

# Women's Regional Networks Research Project





# Preface

It gives me great pleasure to publish the findings of this research project which tells the story so far in relation to the Women's Regional Networks in the Irish health service. Its publication marks an important milestone in the implementation of the Office for Health Management's strategy on Equal Opportunities and Managing Diversity. When established in 1997, the Office sought to influence employers to encourage women to develop their careers within the health service, to increase the proportion of women at senior level and to ensure that working arrangements facilitated work-life balance.

One of the mechanisms we used was to facilitate the start-up of a Women's Regional Network in each Health Board area. We believed that this would enable women to network more efficiently. It would also provide a forum for women to meet and support each other in their career development within the Irish health service.

We believe that the five-factor model which has been devised during the course of this research will be of practical benefit for the effective implementation and/or re-energising of the women's networks. In addition, the audit tool which has been devised based on this model should provide a systematic means of monitoring progress and moving forward.

In the health service we need to maximise the potential of all our staff and in doing so maximise the contribution that women bring to management. We believe the networks can make a difference and we will continue to support them. But the main source of support must emanate from local senior managers and employers, who will ultimately benefit from the impact of the network's activities on the employment potential of their members.

Finally, we are thankful to all who contributed to this publication. The research has identified the way ahead and the Office for Health Management is committed to this vision. However, our vision really needs the support of all the key stakeholders, not least top and senior management, to help integrate the Women's Regional Networks into mainstream organisational life.

*Denis Doherty*  
*Director*



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# Executive Summary



# Executive Summary

Networking has long been considered to be a crucial ingredient of success in any professional career as there are many advantages to be gained by its practice, including information exchange, collaboration, career planning, professional support and encouragement and upward mobility.

The Office for Health Management commissioned Pearn Kandola, occupational psychologists, to conduct a research project on the women's regional networks in the Irish health service.

The objectives of this research were:

- to take stock of the work conducted to date in relation to the networks
- to evaluate the effectiveness of the networks
- to benchmark the experience of the regional networks with experiences in other organisations
- to recommend the way ahead for the networks.

The study included primary and secondary research methods including focus group discussions and interviews with seven regional networks, a review of the relevant literature, and a benchmarking exercise with organisations that have women's networks in place. At the time of the launch of the initiative the Eastern Regional Health Authority (ERHA) did not exist. Also, the Southern Health Board did not express an interest in establishing a women's network and is therefore excluded from this piece of research.

In general, three different types of women's networks have evolved:

1. *Professional and occupational networks*, bringing together women who have similar professional qualifications (e.g. women in management) in order to provide information and career guidance, and a way of learning.
2. *In-company networks*, formal or informal female groupings within a particular organisation, some of which are only open to women at a certain level, and others for the shared concerns of all women.
3. *Training networks*, which are in effect support groups, with a specific, general or professional training focus.

With regard to the reasons for establishing a network, it was found that networks can be crucial in offering common understanding and support, as well as providing practical assistance such as training, exchanging information and advice and working for culture change within the workplace. Networks can provide members



with a career development function as well as psychosocial support. Women tend to join networks to develop their personal skills, to meet others who could help their careers and for social contacts. Employers now also recognise that networks can promote their own organisational interests. Employer-sponsored networks can increase employees' sense of involvement in the organisation and help retain them in the workplace. They can also be a useful source of new ideas.

## Key enablers

The research elicited a number of key enablers to success. These include:

- support from the organisation and senior management
- good marketing and communication on the part of the network
- meeting the members' needs
- seeking feedback from members
- having a diverse skill set on the steering committee
- having senior women on the committee
- holding regular events and activities.

## Key inhibitors

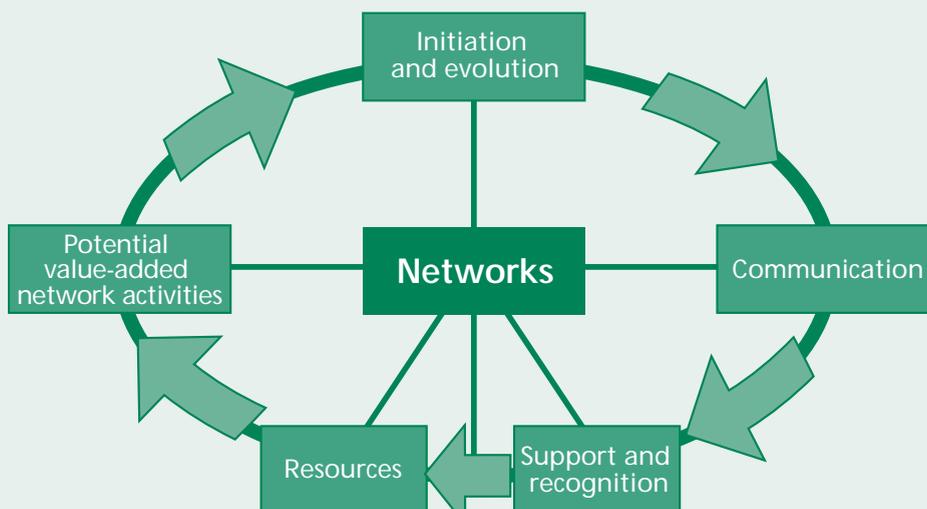
The key inhibitors that were most apparent from this research include:

- opposition from males and the organisation as a whole
- lack of recognition of the benefits of a women's network
- poor communication and distribution of information to members
- lack of funding
- no administrative support
- infrequent activity.

The study provided clear insights into the progress made by various regional networks and recommendations for the way forward. Based on the findings, a five-factor model for effective implementation of women's networks is proposed in Figure 1.



