



MEETING IN A BOX:

Exploring Interfaith Inclusion as Part of Company Culture



More than 16 million people in the United States identify with a religion that is not Christianity and as the religious and spiritual diversity of the country expands, so too does the need to recognize and include those identities in corporate culture.

Many companies are examining how they show up for employees with differing faiths and educate around their unique customs and needs. Understanding that a lunch and learn during Ramadan is inappropriate may sound basic to some, but a culture of inclusion is still a work in progress for many.

This Meeting in a Box is designed to help you understand more about the need for religious inclusion by examining the changing demographics of faith in the U.S. and provide you with tips for creating one of the most effective tools in driving inclusion of all faiths: the ERG.

Creating and Nurturing Interfaith ERGs

At a time when nearly every company in the world is focused on employee experience and speaking in platitudes about bringing your authentic self to work each day, most organizations still leave out one key piece to the culture of inclusion puzzle: faith.

Each year, DiversityInc asks participants in its Top 50 Companies for Diversity competition the following question:

“Does your company have resource groups for the professionals who identify as religion/interfaith?”

In 2022, only **22%** of companies answered that question in the affirmative. Among the Top 50, that number jumped to **34%**.

While that number is still low, it does represent a marked increase from past years. In 2019, for example, only **25%** of Top 50 companies answered yes, while the Top 10 was even lower at **20%**.

But as companies aim to build more inclusive cultures, many are realizing the need for interfaith or faith-based inclusion efforts and are wondering about best practices for the development of employee resource groups (ERGs) focused on faith-driven communities.

The challenge, in the eyes of those who haven't already created these groups, is often around how to execute it. Traditionally, religion is not considered an appropriate workplace topic and the idea of getting people of different faiths together, carrying with them beliefs, politics and rituals that are sometimes at odds with one another, is intimidating to organizations that tend to tread lightly around these topics. But according to Sumreen Ahmad, Global Change Management Lead and head of the Interfaith ERG at Accenture (No. 1 on DiversityInc's 2022 Top 50 Companies for Diversity list), that perception is part of a larger false narrative.

“We have been falsely convinced that bringing faith into the workspace is a bad thing – creating unnecessary friction that should be avoided,” she said. “There’s no question that faith teachings are diverse, even a spectrum within faith groups, but when done right, we’ve proven the untapped potential that comes when you create the necessary trust, intellectual curiosity and understanding amidst the differences.”

In this guide, you'll see we use the terms faith-based or interfaith, highlighting the fact that the two are very different things. Faith-based ERGs may be limited to a specific community or be solely dedicated to religious believers. Interfaith, on the other hand, brings together multiple faiths and even agnostic, atheist or “nons” (those with no religious affiliation). At AT&T (a DiversityInc Hall of Fame company), making the distinction and building the ERG into the company's inclusion philosophy was an important part of getting it off the ground.

“We really pitched it around interfaith and I think it was a very important distinction,” says Seth Zimmer, Assistant Vice President of Organizational Assessment and Development and co-creator of the Faith@Work ERG at AT&T. “The problem that we believed needed solving was one of inclusion. The only way to do that was to make it interfaith. We tell people to bring your full selves to work. Faith plays a role at different levels for many people, so it's hard to just leave it at the door. There was a misconception that we're not allowed to talk about it. Not true, there's no rule about it. People don't talk about it because it makes them uncomfortable.”

To be truly inclusive, an organization must create a sense of belonging and psychological safety. The foundation is built on the organization's readiness to honor the complexity that human beings create.

“In order for it to be a reality, we have to commit to the guiding principle that inclusion of one group, whether it be faith or any other inclusion priority, cannot be achieved at the exclusion of another group,” Ahmad said. “My advice for ERG, I&D and organizational leaders is to align to the core values of the company to ensure that interfaith and faith at work must be built upon guiding principles.”

At Accenture, those guiding principles include:

- **Alignment with Accenture's core value of “Respect for the Individual” and “Integrity” – as well as with the First Amendment.**
- **Honor and foster a culture of inclusive behaviors that does not marginalize individual beliefs.**
- **Encourage open, respectful and honest dialogue inclusive of language directly tied to the doctrines and tenets of the respective faiths.**
- **Recognize individual adherence to core beliefs of their respective faith as a matter of personal choice.**

The Business Case for Interfaith ERGs

Just as DEI, corporate social responsibility and any other “right thing to do” type of initiative needs a business case, so too do new ERGs. According to Ahmad, there are six fundamental elements to creating a business case for an interfaith ERG. Below, you'll see those six elements in bold along with some questions you need to ask in the process.

