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► **To cite this version:**

Forrest Biscoe, Sean Safford. Employee Affinity Groups: Their Evolution from Social Movement Vehicles to Employer Strategies. *Perspectives on work*, 2010, 14 (1), pp.42-45. hal-01052900

HAL Id: hal-01052900

<https://sciencespo.hal.science/hal-01052900>

Submitted on 29 Jul 2014

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Employee Affinity Groups:

Their Evolution from Social Movement Vehicles to Employer Strategies

Forrest Briscoe and Sean Safford

Forthcoming in *Perspectives on Work*

Diversity affinity groups can be defined as groups of employees within an organization who share a common identity, defined by race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, disability, or shared extra-organizational values or interests.¹ Such groups may be more or less formally organized, and their relationship with management may vary from being adversarial to being cooperative or even fully co-opted by management. They operate outside the jurisdiction of collective bargaining laws.²

In some ways, it is nothing new to find workers banding together on the basis of their shared ethnicity, gender, religion or other commonalities. In the nineteenth century, craft unions were regularly organized according to ethnic and religious affiliations, and in the twentieth century, industrial unions like the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters were organized along lines of social identity as well.

But in the early 1970s, diversity affinity groups first started cropping up in large companies--the most well known being the pioneering Black Caucus at Xerox Corporation.³ Unlike their predecessors in the labor movement, the members of these groups are generally white collar. And, of course, they are not formally recognized--in law or in practice--as legal representatives of workers' interests. For these reasons, some dismiss these groups as mere window dressing--a distraction from stronger forms of worker voice, or, worse, employer-

dominated vehicles of worker co-optation. Yet, others have come to see them as an important part of the fabric of America's ever-evolving system of industrial relations.⁴

What Role Do These Groups Play?

This uncertainty makes them especially interesting phenomena for those who study work and employment. What role do these groups play in the evolving employment relations system? The answer is not clear, in part because there has been relatively little systematic research on the emergence of such groups and the evolution of their role within companies.

Affinity groups can take so many forms that it may seem problematic to refer to them jointly as belonging to a common class. But, on closer inspection, it is clear that such groups exist along a spectrum. On one end are groups that reflect grassroots efforts to press demands on employers in concert with contentious activists in broader social movements.⁵ On the other end are company-run (and financed) groups which are used primarily to demonstrate an organization's commitment to diversity to current and future employees as well as to external constituencies including customers. Many groups lie somewhere in the middle, reflecting the reality that group members identify both with the organization--as its employees --and well as with some sub-group within our larger society with which they share a set of common interests they may hope to advance. This is in the spirit of what Debra Meyerson and Maureen Scully called "tempered radicalism"--activism in which workers identify as both insiders and outsiders and use this dual identity to advocate for their interests without strongly violating the norms and rules of the organizations in which they work.⁶

Our research also shows that where these groups fall along this spectrum from employee-driven to employer-driven is not static. It evolves and changes over time. As part of a larger

project on institutional change processes in corporate America, we studied the evolution and impact of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender (LGBT) groups among large American companies. We surveyed 111 LGBT groups found in Fortune 500 companies. Details on the study are found in a paper we published last year in Administrative Science Quarterly.⁷

LGBT Groups

Early LGBT Groups formed in technology companies such as Hewlett Packard (1978), Sun (1985), Digital Equipment Corporation (1986), Apple (1986), AT&T (1987), Xerox (1991), and Intel (1991). But, group formation accelerated rapidly during the 1990s, as indicated by Figure 1, and spread across industries and regions. As documented in Nichole Raeburn's (2004) book Changing Corporate America from the Inside Out: Lesbian and Gay Workplace Rights, the earliest of these groups were not formed to lobby employers, but simply to provide a welcoming environment for socializing and career advice.⁸

<Insert Figure 1 about here>

With the rise of the Gay Rights Movement in the mid-1980s, the groups took on a more political cast. However, those politics were not aimed at companies, per se, but at the broader society. Many groups organized to sponsor floats in annual Gay Rights parades and to fund organizations which advocate for gay and lesbian rights. But in the mid-1990s, the groups' raison d'être shifted inward, as many formed with the explicit goal of advocating for domestic partner benefits.

The motivation for groups to seek these benefits--which extend a company's health insurance coverage to same-sex partners of its employees--was mixed. In some respects, the motivation was straightforward employee interest. Although many same-sex couples are dual-

income (and therefore, likely both covered independently by insurance), the fact that only some employees have the option of covering their spouses under one insurance policy created a disparity that called for redress. In this sense, the movement to gain domestic partner benefits was akin to the demands that unions make. But there were other motivations as well. The LGBT groups recognized that workplaces are not only a context in which work is accomplished, but they are also public spaces in which personal social relationships are formed and where individuals' non-work lives--including their relationships--are acknowledged and often celebrated. Gaining recognition in this broader sense was part and parcel of the movement to achieve recognition and legitimacy in society at large.