Figure 1: The five-factor model for successful women's networks



The five factors can be explained as follows:

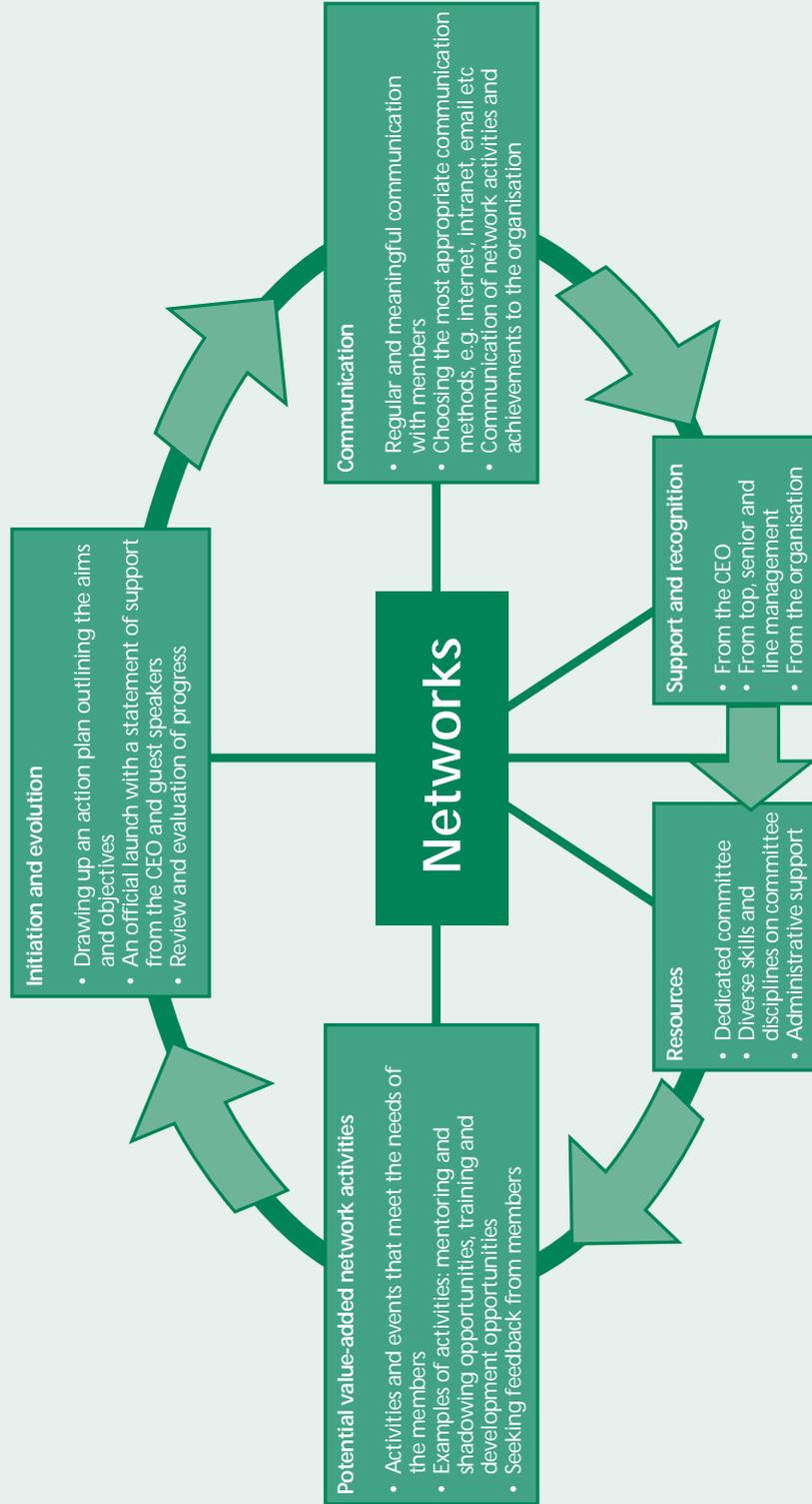
- Well planned initiation and evolution – establishing the network and maintaining momentum
- Effective communication – communicating the business benefits and activities within the organisation
- Support and recognition – having support and recognition from the chief executive officer (CEO) and the top management team
- Adequate resources – having a dedicated committee, administrative support and budget
- The provision of potential value-added network activities – activities and events which meet the needs of the members.

Figure 2 presents examples of some of the steps to follow under each of these five factors.

A practical audit tool based on this model has been designed, to help networks to help themselves, to monitor progress in a systematic way and to use as a source of ideas for moving forward. It is hoped that the findings of this study will be of assistance to the Office for Health Management in providing continued support and guidance to the networks.



Figure 2: The five-factor model for successful women's networks





# Introduction



# Introduction

The Office for Health Management (OHM), as part of its equal opportunities strategy, facilitated the start of women's regional networks in the health service in 1998. The Office's strategy on equal opportunities was to influence employers to:

- encourage all women to develop their careers within the health service by providing appropriate training and development opportunities
- increase the proportion of women at senior level within the health service
- ensure that working arrangements facilitate all staff to balance home and work commitments.

The purposes of the regional networks is twofold:

1. to enable women to network more effectively
2. to provide a forum in which women can meet together and support each other in their career development within the health service.

The OHM specified that provided at least six women within a region were interested in establishing a network, the OHM would provide a trained facilitator for the initial four meetings of the group. The Office also offered to negotiate with employers for the provision of premises for meetings and for the release of staff to attend meetings. The OHM requested that a brief note on the meeting and a list of attendees should be sent to the OHM after each network meeting.

It was acknowledged by the OHM that each network may develop differently, depending on the needs and aspirations of its members. The Office did however present some ground rules for the networks to follow:

- Networks should work to a positive plan of action within a specific time frame and not become 'gripe sessions'
- The main focus should be on identifying and overcoming obstacles to women in their career development; this may take the form of sharing information, establishing learning sets, inviting relevant speakers to address the group, preparing submissions on topics, etc.

The networks were requested that at the end of the first four meetings, each group should have:

- an elected contact person or committee
- a mailing list of members, all of whom work within the health service
- a statement of objectives and a strategy
- a plan of action for their first year of operation, to be agreed with their employer(s) and communicated to the Office for Health Management.



## Benefits of women's networks

There are a number of key benefits to be gained from networks. These include the following:

- Networks provide support for women
- Women have an opportunity to discuss issues in a secure environment
- Women have a forum to learn from each other and share experiences
- Networks provide a powerful means of generating information about the organisation
- Women receive information on available training courses
- Women receive information on the positions and promotion possibilities that exist within the organisation
- Women receive information on how to develop in their careers and how to progress within the organisation.

## The women's networks in the health board regions

The seven health board regions that participated in this research are all at very different stages in terms of their work to date with the women's network initiative. The Southern Health Board is not included in this research as it did not express an interest in the initiative.

