

Building a Vibrant Women's Network at Work: The Benefits, Challenges, and Best Practices

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Abstract--An organized women's network that delivers relevant programming, offers mentoring opportunities, promotes successful women as role models, and connects women through networking opportunities is a powerful organizational tool. Sometimes it can be difficult just for women to find each other in a technical workplace where they are typically underrepresented. Developing a formal network can help to build bridges that would not have otherwise existed for women to advance their skills, their confidence, and ultimately their careers. This session will explore a case study of the development, challenges, and successes of the San Jose Women's Interest Network (SJWIN) that was started at the IBM Silicon Valley Lab in late 2004. This group began as an extension to an existing women's group at a neighboring IBM location, but has grown to become the most active and vibrant IBM women's network in the Silicon Valley region as well as a model for other sites beginning to develop their own groups. This session describes a set of best practices for developing your own vibrant and successful women's network.

Introduction

Despite the fact that more and more women are entering the engineering and other technical work environments, they are still generally outnumbered by men. While most women in a technical environment are used to it, it is still sometimes surprising to look around a room and suddenly realize that they are the only woman there.

Being the lone woman in a work environment can have its disadvantages. For example, you won't bump into the male director in the bathroom and give him your elevator pitch on a new idea, you might not share as many common interests with your coworkers, you might be more concerned about how to balance work and your family life than some of your male counterparts, and you might wonder if there are invisible walls blocking your advancement as a woman in the company.

The good news is that technical work environments might not be as lacking of women as they seem, and they are certainly improving with time. More and more, women are entering the engineering and other technical work environments.

For example, in IBM today, women represent approximately 30 percent of US employees and 28 percent of its managers. Women in executive positions globally have increased substantially since 1995. But even with substantial progress, women are still in the minority and can feel

disconnected from female peers and role models. Without fellow peers and role models they can relate to, talented women might not reach their full potential or might start looking for jobs elsewhere.

A women's network in the workplace can help build bridges between women on all levels through networking, mentoring, and knowledge sharing. These bridges can assist with women's advancement, improved work-life balance, and workplace satisfaction.

Best Practices

In developing and growing a women's interest network, the following five best practices are critical to ensuring success:

1. Identify clear, attainable goals
2. Get management (preferably executive) support
3. Make it a community effort
4. Keep it personal
5. Leverage existing infrastructure

When first starting a women's network, it is essential to be clear and succinct as to what the goals and mission of the group are. The more focused the vision and goals of the group, the more readily others will understand the purpose and how they can contribute to the group. Setting clear, measurable expectations of what will be considered success will help to keep the group on track. Examples of goals include sponsoring 12 events throughout the year, adding 50 new members to the mailing list by the end of the year, and having an average event attendance of 20 people. Keeping the goals attainable will help to keep morale high, especially early in the group's development. After the group gains momentum, the goals and focus areas can be adjusted.

Getting management support, and especially executive support, early in the process can really help to pave the way. The sponsoring executive does not need to be a woman; many men are big supporters of women's diversity efforts. A supporting executive can help by simply attending or introducing the topic or speaker at a key event, or sending out an email to the site in support of a key initiative or series events like women's history month. Executive support can also help to get the group's organizers access to behind the scenes help from site communications, diversity budgets, administrative support to handle logistical details, and advance knowledge of visiting technical and executive leaders that might be able to give a talk for the group.

A women's network is all about building a community, so it is critical that as many women as possible are involved in the organization and planning of events. Not only does it provide leadership and networking opportunities for the individuals, it also helps to make the participants feel a greater degree of ownership and investment in the group. Having more people involved also ensures that the programming will be more on target and relevant to the entire audience. One of the biggest inhibitors to developing an organization like this is the high workloads that make people feel that they don't have enough time to add one more commitment to an already full plate. By sharing the workload, the participants can cover for each other and make the experiences fun and positive rather than overwhelming and stressful.

The most effective way to build a strong community of volunteers is to make the recruiting efforts personal. If someone expresses interest in volunteering, the most effective way to follow up with them is in person by stopping by their desk or giving them a call rather than sending an email. A women's network is ultimately about building relationships, so it is best if the organizers lead by example and begin building those relationships from the very beginning. There will be a significantly higher rate of involvement and retention of the volunteers if they feel personally connected to the group.

To efficiently gain momentum, the organization must leverage existing infrastructure as much as possible. Existing infrastructure might include communication mechanisms, diversity initiatives or councils, regularly scheduled meetings or events, human resources and talent development coordinators or programs. Working jointly with site-wide communications dramatically reduces the work to advertise events and can help to quickly build a broad awareness. Getting involved with existing diversity initiatives or diversity councils can be a way to learn from other groups and to build awareness of the women's network. An added benefit is that a diversity initiative often has a budget associated with it that is available for events or organizations that are in line with the initiative's goals. Talent development coordinators can be amazing resources for identifying speakers, especially if it seems that there is a shortage of female role models. Often a talent development coordinator can identify more women leaders than were expected.