The efforts of the LGBT community toward gaining societal legitimacy are, of course, ongoing. But one thing is clear: today, the fact that a company provides domestic partner benefits is not as controversial as it once was. And with that loss of controversy has come a lessening of the more-or-less politically oriented drive to form LGBT affinity groups inside companies. That is not to say that groups are no longer being formed or that their numbers have dropped off. As Figure 1 shows, the pace at which groups are formed has remained steady since the early 1990s. But the motivation has shifted over time. Today, groups are formed more often by employers as part of a broader effort to reinforce values of workplace diversity and as a signal to the marketplace, rather than by workers themselves as an outgrowth of personal interest or broader politics.

Assessing the Evolution

One way we are able to assess this evolution in the motivation and role of LGBT employee groups is by examining their role in the spread of domestic partner benefits across large

companies. Initially, these benefits were fraught with pragmatic and political uncertainty, as companies pondered the legality, cost, and potential consumer backlash associated with adopting them. But, over time and as adoption accelerated among large corporations (by 2005, over half of the Fortune 500 had adopted), that uncertainty was resolved, and the benefits came to be viewed as a legitimate addition to companies' arsenal of human resource policies designed to attract and retain a high-performing, diverse workforce.

<insert Figure 2 about here>

Consistent with the notion of co-optation, corporate Human Resource (HR) managers in this later period began to form LGBT employee groups themselves, providing funding, guidelines, and liaison procedures. Consulting firms began offering services to set up diversity groups, including LGBT groups (such as Diversity Best Practices). Figure 2 provides evidence. It shows that, while the time between group formation and the adoption of domestic partner benefits was initially extremely long (AT&T adopted benefits eighteen years after its group was founded), by 2002, most LGBT groups were formed after domestic partner benefits were adopted by companies. Furthermore, as Figure 3 shows, the amount of time that passed between a group being formed and the group achieving formal recognition by the company fell from four years to zero. These figures suggest that, over time, LGBT affinity groups have come to be formed, not by the original activists motivated by self-interest, but instead by HR managers seeking to establish legitimacy for the company's diversity efforts.

<Insert Figure 3 about here>

This evolution over time of the motivations behind the founding of affinity groups raises questions for both critics and advocates. In some ways, it retells a well-worn tale of mobilization and co-optation. Affinity diversity groups are subject to the same forces--what Robert Michels

called the Iron Law of Oligarchy--which turns radical voices into advocates for the status quo.⁹ Yet, these groups clearly also have a role to play as vehicles of workers' voice. They exist because workers find meaning in the intersection of their personal (social) identities and their work identities--and are therefore motivated to exercise voice. So, in the search for new models of worker representation adapted to today's economic and social world, the successes and failures of affinity groups provide important lessons worth further examination.

Notes

1. In this article, we refer to such groups as "affinity groups." They are variously known as caucuses, network groups, and by other names, depending on the workplace.

2. A. Hyde, "Employee Caucus: A Key Institution in the Emerging System of Employment Law," Chicago-Kent Law Review 69, no. 1 (1993), 149-93.

3. R. Friedman and C. Deinard, Black Caucus Groups at Xerox Corporation (A) and (B), Case no. 491-047 and 491-048 (Boston, MA: Harvard Business School Publishing, 1991).

4. M. Piore and S. Safford, "Changing Regimes of Workplace Governance, Shifting Axes of Mobilization and the Challenge to Industrial Relations Theory," Industrial Relations 45, no. 3 (2006), 299-325.

5. M. Scully and A. Segal, "Passion with an Umbrella: Grassroots Activists in the Workplace," in Research in the Sociology of Organizations, vol. 19, ed. M. Lounsbury and M. Ventresca (Oxford: JAI Press, 2002), 127-70.

6. D. Meyerson and M. Scully, "Tempered Radicalism and the Politics of Ambivalence and Change," Organization Science 6, no. 5 (1995), 585-600.

7. F. Briscoe and S. Safford, “The Nixon-in-China Effect: Activism, Imitation and the Institutionalization of Contentious Practices,” Administrative Science Quarterly 53, no. 3 (2008), 460-91.

8. N. Raeburn, Inside Out: The Struggle for Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual Rights in the Workplace (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2004).

9. R. Michels, Political Parties: A Sociological Study of the Oligarchical Tendencies of Modern Democracy [1915] (New York: The Free Press, 1968).

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Sean Safford

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Figure 1: LGBT Employee Groups at Fortune 500 Companies