- In the Western Health Board (WHB) a women's network has not been established as representatives from the WHB felt that there was no need for a network.
- In the Mid Western Health Board (MWHB) a number of meetings were held initially to discuss the beginning of a network but no agreement was made regarding a mission statement and the key people organising the network went on long-term leave.
- In the South Eastern Health Board (SEHB) a network was established with aims drawn up but the interest was always minimal and when people began to drop out the network diminished. This network had a lifespan of one year.
- In the Eastern Region a committee was formed, a number of events with guest speakers were held and the committee worked on drawing up an action plan and applying for a budget. ERHA had not been established when this initiative was first embarked on. A budget was granted but as a result of the climate in the organisation and the amount of change that has occurred over the last two years the interest in the network decreased. As a result the action plan has not been launched and the allocated money has not been spent.



- In the Midland Health Board (MHB) the network was the first to launch its action plan with aims, objectives and a mission statement. Following this launch very little activity took place. This is mainly because of the climate change within the health board at the time. A lot of change occurred within the health board and some of this change corresponded with the aims of the network. This resulted in a reduced need for a network. There has been no activity in the last few months.
- The North Eastern Health Board (NEHB) network has been very active over the last 18 months and continues to be. It has achieved a lot. Its success is due to hard work and dedication, support from the CEO, full-time administrative support and a diversity of skills on the steering committee.
- In the North Western Health Board (NWHB) the steering committee has been working hard behind the scenes producing a document and presenting this to the senior management team. It has outlined a number of key aims and objectives and has achieved one of these with the appointment of an Equality Officer. A small number of events with guest speakers have been held but the main problem being experienced in the North West is the difficulty in communicating with and involving the network members.

## Key enablers

From conducting this research a number of key enablers to success seemed to appear again and again. These include:

- support from the organisation and senior management
- good marketing and communication on the part of the network
- meeting the members' needs
- seeking feedback from members
- having a diverse skill set on the steering committee
- having senior women on the committee
- holding regular events and activities.

## Key inhibitors

The key inhibitors that were most apparent from this research include:

- opposition from males and the organisation as a whole
- lack of recognition of the benefits of a women's network



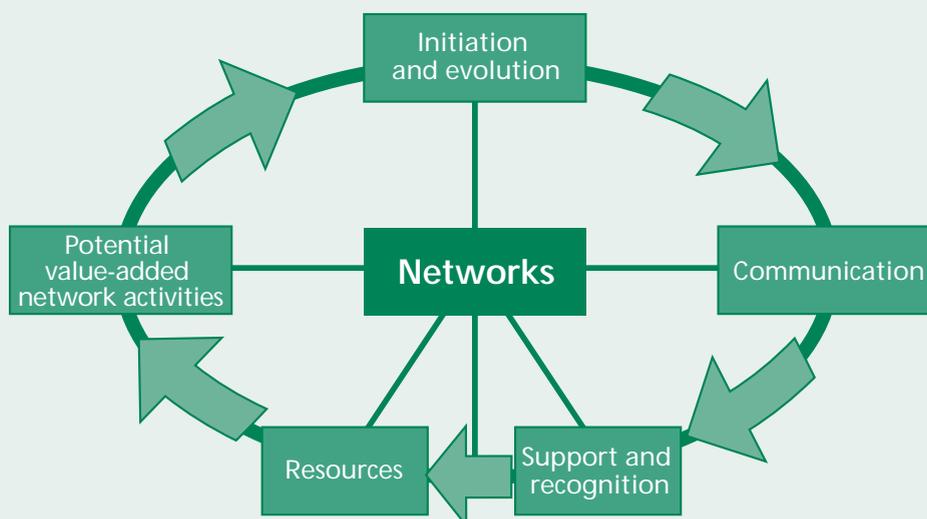
- poor communication and distribution of information to members
- lack of funding
- no administrative support
- infrequent activity.

## The model of factors for a successful women's network

Based on the research findings, a five-factor model for a successful women's network has been designed. This model is depicted below in Figure 3. Under each of the five factors are a number of steps to follow in order to ensure the success of the network. These steps are presented in Appendix A. They appear in the form of a checklist. This checklist will be a useful tool for networks to evaluate how well they are doing under each of the five factors. It will help the network identify areas for development. The evaluation could take the form of an audit that could be conducted once a year for the network.

Table 1 gives more detail of the enablers and inhibitors that are associated with each of these five factors. By striving to ensure that the enablers are achieved and the number of inhibitors are minimised the success of networks can be further enhanced.

**Figure 3: The five-factor model for successful women's networks**





**Table 1: Enablers and inhibitors of success**

Enablers	Inhibitors
<p><b>Initiation and evolution</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>+ Professionally facilitated sessions to establish the network</li> <li>+ Agreement on vision and mission from all involved</li> <li>+ Drawing up of a relevant action plan</li> <li>+ Producing and launching the action plan and network</li> <li>+ Having an impressive launch with the CEO, senior managers and guest speakers present</li> <li>+ Ensuring the action plan is being followed through</li> <li>+ Regular revisiting of the action plan</li> <li>+ Seeking feedback from members</li> <li>+ Acting on feedback and making these actions visible to members</li> </ul>	<p><b>Initiation and evolution</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Lack of clarity on reasons for establishing a network</li> <li>– Poor facilitation at the start</li> <li>– Lack of agreement on vision and mission statements</li> <li>– Unimpressive launch</li> <li>– Not taking stock along the way of progress</li> <li>– Not revisiting aims and objectives</li> <li>– Ignoring change taking place in the organisation</li> </ul>
<p><b>Communication</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>+ Clear routes of communication from management to all levels</li> <li>+ Choosing the most appropriate methods of communication and remembering that not everyone has e-mail</li> <li>+ Up-to-date mailing lists</li> <li>+ Communication of activities to all levels of management</li> <li>+ Regular newsletter and more information on action and activities and how the network is meeting the needs of its members</li> </ul>	<p><b>Communication</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Information not getting past management</li> <li>– Members not kept informed of activities</li> <li>– Out-of-date mailing list</li> <li>– Irregular newsletters</li> <li>– Lack of communication regarding actions and activities</li> </ul>
<p><b>Support and recognition</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>+ Visible support and recognition for the network on the part of the CEO</li> <li>+ CEO making reference to the network on occasions</li> </ul>	<p><b>Support and recognition</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Lack of support and recognition from CEO</li> <li>– Lack of support and recognition from all levels of management</li> </ul>



