than the company is prepared to move. That has been a friction point for us. Our ERGs sometimes want to move to a space of advocacy, a very loud and proud advocacy, that the company is not yet ready to be at or doesn't feel like that is a space that we want to take up. What we've been trying to do is really figure out what are the appropriate channels where they can still have that conversation or activate in some capacity, if that's what really matters to them. That doesn't necessarily always elevate it to a regional or global, internal or external message. It hasn't been easy. I think our ERG members are sometimes a little bit disappointed because the company isn't necessarily always going to go guns a blazing, super loud about a topic. (Participant 10, Apparel Manufacturing)	Educating on corporate advocacy stance
We're not getting involved in taking sides. We're here for the safety and protection of all our employees. And we're trying to do things that support our narrative of our culture and care and well-being for everybody. (Participant 11, Finance)	Educating on corporate advocacy stance
We have to always find this balance around listening to the needs of groups that feel they're being marginalized in some way, at the same time taking this higher road, of saying, "Hey, what is our role here" and creating channels, or forums or ways where people can share their frustrations or their concerns about what's going on. That's probably a good thing. And we've facilitated a number of sessions with our employees to discuss these issues in a public way. But that can't go on forever. One of the things we talked about is how do people find the time to be able to do all of these things? We're here, we've got a job to do. It's getting that right balance that we're really struggling with. (Participant 11, Financial Services)	Educating on corporate advocacy stance
It's so emotional. They think it's the greatest idea ever and it's askew to what the company values are. I tell my team, you have to learn the art of saying no to really mean "not that way. There's another way to do it." Sometimes no means no, but most of the time, the answer really is "not that way. Here's another way," and then trying to help them get past their initial idea to "here's a different way we can get this done that will protect the company but also allow you to do what you need to do." That is the work that those on my team sometimes get exhausted over. (Participant 20, Financial Services)	Educating on corporate advocacy stance
We started to set that expectation of we're not going to talk about everything all the time, we're going to be really focused. You've got to take them [issues/requests] in individually. But make sure that you're consistently using the same approach to determine what do we say and what do we not say. (Participant 7, Retail)	Educating on corporate advocacy stance
We [don't] condone any behavior that is intolerant for our employees to have a safe environment to thrive. When people say, "Hey, I really want a public statement to be made," for whatever, we come back to that because it is inclusion for everyone.... And you have to kind of live in this tension of everyone has a right to their own opinion. It's different if they get treated differently within our four walls, and that is addressed. But this is not the year to be making public statements that then can be misconstrued for the company's values because it is so divisive. (Participant 17, Manufacturing)	Educating on corporate advocacy stance
We have a policy of no politics in the workplace... I think it has served us well... I'm sure people do talk about it but that's not what the workplace is intended to be. (Participant 12, Manufacturing/Technology)	Educating on corporate advocacy stance
We try not to take hard stances on anything other than we are here for everybody. We serve everyone. We respect everyone.... This can be a stressful time. Look out for yourself. Here are some resources. (Participant 24, Restaurant)	Educating on corporate advocacy stance

their world view and their individual experience. We are struggling a bit in terms of how do we provide an avenue for voice that doesn't create further divide? ... How do you structure successful conversations? Conversations that people walk away from feeling like there were insights and progress in terms of understanding as opposed to, "I'm right, and that person was clearly wrong." It is definitely a very active area of our DEI group right now in trying to navigate and find solutions to meet employee needs in this space. (Participant 21, Utility)

A final subtheme involved efforts to educate employees about corporate advocacy (51.5% mentioned). CHROs

noted that there was a need to push back on employee pressures for corporate activism and to specifically increase understanding of how to help employees direct their passion appropriately. Some saw ERGs as particularly helpful in these communication efforts (e.g., Participant 21 (Energy) noted "it's been constructive dialogue."); others discussed the press for advocacy as an increasingly challenging part of their interactions with ERG members. For example:

I had never experienced this in my career to date, but we had a couple of situations where even though the organization said, "No, we're not ready for that" or "No, that's not an organizational priority" there was

continuous pushback for it. So, we're "Maybe let's take a step back and let's just develop. Let's make sure everyone is clear what our areas of focus are." (Participant 6, Agriculture)

The subtheme of educating around advocacy was directly correlated with the subtheme of balancing business goal alignment with identity affirmation. Those who wanted to achieve business outcomes along with providing identity-related spaces for employees may be more likely to recognize that this might create tensions or that they were already managing tensions when ERG member beliefs about a need for an identity-affirming action (e.g., issue a statement on a social issue) clashed with the goals of the business. One participant (Participant 15, Manufacturing) noted that they had a transparent set of engagement principles and a process for deciding on what issues the organization would take a position. Another (Participant 18, Food and Beverage) spoke about being clear as to when they were talking externally as a brand versus internally to employees. A third (Participant 7, Retail) noted "you can send a note {to the ERG members}..we're going to hold space...folks want to connect and talk, we're here for you...but what you're not going to get is a company email."

Stage in the Journey

While not as prevalent a topic as others, a handful of interviewees noted that there is a "DEI journey" and organizations are not all in the same place, which affects whether an ideological stance is crystalized, if it is acted upon, and how effectively an organization can implement any identity-conscious practices. A couple described their efforts as mature, with phrases like "we've been doing this for a long time" (Participant 15, Food and Beverage) or "we've had ERGs for over 20 years" (Participant 19, Energy). These quotes fit the subtheme of describing inclusion as a deeply embedded value in their culture. For example, in discussing ERGs, one CHRO noted:

It's [the value of inclusion] integrated. It's not a stand-alone. It's not a one and done. (Participant 14, Manufacturer)

CHROs of organizations who felt they were more mature in their efforts also tended to give more positive examples of how they navigate addressing external conflicts and employee divisiveness. For example:

I know many people have had challenges, particularly around Israel and Palestine...we've found that having our interfaith umbrella and the principles in their charter.. served as a really meaningful framework for addressing employee behavior challenges ...the fact

that they had existed for 19 years prior to that moment gave us a lot of traction in and belief in that we could navigate some of this space. (Participant 16, Professional Services)

A few organizations, particularly those in sectors where there is less diversity in their workforces (e.g., construction, heavy manufacturing), expressed a lack of organizational readiness for deeper investment in ERGs or a lack of senior leadership commitment (i.e., subtheme of not there yet in Fig. 1). Others stated that prior organizational actions related to DEI were performative in response to external events rather than reflective of a true valuing of inclusion (i.e., subtheme of performativity in Fig. 1). For these CHROs, the task of undoing the damage of subpar efforts was a challenge. For example,

People feel like it's shoved down their throat.. What happened before is the ERGs and leaders go through this diversity training and it was very much a "white people are bad" type of training. These guys just completely shut down with it. ... That's why with our business it is just a little more challenging because we had a really bad start. So, it's gently bringing it back. (Participant 13, Building Products)

The quote below sums up the idea that organizations are at various stages of the DEI journey. It suggests that ideological stance is dynamic as it is influenced by outside events, but also related to the maturity of an organization's investment in DEI:

There are three tiers of behavior by companies. You have companies who have embraced and understand how inclusion is an important ingredient to how they run the company. They've been at it before 2020, and they're still at it. What may have changed for them is they're not putting a target on their back by the naysayers who don't believe in it, but they're still doing the work. Tier Two are companies that starting in 2020 realized "Hey, inclusion. There's a case for it. We should be doing this." They've embraced it but they don't quite know how to embed it and make it part of their culture too. They've hired people. They've had some stumbles. Those are the ones who got burned or got attacked. They are starting to say "Let's change. Let's not call it DEI. Let's call it something else... Let's not be individual identities, let's just put it all together." But that behavior is based upon they got burned, but they still believe it's important. The third tier are those who had no clue, and after the George Floyd murder, they got caught up in the hoopla. ..They were loud and proud with their commitments. They had zero understanding as to what they were getting

themselves into. They hired people with expertise, mainly from academic backgrounds, who had no experience changing a corporate culture. They got pushed back. They saw blowback, they have fired those people they hired, and they are being incredibly silent. (Participant 20, Financial Services)