1. What is your case for change/burning platform? – How does this align to your overall inclusion and diversity priorities? Where does it fit into the organizational ecosystem? Is this being driven by the market or employees? Do you have the right foundation and governance in place to support?

2. What impact are you looking to drive? – Is it to bring awareness to the collective? Create dialogue across intersectional communities? Build community solely for people of faith? All of the above?

3. What Stakeholders need to be considered? – Faith communities only? Across multiple faith communities? All employees? Leadership/sponsors? Broader marketplace? Customers and ecosystem partners?

4. How will you define your scope? – Faith only? Interfaith only? Faith AND interfaith? Faith, interfaith as intersection into other diversity priority focus areas?

5. How will you measure your impact? – Leading indicators (# of members/events/sponsors/locations)? Accommodations provided and usage (dietary, holiday recognition, prayer, crisis response)? Lagging indicators (psychological safety, team norms, thought leadership, recognition)?

6. How will you sustain efforts? – Is this being managed in line with any other organizational culture change? How will you continue to manage the growth and evolution?

At AT&T, one of the biggest challenges was convincing leadership to embrace an interfaith ERG. By the time Zimmer and his colleagues got the go ahead, they'd spent three years building their business case and convincing leaders that this is an important part of remaining true to the vision for an inclusive culture.

“There was a combination of resistance and discomfort among leaders to move this forward,” Zimmer said. “We’re open to all employees, and I tell everybody, we’re not here to recruit to a club. We’re here to create awareness. How can we be better colleagues? How can we understand each other better? We focus on things that are common, not things that are different. Differences come up, but that’s not what it’s about. There are a lot of things around faith that are incredible commonalities. So, everybody’s welcome, the more diverse our membership, the better.”

Part of the success of AT&T’s group has been understanding what the ERG is meant to do and what it isn’t.

“You need to document your purpose and stay true to it,” Zimmer said. “Sometimes things sound good and then when you look at your purpose, they don’t apply, that’s really not aligned with what we are, what we want to be. You have to understand what problem or problems you’re trying to solve.”

Interfaith ERG Governance

Each ERG is unique and therefore has its own governance needs that must be met. In the case of faith-based or interfaith ERGs, there is a level of emotional intelligence required that isn’t present in the case of most other groups.



Accenture’s Ahmad is a 20-year veteran working in ID&E efforts and has coached ERG leads over the years. Her guidance to interfaith ERG leads as it pertains to governance instructs leads to “be and remain neutral, whatever your own beliefs.”

Other tips include not treating members in any different way specific to religion, keeping discussions focused on the workplace so that employees are not discussing the religion itself, but it’s impact on work relationships and building an inclusive culture. And finally, following the principles of respect and reciprocity, or not imposing on others what you would not want imposed on you.

As the variety of faiths in America diversifies, it’s important to keep an open mind regarding who might be attending interfaith ERG meetings. Both Accenture and AT&T’s groups include space for the agnostic, atheist and “nons” category, something that may seem counterintuitive to having an interfaith ERG to begin with, but that is necessary.

“Under the definition of inclusion, you never want to exclude someone when you’re trying to create inclusion,” Ahmad said. “So, yes, we have a chapter that is on par with the Buddhists, the Muslims, the Christians, that is agnostic, atheists and non. And that wasn’t easy, right? That was an interesting introduction and I think a lot of people start from the place of thinking it could be polarizing, but one of the things that we’ve done a great job with is setting the stage for creating space. At no point are you supposed to come to the conversation trying to force your beliefs on somebody else. That’s a starting point.”

To create a chapter or subgroup at Accenture, the group has to meet some basic requirements that Ahmad refers to as “critical mass.” To do that, they need at least 10-12 members in a single location, a sponsor and a strategic plan that shows the direction the group is trying to take and what its goals are.

Meeting these requirements demonstrates a level of formality and seriousness to justify a national level group. However, smaller, localized interest groups can form without the same level of formality as a starting point. If the groups grow and become more intentional over time, it’s a possible pathway toward becoming an ERG.

“We’ve mostly prioritized based on critical mass and demonstrated commitment such as leadership, events and consistent execution against priorities,” Ahmad said. “Understandably, we have faced some growing pains over the years with the addition of new faiths/ groups through our journey. By preserving both an interfaith and faith ERG pathway, however, we’ve allowed for employees to opt in while also creating spaces and places for individuals to learn and engage.”

AT&T’s group, however, does not account for subgroups or chapters and has faced some challenges because of its name “Faith@Work.” Zimmer says that in hindsight, the name may not have been the best choice because it has misled some people to believe that that the group is faith-based rather than interfaith.