Enablers	Inhibitors
<p><b>Support and recognition (cont'd)</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>+ CEO available to discuss issues with the network when required</li> <li>+ CEO encouraging all levels of management to support the network</li> <li>+ Support and recognition from all levels of management</li> <li>+ Line management giving permission to members to attend network activities</li> <li>+ Having a link with HR for activities such as training or issues that are common to both</li> <li>+ HR being willing to help with relevant activities</li> <li>+ Not doubling up on activities being conducted by other parts of the organisation</li> <li>+ Support from OHM when required</li> </ul>	<p><b>Support and recognition (cont'd)</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Line management not granting permission to members to attend network events</li> <li>- Human Resources (HR) not supportive of the network</li> <li>- HR not willing to offer help when required</li> <li>- The network taking ownership of issues that are owned by HR or partnership committees, e.g. flexi-time, job sharing etc.</li> <li>- Slagging from males</li> </ul>
<p><b>Resources</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>+ Dedicated committee</li> <li>+ Committee members supporting one another</li> <li>+ Diverse skills on committee</li> <li>+ Senior women on committee</li> <li>+ Enthusiastic and energetic committee</li> <li>+ Range of skills on committee</li> <li>+ Six-eight members the optimum number to have on the committee</li> <li>+ Evolve committee after one year to one and a half years</li> <li>+ Budget from organisation</li> <li>+ Full-time secretary</li> </ul>	<p><b>Resources</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Insufficient numbers on the committee</li> <li>- Committee members not having enough time</li> <li>- Lack of commitment from committee members</li> <li>- Too many talkers and not enough doers</li> <li>- No administrative support</li> <li>- Members overworked and as a result lose their energy</li> <li>- Unsolved tensions between committee members</li> <li>- No funding</li> <li>- Poor teamwork</li> <li>- Lack of knowledge on how to draw up a strategy</li> </ul>



Enablers	Inhibitors
<p><b>Potential value-added network activities</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>+ A mixture of social and light events as well as the more serious events</li> <li>+ Get ideas and suggestions from the OHM for conferences and speakers</li> <li>+ Hold regular events</li> <li>+ Ensure that if the committee is working on a document for e.g. service plan that activities still continue</li> <li>+ Events are professional and educational</li> <li>+ Constant interaction with members</li> <li>+ Seek feedback from members and act on this feedback</li> <li>+ Good speakers</li> <li>+ Good networking opportunities</li> <li>+ Good development opportunities</li> </ul>	<p><b>Potential value-added network activities</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Too heavy an agenda (too many serious events and not a mixture of serious and light events)</li> <li>- An agenda that does not meet the needs of its members</li> <li>- Events that have not been suggested by members</li> <li>- Not acting on feedback from members</li> <li>- Not holding regular activities</li> </ul>



# Section 1

## Current Research on Women's Networks



# Current Research on Women's Networks

## What are women's networks and why are they established?

Networking has long been considered to be a crucial ingredient of success in any professional career as there are many advantages to be gained by its practice, including information exchange, collaboration, career planning, professional support and encouragement and upward mobility (e.g. Green, 1982; Stern, 1981; Welch, 1980).

Historically, most organisations have been dominated by white able-bodied men who have built up informal networks within their place of work and externally in male-only organisations. These informal male networks form an important part of the structure and culture of organisations and provide a vital source of social support, contact, policy information and guidance on how to operate successfully within the workplace. They have acted to support the dominant male culture within organisations and have excluded 'outsiders' such as women, ethnic minority groups, disabled people, lesbians and gay men (*Equal Opportunities Review*, 2000).

In 1997 an Institute of Management Survey found that the adverse impact on those who do not 'fit' the prevalent culture was still very much in evidence, concluding that 'the biggest single barrier to the progress of women in management is the existence of the men's club network'. Similarly a recent HM Fire Services Inspectorate's thematic review of equality and fairness in the UK fire service (documented in *Equal Opportunities Review*) uncovered a widely held belief in the 'maintenance of the existing white male-dominated organisation'. This belief manifested itself in strong opposition from those within the fire service (predominantly white men) to the recruitment of women, ethnic minorities, lesbians and gay men.

Employees perceived as different to the dominant organisational culture can feel isolated, undervalued and ignored. In practical terms this can result in fewer training and promotion opportunities and in organisational policies that hinder the excluded group. An increasingly popular strategy for combating this negative situation is for members of disadvantaged groups to form their own networks. Such networks can be crucial in offering common understanding and support, as well as providing practical assistance such as training, exchanging information and advice and working for culture change within the workplace (*Equal Opportunities Review*, 2000).

Employers now also recognise that networks can promote their own organisational interests. Employer-sponsored networks can increase employees' sense of involvement in the organisation and help retain them in the workplace. They can also be a useful source of new ideas. Employers wishing to reap the benefits of a



more diverse workforce are beginning to appreciate how such groups can be an important tool in promoting the culture change required for organisations to positively embrace diversity.

Over the last 20 years an increasing number of women's networks have been established, both inside and outside work, to meet the needs of the growing number of women in paid employment and to encourage women to form networking groups (Travers, Stevens and Pemberton, 1997).

Employee networks are typically grassroots-driven groups of employees formed around a characteristic of diversity (Society for Human Resource Management, Diversity Forum, 2001). Vinnicombe and Colwill (1996) define networking as 'the banding together of like-minded people for the purposes of contact and friendship and support'. More specifically, they explain that networking, in the context of women's networks, is 'women's attempts to create for themselves the support generated for men by their informal same-sex grouping'.

In general, three different types of women's networks have evolved:

- *Professional and occupational networks*, bringing together women who have similar professional qualifications (e.g. Women in Management) in order to provide information and career guidance, and a way of learning
- *In-company networks*, which are formal or informal female groupings within a particular organisation, some of which are only open to women at a certain level, and others for the shared concerns of all women
- *Training networks*, which are in effect support groups, with a specific, general or professional training focus (Travers, Stevens and Pemberton, 1997).

Even in the health and care sectors where women predominate in the workforce, women senior managers are usually in the minority in their management team (Foster, 2000). Women are frequently excluded from the informal networks of organisations. Often these tend to be based on sporting activities such as football, golf etc. Not only does this disadvantage women in excluding them from the informal exchange of information which takes place beyond the confines of meetings and office discussions but it denies them opportunities to explore issues or build relationships and it may deny them access to information about jobs. Establishing networks specifically geared to facilitating the sharing of practice and experience is a practical way of developing contact with other women and helping to counter this exclusion. Sharing ideas, strategies and experiences can be very helpful not only in increasing confidence and motivation but also in furthering strategic issues (Foster, 2000).