Discussion

While scholars gather, analyze, and debate evidence on how diversity ideology impacts DEI initiative effectiveness, organization leaders such as CHROs are making real-time decisions of what to keep, discard, revise, or enact in response to external pressures. This study examined how CHROs discussed their implementation of ERGs in light of these pressures. This study provides insights as to how people leaders think about the organization's diversity ideology in terms of how ERGs are chartered, supported, messaged, and evaluated.

A key finding is that there is considerable variation in how diversity ideology is manifested, even with what is ostensibly an identity-conscious practice, and that manifestation influences how employees receive the practice. As noted in the introduction, for outcomes related to intergroup relations (stereotyping, prejudice, and discrimination), multiculturalism frequently is associated with positive results (Leslie et al., 2020), but there is also evidence that how multicultural ideologies are manifested in DEI initiatives can backfire and lead to negative outcomes. In particular, CHROs recognized and navigated the tension of ERGs promoting inclusion to some but signaling exclusion or advantage to others. Qualitative findings here echo prior work, but they also provide needed suggestions as to *how* to ensure effective implementation of identity-conscious efforts.

One path followed by organizations to ensure effectiveness was to focus on ERG goal alignment with business needs and demonstrate ERG impact. Specifically, CHROs discussed how structures — chartering criteria, guidance documents, goal accountability, metric assessment — contributed to their ability to demonstrate the value of ERGs to the organization. A second path was to address symbolic threats (Iyer, 2022) by focusing on possible learning from threat (Bryan & Lyons, 2024). This use of ERG activities (e.g., cultural events, speakers) could be viewed as “opening tactics” as described by Bryan and Lyons (2024) in that they engage employees in opening themselves to introspection on their beliefs. In line with this focus on learning, participants discussed efforts to structure conversations around identity-related conflicts as critical yet challenging and saw ERGs as having a key role in managing disruptions in the workplace from external events. The third path to navigating

social identity threat while embracing multiculturalism is showcased in how navigating ERG advocacy was discussed. CHROs noted that in addition to promoting dominant-group learning as Bryan and Lyons (2024) suggested, learning on the boundaries of corporate advocacy by marginalized groups was also important. Finally, organizations noted that emphasizing that ERG membership is open to all was important to embedding inclusion into the culture.

Implications for Practice

As one might expect from conversations with CHROs, the interviews focused on practicalities for making ERGs effective. Table 5 provides a summary of some of the practical implications from this study. First, criteria for formation of an ERG need to be clearly understood by employees if unwanted signals of advantage or exclusion are to be avoided. While organizations varied in their criteria for ERG establishment (e.g., for underrepresented groups, any social identity group (e.g., parents, young professionals)), employee understanding of what an ERG is and what the purpose is plays a key role in whether exclusion or advantage is signaled. This is in keeping with procedural justice principles regarding being transparent about criteria for decisions and being consistent in their application. Related, it is important that there is clarity that membership is open to all employees regardless of identity, as name changes like adding “and allies” can convey. Given changing legal enforcement priorities in the USA with regard to discrimination in the workplace, such clarity regarding membership has taken on increasing importance.

Second, both the gray literature on ERGs as well as the interview data here point out the importance of clearly defining ERG purpose, structure, guiding principles, and expectations for ERGs to achieve success. That is, if the purpose of the ERG is to increase employee engagement, measures of success might be quite different than if the primary aims relate to informing marketing strategies. While the theme of alignment with business purposes was discussed above, ERG leaders and their members need to be aligned with each other as to aims and purposes, and different ERGs may need to be aligned with one another to avoid duplication of effort, suboptimal resource use, or competition.