“We’re a year and a half since launch, so that’s still pretty new and it takes a lot of repetition,” Zimmer said. “A fair number of folks think that we’re faith-based and we’re not, we’re interfaith. That’s really a critical distinction. We’ve had people come to us and say they’d like to do sort of a subgroup for Christians or a subgroup for Jews. But we won’t align to anything that is based on a specific faith.”

A Culture of Participation

Talent comes to an organization for a variety of reasons, ranging from better compensation to a new challenge, a title or simply to escape a situation where they were previously unhappy, but they stayed for the culture. For talent who sees faith as a core component of their identity, having that recognized and being able to perform work that aligns with their beliefs and ideals is something that means a lot.

Ahmad notes that by giving people of faith work that goes beyond materialistic aims, it allows them to inject compassion, consciousness and courage back into the corporate ecosystem. That is key to employee satisfaction and creating a sense of belonging.

“My favorite moments doing this work have been watching the awe of our people coming out of faith or interfaith-led events, even in cases where differences have had to be navigated by creating space for people to be seen and heard,” Ahmad said. “Ultimately, these communities directly help create psychological safety that drives belonging that is fit for purpose to individuals versus a top-down approach that assumes uniformity. That said, I don’t want to take for granted the commitment, sponsorship and support that does come from leadership – in their own efforts to seek and to understand the voice of the employee by leveraging the ERG channels.”



ERGs are a vehicle through which the average employee can not only connect with inclusion and belonging strategies but help drive them and make an impact they see and feel good about. That participation is what a culture of belonging stands on and provides the organization opportunities to educate and create connections among people who outside of the ERG will be expected to collaborate and innovate together.

“For many individuals, the workplace is their first opportunity to communicate with somebody who speaks a different first language than they do, who grew up with a different socioeconomic background, who is a different race, ethnicity or belief system,” Ahmad said. “The interfaith and faith ERGs create opportunities to engage with relevant information when needed, delivering with empathy and transparency and most importantly break down barriers necessary to navigate difficult conversations. While this is definitely not the path of least resistance, it is what we need to teach, model and counter against the forces of polarization that exist around us.”

Ahmad also emphasized the importance of elevating the discussion to shift mindsets from faith inclusion being an ad-hoc and standalone effort led by ERGs alone. Rather, by nurturing and creating space for these communities, ERG members can serve as a conduit to deliver and differentiate across key areas that are top of C-Suite agendas.

There are six important ways they can do this:

1. PURPOSE

Explore faith-led philosophies, values and beliefs that drive individual purpose and enable organizational purpose.

2. BELONGING

Highlight impact of faith on fostering psychological safety belonging and trust as a key driver to support recruitment and retention.

3. RESILIENCE & WELL-BEING

Explore the intersection of faith, mental wellness and resilience with specific focus on the current mental health crisis.

4. HUMAN-CENTERED LEADERSHIP

Highlight faith-led virtues necessary to drive responsible leadership and to respond to current crises while positioning solutions for the future.

5. NAVIGATING DIFFERENCES

Promotion of best practices to support behaviors necessary to hold opposing views while honoring respect for the individual.

6. CORPORATE CITIZENSHIP/ VOLUNTEERISM

Explore how faith serves as an enabler of organizational core values and corporate citizenship/volunteerism as a basis for driving impact in the communities in which they serve.

Growing Impact of Interfaith ERGs

At the outset, we examined data which shows the prevalence of interfaith ERGs is growing. This points to an evolving conversation around these ERGs and what sort of role faith plays in mental health and well-being, employee satisfaction and corporate culture.

Implementing interfaith ERGs is different to creating groups related to ethnic or racial identity, just as groups related to gender or the LGBTQ+ community is. Creating one must be treated the same as any other type of culture change. Or as Ahmad said, “it is not a flip of a switch.”

“As the demographic make-up of organizations spans five generations, it is imperative to meet people where they are at,” she said. “Ensure priority on creating a culture of intellectual curiosity and continuous learning above all, where dialogue is anchored on respect for the individual and organizational core values.”

When done properly, interfaith or faith ERGs become a vital component to inclusion and belonging, and like all ERGs, provide people with a different experience of the community it creates.



“We’ve had some interesting challenges,” Zimmer said. “Not every employee at AT&T thinks we should be doing something like this. There’s been some discomfort around it with the LGBTQ+ community because faith has been used negatively toward them in some cases. A few employees reached out and were vocal about their concerns and their fear. It was incumbent on us to show them what we’re about and stay true to that. There’s a lot of communication to make sure there’s clear understanding that everyone is welcome. And we’re here to share, not recruit.”