Applying these five best practices can ensure a smooth start to a women's networking group in a technical work environment. These best practices were very effective in the cultivation of the San Jose Women's Interest Network at the IBM Silicon Valley Laboratory.

Case Study of the IBM San Jose Women's Interest Network (SJWIN)

IBM in the Silicon Valley is made up of several sites that are up to 60 miles apart across the valley. Silicon Valley Laboratory (SVL) is the largest site with over 2200 employees primarily involved in software engineering.

While neighboring sites had women's networks since 1997, SVL never had a women's network. In theory, the SVL population was addressed by the San Jose Women's Interest Network (SJWIN) organization that hosted events at a site 10 minutes down the road. However, because of time constraints in an already busy day, women at SVL rarely could take the extra 10 minutes each way to travel to an event. In late 2003, SJWIN decided to develop a presence at SVL and created a second Vice President position on the leadership board. The focus of this position was to get the organization alive and active at the SVL site.

One of the first challenges was building awareness and finding other women interested in volunteering to organize and plan events. SJWIN began by getting support from some of the women executives on site at SVL. Luckily, the SVL site director is a woman and is very supportive of developing an active women's network at the site.

The lab director connected SJWIN with a top female executive that was planning to visit SVL and they organized the first SJWIN-sponsored event as a talk by this female executive about career success factors. They advertised the event through site-wide communications and drew over 100 people to the talk. They used the talk to promote the start of SJWIN at SVL and also

surveyed the audience on the type of programming they would like to see and to recruit volunteers to organize future SJWIN events. Of the 100 people (men and women) that attended, 39 women and 1 man volunteered to help plan future events.

After the initial talk and volunteer recruiting, they identified volunteers who were interested in leading specific committees and then had a brainstorming meeting with all of the volunteers to make plans for the coming year. They focused on keeping their goals attainable—one event from each committee per quarter. Since they began with three committees, there should be one SJWIN event at SVL each month. Many women were initially concerned with the time commitment that would be required to be actively involved. They overcame this concern by keeping the goals reasonable.

Based on the results of the interest surveys from the first event, the SJWIN leadership group focused their activities and events around three main categories—speaker series, brown bags, and networking. Each of these categories of events addresses different challenges that women face in the technical work environment.

The speaker series committee organizes talks that are on a large scale and would draw an audience of 50 people or more. Typically speaker series events involve one speaker on a topic or a panel of speakers that discuss variations on a common topic theme. Topics have largely focused on career building both on the management and technical career ladders. For example, SJWIN recently hosted panel discussions on International Women’s Day on the theme of “Inspiring Potential.” Four top women leaders (both technical and management) discussed what inspires them to achieve their potential, how others have inspired them, how they inspire other women in the community, and any relevant anecdotal stories or advice. Other speaker series events have been on topics such as “Career Success Factors” and “10 Ways Women Shoot Themselves in the Foot in the Workplace.” These events typically draw a large audience and help to make the women leaders more visible as role models.

The brown bag committee organizes more intimate discussions or presentations—typically around 10-20 attendees. These sessions foster discussion and active interaction between the presenter or facilitator and the rest of the audience. These sessions provide opportunities to connect women with common interests and share knowledge and best practices with one another. The topics are very diverse and have included topics such as roundtables with HR, discussions around the management career track and if it is right for you, recaps of conferences that women at the site have attended, introductions to yoga, pilates, and weight lifting, giving effective presentations, techniques for managing your email, time management, and work/life balance. Diverse topics often draw a diverse and changing set of people. This diversity provides opportunities to always meet someone new at the event. Also, in the cases that a brown bag seminar is led by a woman leader, junior women get face time with more senior women—helping to develop mentoring opportunities as well as to promote visible female role models.

The networking committee organizes events both on and off site that help to connect women in a relaxed, social environment. Networking events have included wine tasting, happy hour socials, dessert potlucks, lunch and games hour. SJWIN has also effectively combined networking time with speaker series events by building in 15-20 minutes of networking time at the end of a

speaker series talk or panel discussion. The speakers agree to stay after their talk so that the audience has an opportunity to not only network with each other, but to talk one-on-one with the speaker. This has been very popular and very effective at connecting people. As a result of these networking opportunities, new event ideas were generated and several talks were planned across multiple IBM sites in the Silicon Valley area. Additionally, several individual mentoring relationships were formed between women who met at an SJWIN networking event. Networking events also help to build stronger bridges between women across the lab who would not otherwise know each other, but who find they can collaborate on similar projects now or in the future.

Over the course of 2005, the SJWIN group at SVL applied all five of the best practices to sponsor over 30 events with consistently strong attendance. They far exceeded their expectations of one event per month. For 2006, they have a lot of excitement and even more women interested in taking on leadership roles within the organization. Such a women's network is a powerful way to build bridges between women in a male-dominated environment. Once connected, women have more access to mentors, role models, and knowledge-sharing opportunities which all contribute to increased job satisfaction and career advancement.

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