Third, clear organizational policy on political and social engagement is needed to address issues that arise. Communication about the rationale and principles that guide when an organization speaks out on issues and when it does not is unlikely to entirely eliminate conflicts in the workplace, but creating better alignment on expectations regarding corporate advocacy was mentioned by CHROs as critical to managing spillovers of controversial social issues into the workplace. Corporations may not be able to anticipate the social issues that employees will want advocacy on (e.g., Black

Table 5 Practical suggestions for ERG design and implementation

Focus	Action
Address resource threats	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Establish strong mechanisms for employee voice for all employees • Invest in robust employee development programs for all employees • Create mechanisms for cross-ERG sharing of programming and resources • Emphasis that ERG membership is open to all employees
Address symbolic and morality threats	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Encourage but don't mandate opening activities to increase self-awareness and learning • Communicate how ERGs connect to foundational values and principles of the organization (use continuity rhetoric)
Ensure alignment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Have clear criteria for ERG establishment and chartering, and communicate them broadly • Clarify any identity-affirming and business goals of an ERG from the start • Require accountability from ERGs through an annual strategic planning and budgeting process • Align investment in ERGs with the organization's overall DEI strategy stage
Clarify ideological stance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Work toward alignment across leadership levels in ideological stances • Ensure that practices (e.g., identity conscious practices) align with top leader ideological views rather than engaging in performativity • Review identity-conscious practices (e.g., representation goals) as to whether they are aligned with a multicultural stance
Anticipate that external events will impact employees	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Have an articulated policy on corporate advocacy and apply it consistently • Provide managers with tools and training on how to support employees experiencing external identity threats • Provide spaces for dialogues for those who wish to engage, while clarifying what are not spaces and places for those conversations
Track the metrics	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Seek to upgrade and evaluate the metrics used to determine ERG success continually • Use data (e.g., employee surveys) to pinpoint where change needs to occur • Ensure that identity-conscious metrics (e.g., representation statistics) are used in ways that align with values and their use is communicated in ways that do not signal social identity threats
Invest in ERG leadership	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop processes for ERG leader selection and succession • Articulate requirements and terms for ERG executive sponsors • Consider how ERG leadership can best be supported, recognized, and rewarded

Lives Matter movement, conflict in the Middle East, immigration enforcement policies), but they should anticipate that employees who highly identify with their workplace will seek value affirmation and support from their employers.

Fourth, CHROs emphasized the importance of how ERG leaders were selected, trained, and recognized. As Green (2018) noted, ERG leaders are volunteers, and the expectations of their time, commitment, and goal fulfillment need to align with the voluntary nature of their roles, or, as some organizations discussed, greater leadership development training and compensation should be afforded those roles.

Fifth, the data also hinted at the value of matching ERG efforts to the organization's overall DEI strategy with a consideration of what "stage of maturity" the organization was at. Organizations that seek to quickly enact ERGs (or any identity-conscious practice) may fail to build needed guidance on chartering and governance, may fail to align leader ideologies across organizational levels, may not have a sufficient leadership bench for effective implementation, or may lack other foundational efforts needed for success. Research on DEI strategy life cycles could be helpful to organizations seeking to enact new practices by providing guidance

as to how to judge an organization's readiness for effective implementation.

Finally, the data spoke to various paths organizations were taking to counteract social identity threat to dominant-group members: align with business goals, demonstrate impact, emphasize that membership is open to all, engage employees in opening activities, and be mindful of advocacy boundaries. Recent work by Kukula et al. (2025) found that leader continuity rhetoric was important to garnering non-target member support for identity-conscious initiatives; specifically, acceptance is greater with high continuity rhetoric such as connecting to fundamental values, noting that distributive justice principles remain upheld, and generally reducing uncertainty. While this study focused on established ERGs rather than introducing them as a new practice, participants did speak to the ways in which they connected ERGs to fundamental values (e.g., Participant 14 (Manufacturing) "we have values and we have behaviors that drive who we are and our ERGS raise awareness around those"; Participant 8 (Chemical) "we want to talk about our inclusion or our belonging initiatives as a way of living our values.").