## What do networks provide for their members?

Joy Foster has published articles on women's networks. She is a member of the Association of Women Senior Managers (AWSM) in Personal Social Services in the UK. This is a network which has been meeting for over 10 years. According to Foster, 'the meetings provide an opportunity for the members to reflect on current issues, to listen to a chosen speaker, to participate in personal development exercises and so on'. On a personal level they have enabled Foster to meet with other women 'whose values and experiences resonate with my own' (Foster, 2000). Within the network it is safe to discuss ideas before they are fully thought through, to seek to develop them further and to share issues and concerns. To balance the focus of the network and to seek to be supportive of other women, the network has regularly organised conferences on women's issues. There is little evidence of competitiveness or status consciousness but a real sense of empowerment for women through being with other women at these conferences. Several members have also established women's networks within their authorities or departments.

Segerman-Peck (1991) has argued that, by using networks to share information with others, women empower themselves and gain support and respect from others.

In 1994 The European Women's Management Development (EWMD) Network UK wished to establish whether external women's networks were providing members with a career development function as well as psychosocial support. The EWMD conducted a survey of 328 members. The findings of this initial study indicated that women joined networks to help them develop their personal skills, to meet others who could help their careers and for social contacts. In general these expectations were met. Findings revealed that women rated the psychosocial benefits to be greater than career support. The skills necessary for successful networking were identified as the ability to project oneself to new contacts, knowing how to work within a network and knowing how to use the network effectively.

The research team also focused on cross-cultural differences in networks. They concluded that there were potential difficulties and barriers to effective networking across cultures but that 'cross-cultural networkers' may prevent problems if they avoid falling victim to the following assumptions:

- that the members of a network will be like us, when the network has a very different demographic profile
- that the needs of the members are similar to ours when, as the results show, they may have very different agendas



- that the time dimension of the network is the same as ours and rush into developing business contacts out of sync with the rhythm of the network members
- that the network is unable to meet our needs, when in reality it is the social norms that are different.

In order to network effectively across cross-cultural boundaries we may need to adjust our expectation of a network when we move outside our own culture, and acquire a broader range of networking skills.

## Establishing a network

Membership in employee networks should be completely voluntary. Different organisations have different requirements for establishing official or corporate sponsored employee networks (Society for Human Resource Management, Diversity Forum, 2001).

At AT&T, for example, prospective groups must prove their value to the business before they can be recognised and supported by management. In each case they must present a business plan to management for formal recognition and support. At 3M, part of the criteria for group formation is the stipulation that the groups cannot serve as advocates for individual employees or promote a specific cause and/or event because the company already has formal procedures for handling such issues.

In general, however, organisations considering the establishment of networks ask for some basic information from the group's organisers, including the following:

- A mission statement or statement of purpose
- Goals, both short-term and long-term. What does the group plan to achieve?
- How will the group accomplish those goals? What is the timetable?
- What type of financial commitment from the company, if any, will be needed?
- How will the group operate? Will it have designated leaders? Who is eligible for membership?
- How does the group's mission/purpose compare with the corporation's core values?



## Examples of employee networks from the literature

An article in *Equal Opportunities Review* (2000) entitled 'Implementing equal opportunities, employee networking' explores the experiences of five organisations with employee networks. These organisations were HSBC Bank plc, London Borough of Hammersmith and Fulham, Oxford University, Barnardos and BP Amoco plc. The focus was on employee networking as an example of best practice in the implementation of equal opportunities policies. Four of the organisations are described in brief below.

### **HSBC Bank plc**

HSBC's equal opportunity policy supports all staff in making the most of their careers within the organisation. HSBC has set up several employee networks to support historically disadvantaged groups. These include 12 women's networks, the working parents network, the employees network on disability and the recently formed cultural diversity forum. With regards to the disability network, one of HSBC's general managers sits on the National Disability Council. The network is sponsored by the company to support the development of its employees with disabilities and raise awareness of disability issues throughout the organisation.

### **London Borough of Hammersmith and Fulham**

The borough has a history of supporting employee networks. Networks include groups for black workers, Irish workers, disabled workers, lesbian and gay workers, senior women, the Springboard network and a support group for employees with HIV. The networks enable the council to interface effectively with employees who are target group members and who historically may have been disadvantaged. A senior personnel officer for equality at the council explains: 'The networks provide a useful function for both parties. They offer management a sounding board for new ideas and provide a forum for employees to feed into council policy making. They also give staff the opportunity to inform management of how policies and practices are affecting them.'

The council provides different levels of support for the groups, dependent on their requirements. Generally, it provides a meeting room and agrees travelling and attendance time. Further input is subject to the needs of each group. 'For example,



we provide full administrative support for the disabled workers' group and the HIV employees' support group. However, some of the other workers' groups are completely self-organised or are supported by the trade union, Unison.' The council believes that trade unions are key partners in promoting and helping to ensure adherence to its equal opportunities policy and that the involvement, support and participation of employees and their trade unions is essential. As such, the union also supports a number of workers' groups that overlap or run parallel with the council groups.

According to the borough, membership of the networks tends to ebb and flow. There are about 10 core members per group who regularly attend meetings but attendance can triple or quadruple if a relevant issue comes to the fore.

## **Barnardos**

Barnardos charity has a variety of employees' support groups spread throughout the UK. These consist of black workers' forums, gay and lesbian forums and disability forums. The black workers' forums were the first to develop in the early 1990s, stemming from the introduction of Barnardos' first equal opportunities policy in 1992. A high-profile race awareness programme within the organisation followed the adoption of the policy and the black workers' forums evolved from this. The impetus came from employees themselves who were feeling isolated and saw networking as a mechanism for providing mutual support. The groups are self-run with Barnardos providing time off for attendance. Forum meetings take place on a monthly or six-weekly basis. The forums are open to all grades, and seniority varies across the regions with some very senior people having a high-profile co-ordinating and facilitating role.

Barnardos also provides a small budget for conferences and the black workers' groups hold a bi-annual conference. Regional directors allocate money for special events on an ad hoc basis in support of the networks. The networks have had a major influence on Barnardos' policies and employment practices. The black workers' forum has been instrumental in Barnardos introducing race equality standards which have now been adapted and implemented in respect of disability and sexuality. As a consequence the workforce is becoming more representative of the communities it serves.

