

Setting up an Environmental Sustainability Employee Resource Group

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Introduction

Establishing a sustainability-focused employee resource group (ERG) within your organisation can showcase commitment to environmental responsibility, promote a culture of sustainability, and actively engage employees in driving positive change. It can also generate innovative ideas, highlight potential issues, and support sustainability-related policies and compliance. This guide outlines key steps, considerations, potential risks, and lessons learned in setting up an ERG for sustainability.

Some sections contain a box like this, containing examples derived from experience establishing and supporting Springer Nature's Green Office Network. Other examples added from working with and leading streams in Emerald's Planet team.

Steps for Creating an ERG

1. Define the Mission and Objectives

- **Mission Statement:** Create a clear, concise mission statement outlining the ERG's purpose and goals.
- **Objectives:** Define short-term and long-term objectives aligned with sustainability, such as reducing the carbon footprint and fostering employee engagement.

Mission: Drive awareness about sustainability topics and catalyse behavioural change in all employees/company culture.

Objective: Generate ideas at a local level that support the company's sustainability strategy, report back to the sustainability teams.

2. Secure Leadership Support and Budget

- Identify an Executive Sponsor who will champion the ERG and provide crucial support from senior leadership.
- Involve HR colleagues to get their support. In some countries, works council involvement may also be required.
- Establish clear lines of communication and frequency with executive sponsor and other senior leadership involved.
- Define with senior leadership, the support available for those participating in the ERG, i.e. working time allowances to spend on activities related to the ERG, specific training, exposure to different areas of the business etc.
- Advocate for / allocate a budget allowance for ERG leaders to use for activities that further the objectives of the group and in line with overall sustainability strategy.

- Agree a schedule of meetings between ERG leaders and executive sponsors.
- Outline what is in scope for the ERG budget and agree a process for request/approval. For example:
 - Speaker fees for educational meetings
 - Engagement activities/events
 - Local level 'green' improvements that are not captured in other budget areas.
 - Professional development activities

3. Recruit Members

- Encourage employees from diverse backgrounds and roles to join, fostering inclusivity.
- Decide on open invitations or specific roles based on your objectives and company culture.
- Where possible involve those colleagues who lead on building activity into the departmental strategy.
- Consider the different time commitments colleagues will be able to make, create an inclusive space for colleagues' variable levels of availability.
- Allow members to play to their strengths and interests

- Consider, if relevant, setting up a global committee/ ERG that facilitates global collaboration.
- Be clear on what is expected of team members and offer flexibility of participation and commitment

4. Determine a Schedule and Organize Inaugural Meeting

- Establish a meeting frequency that balances time and momentum.
- Host an inaugural meeting to introduce the ERG, its mission, and objectives.
- Establish clear roles and responsibilities for colleagues taking part in the ERG.

- Involve executive sponsor in the inaugural meeting to demonstrate leadership commitment.

5. Create Subcommittees

- If groups are large enough, consider forming subcommittees to address specific sustainability areas, such as waste reduction or green procurement.
- Explore the motivation and interests of those participating so that those can be channeled into the areas most relevant to them.

6. Develop an Action Plan

- Collaboratively set actionable goals and strategies to achieve them, ensuring alignment with your mission.
- Consider creating a plan with a good mix of educational activities, networking opportunities and other more action-based activities.

- Show members where actions contribute to company sustainability goals.
- Offer an online course which gives colleagues the opportunity to learn about sustainability and the sort of actions personally and professionally that create impact

7. Promote Awareness

- Develop a Communication Plan to raise awareness about ERG activities and encourage participation.
- Organise informative sessions for those colleagues interested in joining to learn more about the ERG.

- Involve internal Communications' colleagues to feedback on the communications plan.

8. Collaborate and Partner

- Actively collaborate with other teams, departments or external groups to identify and address environmental issues. I.e. plastic or waste reduction awareness campaigns in collaboration with the facilities team, and sustainable travel guides with HR/procurement teams.

- Consider whether external certification, e.g. Plastic Free, or ISO14001 would motivate and drive action in your setting.
- Bring in external speakers to talk about related topics which impact individuals as well as the business such as the Energy Saving Trust.
- Encourage members to organize events the wider organization can participate in such as pre-loved swaps and sustainable gift giving or holiday (Christmas) tips.

9. Measure and Report Progress

- Benchmark current activity to be able to report positive impact of activity against.
- Establish Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) to track the impact of ERG initiatives.

10. Celebrate Achievements

- Recognize and celebrate ERG members' contributions and the organization's progress in sustainability.

- Build related activity into performance appraisals so there is formal recognition of activity.

- Use company-wide internal communications channels to raise awareness and recognise success.
- Involve senior leaders in giving colleagues recognition for their involvement in ERG activities/successes.

Key Learnings

- Sustainability initiatives may have varying impacts, from tangible carbon footprint reductions to awareness/engagement campaigns. Be clear that these different impacts are all valid outcomes. And remember that bigger carbon savings are likely to come from other operational changes - don't put all the burden on the ERG!
- Authenticity and credibility are essential to gain support and trust. The ERG may need leadership support to move things forward. An unfunded group that doesn't feel it can make progress may not survive for long.
- Engage employees at all levels to foster inclusivity and diversity. ERGs can create opportunities for co benefits around employee networking and development, bringing together people who would not normally work together.
- Balancing resource constraints, including funding and time commitment, is crucial. It may be beneficial both to have a policy to enable volunteers to carve out some dedicated time for participation, and some centralised funding that can be requested by the groups.
- Address resistance from departments or individuals not aligned with the ERG's goals. This is where executive sponsorship, and central team support can be most valuable. Sustainability goals may take time to achieve; and sometimes it's not the right time for a particular initiative.
- ERGs may need some support in bringing in all relevant stakeholders to help move some initiatives forward.
- Be prepared for changing membership, loss of key people and slow downs in momentum. Actively seeking to grow membership can help with this.
- Regular positive and supportive communications can make a real difference.

Potential Risks

- Resource constraints, including financial and time limitations.
- Lack of interest in some initiatives or burnout among employees - ERGs are ultimately resourced by volunteers and their commitment may vary over time.
- Misalignment with organisational goals.
- Challenges in demonstrating measurable sustainability impact.
- Inclusivity and diversity concerns.
- Communication and awareness issues.
- Sustainability fatigue among employees.
- Legal and compliance risks may at times need to be managed.
- Leadership transitions impacting ERG continuity.
- Data accuracy and reporting challenges.
- Pressure from external stakeholders.