Implications for Research

This study provides insights from the enactment of an identity-conscious practice that might inform research directions. Research has established that different forms of identity-blind ideologies can have positive and negative impacts (Leslie et al., 2020), and now researchers need to clarify when practices rooted in identity-consciousness such as ERGs are more or less impactful and importantly, for what outcomes. One intriguing direction for research that aligns with findings here is to further examine extensions from multiculturalism, such as interculturalism ideologies, which emphasize intergroup dialogue, identity flexibility, and unity (Verkuyten et al., 2020). Organizations might employ both multiculturalism through identity-conscious initiatives that support marginalized groups along with structures and activities that are deliberately interculturalism focused (i.e., create space for active engagement and interaction among diverse groups, such as in multi-identity ERGs). Indeed, leaders in this sample discussed some of these approaches (e.g., embracing allyship for all, creating councils or summits across ERGs).

Another direction would be to consider whether signals of advantage are less present in organizations that have robust employee development programs for all employees (i.e., skill development and personal growth opportunities are available for all) alongside ERGs. Signals of exclusion may be less present in organizations that have a strong emphasis on employee voice and participation (i.e., inclusion) in how managers interact with all employees on a daily basis. That is, whether ERGs send unintended negative signals may depend upon whether the organization is meeting or failing to meet the needs of all employees through its talent management efforts and quality of supervision.

Further, the role of leaders in presenting an organizational ideological stance continues to warrant further examination. Dang et al. (2023) provide insights into how followers perceived leader ideology endorsement. While at times participants differentiated their own personal views from those of other leaders (e.g., “our CEO has been very vocal”; “we have a new CEO...he recently made a statement to the whole company”), the distinctions between their own opinions and the direction of the organization were not always articulated, perhaps because there was good alignment at this high level of leadership. Future work should continue this focus on messaging of ideology at various leadership levels within the organization (e.g., how consistent is messaging across lower level leaders, what happens when messaging is inconsistent across identity groups).

Research on diversity resistance and backlash might also benefit from findings here. Ballinger et al. (2024) demonstrated that individuals differ in views of DEI initiatives

as zero-sum or win-win. Further, Gundemir et al. (2024) recently noted that resistance and support of DEI initiatives should not be thought of as a continuum as employees can hold beliefs of both support and resistance simultaneously. In line with these ideas of recognizing that individuals may have complex views of DEI initiatives, the quotes here illustrate that beliefs about diversity initiatives can also be a complex mix of support and desire to rethink or revisit strategies; that is, viewing organizations through the dichotomy of “on board” or resisting oversimplifies the ways in which DEI strategies are conceived and enacted in practice.

This work also has implications for research on ERG effectiveness as CHROs provided insights into what they felt was key to success (e.g., good chartering and governance documents, clear policy on corporate advocacy, goal alignment). While there may not be an immediate need for further research on demonstrating these links, CHROs desired more research guidance on metrics to evaluate ERG effectiveness as well as access to more studies demonstrating effectiveness, particularly with regard to outcomes beyond employee engagement (e.g., talent recruitment and retention). For example, Participant 22 (Pharmaceutical) wondered if anyone was looking at “per member spend” or other financial metrics to help with demonstrating ROI.