With regards to diversity groups, Paul Deemer, Equalities/Diversity Manager, believed that 'while diversity groups may be the ultimate goal, Barnardos has not



reached this stage and there is still a need for people with different experiences of discrimination to meet together to provide mutual support and discuss the issues that are of practical relevance to them' (Deemer, 2000).

## **BP Amoco plc**

The subject of career development for women was first raised during the 1990s at a management conference when the chief executive officer noted that there was only one woman among the 200 top managers in attendance. As a result the national women's network of BP Oil Europe and the European women's network was established. A champion was appointed at a very senior level to increase credibility for and raise awareness of the issues with the senior executive. The overall concept, supported by the management team, the champion and the European women's network, was: 'We intend to promote and aid the creation of an environment that makes it possible for women to develop their skills and careers in accordance with their potential, the objective being to release value to BP Oil Europe from a more balanced workforce, diverse styles of management and greater retention of quality staff.'

As a result of the network, BP implemented several initiatives aimed at improving the position of women in each country. These included job shadowing, mentoring and career development courses for women. After a couple of years the network members realised that there was something missing and began to feel isolated within the organisation. While the network had been necessary and beneficial at the start the members began to feel the need to move on. As a result members were keen to open up the meetings to a wider range of employees. In 1997 at BP Oil Europe's annual women's conference it was decided to rename BP Oil Europe women's network as the 'diversity network'.

Following the merger of Amoco and BP, the UK diversity forum of BP Amoco was created. Forum meetings consist of between 20-25 people, with three or four people attending from each major UK location. Meetings last either one or two days and are fully financed by the company. At the senior executive level a diversity and inclusion framework has been developed and an implementation plan created.

The network meets with management every two months and there is very strong commitment to diversity and inclusion right from the top at BP Amoco. Several high-profile statements of the company's commitment to diversity have been made



by the chief executive. It has also been extremely important that the diversity message is owned by line management and that the function of the human resource department is that of facilitator only. 'Diversity and inclusion must be about how the company does business and not just a side issue for women or any other targeted group' (Isabelle Pujol, Global Diversity and Inclusion Co-ordinator, 2000). The BP experience highlights how women-only networks can evolve in time to become more diverse.

## Benefits of networks

Companies that have established employee networks say the groups have several clear benefits. The groups help the company achieve its diversity vision by improving processes such as:

- performance feedback
- employee development and retention
- enabling the company to better connect with a diverse customer base and
- providing valuable viewpoints on company projects and policies (Society for Human Resource Management, Diversity Forum, 2001).

## Inhibitors of success

For some organisations the existence of employee networks is not always so beneficial. Although the cost of administering and maintaining the networks is usually minimal, there is sometimes criticism from other employees who do not agree that such groups benefit the organisation.

## Enablers to success

However, for employees to really reap the rewards of employee networks, it is not enough merely to facilitate their getting together for mutual reassurance; there has to be a two-way dialogue between network members and senior management. One of the criticisms of the effectiveness of the networks is that because they consist of disadvantaged groups they remain outside the informal male-dominated networking system and therefore continue to lack power and influence within the organisation. To overcome this it is essential that there is an open channel to



decision makers at a senior level who can address members' genuine concerns and so promote a more diverse and inclusive organisational culture (*Equal Opportunities Review*, 2000).

Similarly, for positive action measures like networking to succeed, their implementation must be accompanied by equal opportunities training within the organisation to ensure that they do not simply fuel resentment among colleagues and reinforce negative attitudes. It is vital to educate the whole workforce about the business benefits of positive action for the organisation as a whole.

For networks to succeed at the individual and organisational level, careful planning and adequate resources are required. Lawrence Baytos (1995) outlines action steps for successful employee networks. These steps can help smooth the establishment of an employee group:

- Get senior management to support the existence of an employee network or to at least tacitly recognise the validity of employees' interests in forming such a group.
- Establish a close link between the network and the HR department so that employee input is captured, realistic expectations are established and competing priorities of various groups are balanced and sequenced. If HR staff members happen to participate in the group, have them do so as individuals, not as representatives of the HR department.
- Give each network group a specific role in important aspects of the diversity change process, such as helping to raise issues, selecting consultants/vendors, and testing training or initiative ideas.
- Balance attention and resources so that no single ethnic/gender network is seen as receiving a disproportionate share of benefits or having excessive clout.



## Conclusion

This section has included a summary of the literature in the area of employee networks. From conducting the research it was clear that there have not been many formal and strategic evaluations of the networks that are in existence and therefore there is a lack of structured research information regarding the effectiveness of women's networks. However, lessons can be learned from the experiences of organisations such as BP, Barnardos etc. We expand this benchmarking information in Section Two, where we report on our contact with a range of organisations that support women's networks.



## Section 2

# Benchmarking Information from other Organisations



# Benchmarking Information from other Organisations

## Introduction

A number of organisations and an individual network were contacted for this aspect of the research. The majority of the research was conducted via telephone interviews. The following are the organisations that were contacted directly:

- The Business Enterprise Network for Women in Rural Areas in the UK (individual network)
- Lloyds TSB
- BP
- UBS Warburg
- IBM Ireland
- Civil Service (Ireland).

Information regarding additional organisations was found in various articles and reviews. From these sources information on women's networks in the following organisations has also been included:

- Pricewaterhouse Coopers (US & Canada)
- British Telecom
- General Electric
- Deloitte and Touche (Canada)
- Arthur Anderson (Canada)
- KPMG (Canada)
- Hewlett Packard.

The findings from these organisations are outlined below under a number of key headings.

## Reasons for establishing a network

A number of reasons are cited for establishing women's networks. They include the following:

- **Isolation:** women in rural areas feel isolated (Women in Rural Areas Network) and senior women in organisations can feel isolated (Lloyds TSB). Women need an outlet to overcome this isolation, exchange information and ideas, inform others and learn from others.



- **Lack of understanding:** women in rural areas are unable to give 100 per cent of their time to their business because of family responsibilities and this is not accepted by many people. Senior women working in organisations also have a number of demands, which include their family responsibilities.
- **Lack of opportunity for women to get together to empathise and discuss issues with each other:** women in Lloyds TSB requested more of a support system for senior women and as a result the network was formed.
- **Dissatisfaction with the lack of opportunities and the lack of networking opportunities:** this was the reason for establishing a women's network in UBS Warburg.
- In IBM Ireland the network was established to help achieve one of its six global diversity challenges, which is the **development of women**. Other diversity challenges include diversifying the management team and work/ life balance issues. The women leadership council established in IBM Ireland in 1998 organises the networking events.
- **To assist the advancement of women:** this was the reason for establishing the women managers network in the Irish Civil Service.