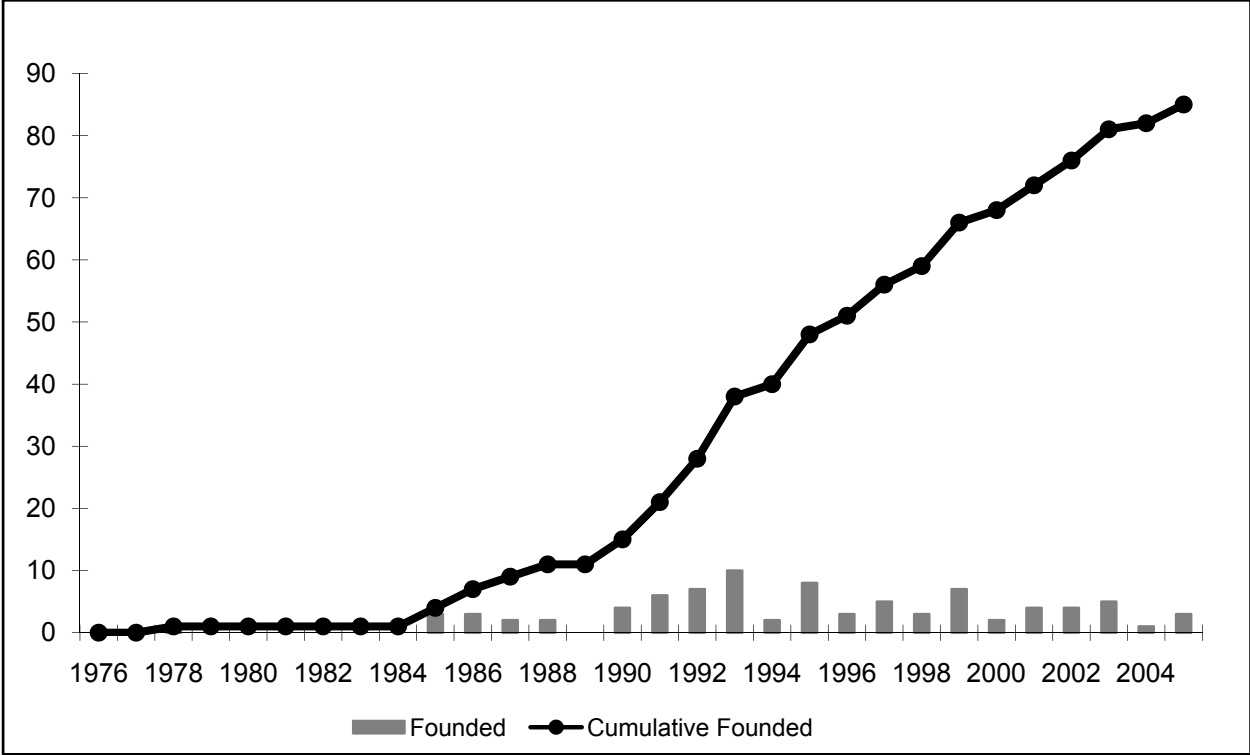


Figure 2: Average Time from LGBT Group Formation to Benefit Adoption by Year of Group Formation (years)

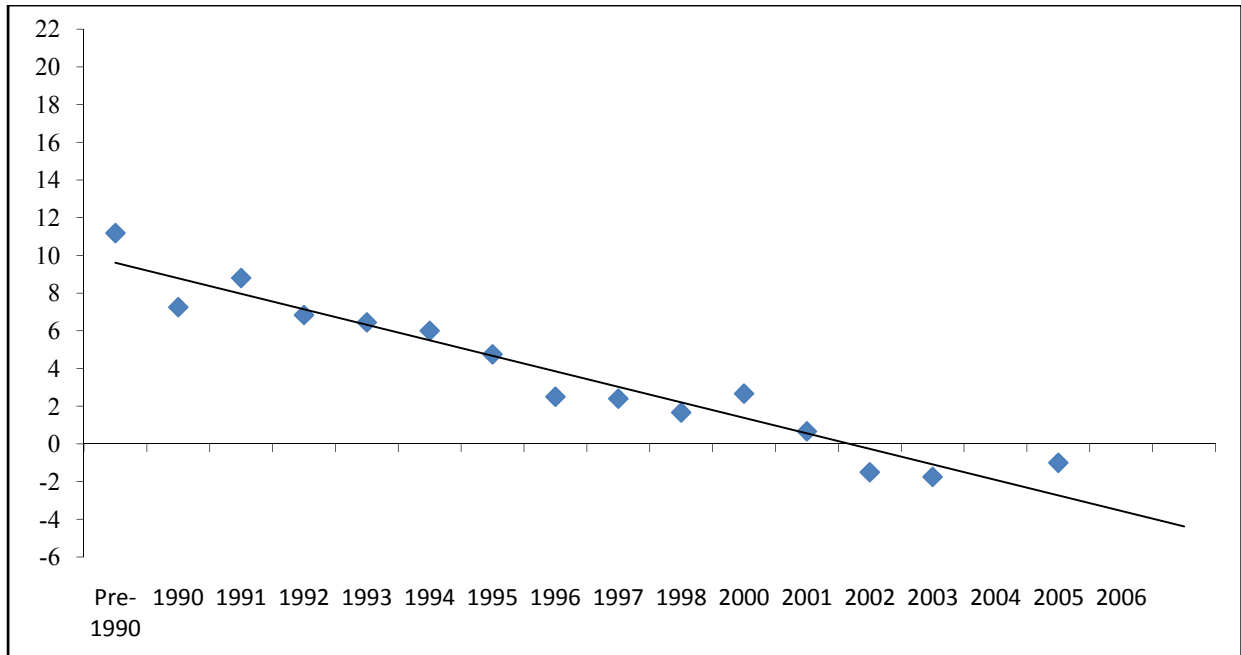


Figure 3: Average Time from LGBT Group Formation to Corporate Recognition by Year of Group Formation (years)