This study also adds to emerging work on firm-level performativity in diversity management. Specifically, some of the CHROs in this sample described what Roberson et al. (2024) labelled as a narrative approach to diversity management, involving descriptive, often detailed, accounts of their ERGs, while acknowledging a need for more substantive embedding of diversity management in their organizational culture. Some CHROs were working toward what Roberson et al. labelled as a conclusive approach to diversity management, in which they wanted to provide data on ERG impact to those in their organization. That is, CHROs were generally highly engaged in demonstrating that their diversity management efforts were valuable investments and not performative. However, topics mentioned by Roberson et al. as enabling conditions for moving beyond performativity (e.g., readiness for change, leadership motives behind diversity management strategies) arose in the interviews as well, supporting their idea that some firms struggle with moving beyond performativity in their diversity management efforts. Future research that examines how organizations evolve their diversity management strategies as well as how those efforts are received is warranted. This is particularly the case as businesses have finite resources, and evidence-based work that helps inform decisions regarding the most impactful specific investments would be welcomed.

Related to this point, in some interviews, CHROs expressed leadership’s desire to take ERGs that were formed for the purposes of providing employee voice and identity

affirmation and “retrofitting” them to be elements of the organization’s business strategy. While ERGs could certainly serve multiple purposes, there may be differences in effectiveness between those formed with business strategy aims in mind and those where connections to the business were foisted upon the ERG to fend off questioning from activist investors. Spending time upfront articulating how ERGs support the business versus trying to add those links later may have different impacts on ERG members, how ERGs are viewed by non-members, and ERG effectiveness in achieving those aims.

Limitations

As with all studies, there are limitations to this work. The study showcased rare access to candid conversations with high-level executives at some of the largest and most successful corporations, which impact a large swath of employees and consumers. However, smaller organizations may also have ERGs and experience different challenges such as being more negatively impacted when external tensions spill into the workplace. Second, CHROs lead the people functions in their organizations, and they spoke in that capacity; however, there may be variability across organizations in how aligned C-suite teams are in diversity ideologies. An examination of top leadership teams and divergence in viewpoints on DEI-related initiatives as well as studies of how such variability impacts employees and diversity initiative success would be informative. Third, interviews were conducted at a time when there was societal divisiveness around the value and need for DEI efforts, and that may have led to more cautious and socially desirable responding by interviewees. However, there were a range of responses to questions, and many examples of challenges and the need for improvement were offered, suggesting that social desirability was not a major influence here.

Future Directions

While the focus here was on how the identity-conscious practice of ERGs was positioned and viewed in a particular social climate, the future of ERGs also is linked to evolving views of social identity group categories. Dennissen et al. (2020) found that the single-category nature of ERGs can marginalize those who belong to multiple disadvantaged groups. One CHRO noted “There’s so many different cuts of affinity – how people view themselves as belonging to a group” (Participant 8, Chemical). Another framed this as an issue that will become more salient in the future:

No one really self identifies with [one identity]...., take a member of our LGBTQ ERG. They always are part

of another group, meaning they’re either gender. Race may come into play there. We have veterans within our [LGBTQ ERG]. Most people say, and especially this younger generation, don’t put me in just that box (Participant 1, Healthcare)

Other CHROs noted the need for research on how generational shifts will impact what is expected of ERGs and how they should be configured.

We have a new generation of folks...and there are things that are on the outside that they’re bringing into the organization. We have to do something with that energy. (Participant 11, Financial Services)

Thus, how ERGs and other DEI initiatives will be enacted in the future will likely evolve to reflect changing views on what social identities are (e.g., gender fluidity), what is equitable (e.g., views on reparations, evolving definitions of “illegal DEI”), and what potential generational shifts in what is expected from employers are likely to occur. One CHRO pondered the role of ERGs in the future:

Do you think the era of ERGs is gone? Are ERGs past their useful life? Or will they survive into the future as the world becomes more and more diverse and intersectional. (Participant 23, Technology)

While this analysis of CHRO interviews does not forecast the future, it indicates how many leaders saw the value in organizational support of designated spaces and activities for identity-consciousness in service of achieving their business aims. It can provide insights into current organizational commitments toward evolving ERGs further to support inclusion and belonging, while minimizing signals of exclusion and divisiveness.

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Data availability Survey and interview protocol are available in this journal’s repository.

Declarations

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