## Who are the networks for?

As the membership of networks can vary according to levels and needs in the organisation the participating organisations were asked, 'Who are the networks for?' The answers are as follows:

- For women who need networking opportunities
- For women who need more support in their roles
- For women from all levels in the organisation. The women's network in Lloyds TSB began originally as a senior women's network. This is known as the national network. Regional and local networks have since been established. The regional networks are comprised of women at all levels of management while the local networks are open to all women employees. In IBM Ireland women from all levels in the organisation are welcome to network events
- In the case of the women managers network in the Irish Civil Service, it is for grades higher executive officer (HEO) and above.



## The steering committee – skills and diversity required

The steering committee plays an essential role in the network. Therefore it is important to discover the key skills and characteristics that committee members require. They may include the following:

### Skills

- Drive and passion and a belief in the network by committee members
- Communication skills to be able to sell the network and the reasons for its existence
- A complement of skills by the committee members
- An ambassador, who can speak about the network and promote the network
- A number of 'doers'/ 'executors of the work' to organise events
- A sense of openness among committee members. They need to realise that they rely on others within the organisation and cannot go it alone.

### Characteristics

- A sufficient number of committee members to conduct the work
- A representation from different parts of the business
- A link with corporate communication
- Full-time administration
- Women from senior positions in the organisation.

## Objectives of the networks

Outlined here are some of the objectives that networks within organisations have assumed.

The objectives of the Lloyds TSB network are as follows:

- To provide a platform for women to develop themselves in an environment which they can relate to. To provide an environment which is conducive for women to develop. To encourage women and help women promote themselves better in the organisation. To instil confidence in women, for women to market and promote themselves.
- To engage women more in the business and inform them of the business opportunities that are there for them as women and for the business as a whole. To provide a forum for communication and information. To create a better appreciation for the business agenda and for where the business is going. To be very business focused.



- To provide an opportunity for women to learn more from senior women, and find out what enabled them to get to where they are today. What learning needs to occur on their behalf?

In UBS Warburg the objectives of the women's network are:

- to expand the current profile of leaders
- to retain and recruit from more varied backgrounds
- to provide direction and support channels to employees where needed.

In IBM Ireland the objectives are:

- to recruit more women
- to lose fewer women
- to improve the distribution of women in the senior community
- to improve IBM Ireland's image of being an employer of women.

In the women managers network in the Irish Civil Service the objectives are:

- to provide training for the development of women managers in the Civil Service
- to promote equality for women in the Civil Service
- to address equality issues in the Civil Service
- to look at areas affecting promotion of women in the Civil Service
- to provide a forum for the exchange of information
- to maintain and make links with national and international women organisations, e.g. The National Council of Women in Ireland

## How the networks are funded

All of the networks that participated in this research received a budget from their organisations. Of course it was necessary for the networks to indicate what the network was striving to achieve and how this money would be spent.

The network for women managers in the Civil Service is funded by the Human Resources Development Services section of The Centre for Management and Organisational Development (CMOD).



## Enablers of success

When asked what they believed to be the enablers to success a wide variety of answers were received. However, many participants mentioned the same enablers. These are clustered here under sub-headings.

### **Inclusiveness**

- The network is all-embracing and meets the needs of its members.
- It has a strong ethos of openness and a statement that everyone is welcome.
- There is a commonality amongst members
- In IBM the network is part of the diversity strategy and is enabled by this.
- The network is based on what women want. Members should be asked what they want, what they would like as part of the events etc; then giving members what they want is important
- The network has its own separate identity, i.e. is not owned by HR
- It aspires to attract all women in the organisation
- It is open to both genders and all levels.

### **Commitment of the members**

- The network is the product of the drive, passion and initiative of the women
- People who initiate the network are self starters
- Leadership is a characteristic of the members
- Members are committed to project management.

### **Communication**

- The network communicates with and educates the rest of the business
- It demonstrates that business is getting done and that it is a serious forum
- It markets itself correctly, to ensure that the organisation knows exactly what it is trying to do.

### **Support from the organisation**

- The network has the commitment and support of senior managers, e.g. in Lloyds TSB the deputy chief executive supports it and the fact that he is male makes a difference. One of the most senior women from Lloyds TSB is on the chair. The Lloyds TSB network is approved by the board. Invitation letters to the annual conference are signed by both the chair and sponsor. This shows that it is important. Buy-in from the top is critical. According to IBM Ireland, the women's network, like any diversity initiative, must have top-level management support
- A budget is a necessary requirement.



## Inhibitors of success

The following are some of the inhibitors experienced by the participating organisations.

- There is opposition from groups not represented by the network, e.g. white males. This occurs if the network has not been publicised properly. As a result white males can feel threatened and express opposition to the network. Males need to have as much information on the network as possible so that they can understand the reasons for it. When the mystique is taken away they became much more objective and open to the network. For example, in Lloyds TSB men now recognise that it does make the most of talent and that women are learning a lot more and are challenging a lot more by not accepting inappropriate behaviour/practices
- The expectations you have as a woman and the way you view the world can inhibit success. If women are pessimistic and feel that things will not change then they will never work to make it happen
- The network requires huge effort and time
- The 'mindset' of some employees at executive and management levels is an inhibitor. Where this is an issue executives and management need to be convinced that the advancement of women is an imperative business objective.

## Events that have taken place

The following list describes typical events that have occurred through the women's networks:

- training events (those required by the women)
- annual conferences (with guest speakers, reports on work throughout the year and a launch of an action plan for the coming year)
- mentoring programmes
- development programmes or two-day training events
- senior management development weeks, which include seminars, coaching and mentoring sessions for senior managers
- cheese and wine receptions
- lunches, where women share their experiences with each other
- seminars.



## Benefits

With regards to benefits, the participating organisations were able to give a number of benefits for both members and organisations. These are as follows.

### **Benefits for members**

- Women's networks provide a forum for women to come together and mutually help each other, share their experiences, advise each other, learn from each other and help each other with their problems. Fundamentally they equip women with coping strategies and give them more confidence.
- The networks provide training and help specific to women's needs.
- They provide women with more information regarding the organisation and knowledge of the positions available to them.
- Membership motivates women and helps them to become empowered.

### **Benefits for organisations**

- The perception of the organisation as an employer of choice improves as a result of employee networks. External networks can improve the external profile of an organisation, graduates become aware of it and this in turn is good for recruitment and retention.
- Networks can result in an increase in the number of women in senior management. In Lloyds TSB in 1996/97 there were 7 per cent women in senior management and in 2001 there were over 16 per cent. Of course this increase is not exclusively as a result of the networks but they certainly have provided a platform for women to market themselves.
- Networks have helped increase the number of middle and junior women managers and the talent pool for senior managers of the future.

## Means of communication

Networks use a number of mediums to communicate. These include:

- internet site
- intranet site
- newsletter.



## How the networks have evolved

- In Lloyds TSB, in addition to the national network, regional and local networks have now been formed. It has been a stage-by-stage process and has evolved in response to demands. Each of the regional networks has its own steering committee. The local networks are accessing quite junior women.
- In UBS Warburg the network has become much more proactive and is concerned with further educational opportunities for its members.
- The women's network in British Telecom was initially concerned with raising awareness, but it has since become more business focused, and influences policy and organisational thinking.
- The women's network in IBM Ireland has evolved from only involving very senior women to involving more levels of women.

## Potential benefits of single gender groups

The following are a number of quotes given by participants when asked what they perceived to be the potential benefits of single gender groups:

'They provide an excellent service up to a certain point. They bring out and put on the table a collective view of what once were isolated views. Very positive and feel good factor for the individual. The danger point will be that some senior women will think that they got here on merit and did not have the ladder that the more junior women are getting through their involvement in the networks. They may try to take the ladders away for these women.' (Financial Sector)

'Single gender groups facilitate thinking and development, open up discussion and generate an open approach. It will be destructive if they are used as a means to an end. They are a great forum if managed.' (Financial Sector)

'They are helpful and useful in some circumstances and more protective and supportive.' (Manufacturing)

'If pitched against the diversity message and diversity is a business priority then single gender groups can be accepted as being important for the business.' (IT sector)



## The future

The interviews were concluded by asking the organisations what they felt the networks needed to do differently or what is planned for the future. Many of the participating organisations agree that there is a need for networks to become more integrated with the rest of the business and to market themselves more to the organisation. Keeping the network fresh and alive is an ongoing challenge. One of the ways to do this is to continue to organise workshops, conferences etc that meet the needs of the members. One organisation in the financial sector is interested in conducting a strategic evaluation of the network to look at its impact on the business.



## Section 3

# Recommendations for the Office for Health Management



# Recommendations for the Office for Health Management

## Feedback from the networks

Overall, feedback from the network participants on support received from the OHM was very positive. Each network considers the OHM to be very helpful and can be called on when required. The OHM has often given ideas for guest speakers and is always very supportive when any assistance is required.

## Additional support

When asked what other support or guidance the OHM could provide it was suggested that it should continue doing what it is doing and continue to give support. A steering committee member from the NEHB stated that perhaps bi-annual meetings could be conducted to share views on the work of the networks and to continue to include members on training days funded by the OHM nationally. The NWHB also agree with sharing information and would like updates from the OHM on progress nationally. Perhaps a visit once or twice a year from an OHM representative would also be worthwhile.

## Networks supporting each other nationally

This was an area covered in the focus group schedules. Many suggested that the OHM could perhaps organise an annual national event where all of the networks come together, share their experiences and have each of the networks make a presentation on progress made during the year. Another way for networks to learn from each other would be to organise an annual meeting whereby the steering committees would meet up to share experiences and learning.

### **Additional specific recommendations for OHM**

- Communicate the key findings from this research report to each of the networks. In particular communicate the five-factor model for successful networks and share the key enablers and inhibitors of success with the networks
- Continue to provide support to the networks when required and ensure that the networks are aware that the OHM is there to assist whenever it is required
- Refer to the model when assisting any of the networks with any problems they are having
- Have regular 'check-ins' with the networks to ensure that they are progressing
- Discuss the way forward with the inactive networks and offer to facilitate discussions
- Encourage the networks to audit progress using the checklist proposed
- Encourage information sharing.



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# Appendix A

## The Network Audit



# The Network Audit

## Overview

The network audit is an instrument to provide insights into how a network is performing and how successful it is. Specifically, the audit involves the examination of the network against the five-factor model in order to identify which aspects are working well and which need more attention. It will help the network take a planned approach to achieve success.

It consists of a checklist of the steps to be followed under each of these five factors:

- initiation and evolution
- communication
- support and recognition
- resources
- potential value-added network activities.

By evaluating the network according to this checklist, areas for improvement can be identified. It is recommended that each network conduct an audit on progress at least once a year. Some of the steps identified under each of the five factors may not be relevant to a particular network depending on how the network is progressing, e.g. having an official launch of the network will only apply to a first year audit. Therefore some of these steps may require refining depending on the stage the network has reached.

## Procedure

Each factor is presented and the steps to be followed under each factor are presented in table format. There are two columns in this table: 'Best Practice' and 'Reality'. In the 'Best Practice' column the various steps to ensure success are outlined. In the 'Reality' column space is provided for the network to comment on what is happening or has happened in relation to the steps. By examining all of the responses in this 'Reality' column, an overall assessment score using the rating scale provided can be allocated.

By looking at each of the ratings across the five factors the network can identify areas of strength and areas for improvement. Following this evaluation each network should draw up an action plan to help with the areas that are in need of improvement. This in turn will assist the network in becoming more successful.



## Initiation and evolution

Best practice		Reality (insert comments)	
• There is a clear reason for establishing the network.			
• Sessions for establishing a committee were facilitated.			
• The network has a mission and vision and this is reviewed on a yearly basis.			
• An action plan outlining aims and objectives is drawn up on a yearly basis.			
• The network is officially launched, with a statement of support from the CEO and guest speakers.			
• Progression milestones are noted.			
• The network seeks feedback from members regarding the action plan.			
• A review and evaluation of progress is undertaken.			
• The aims and objectives are revisited.			
• The network is linked with a diversity strategy and with equal opportunities.			
<b>Overall assessment score</b> (Insert a score 1-4 as outlined below)			
<b>1</b> Not doing this	<b>2</b> Just starting to do this	<b>3</b> Doing this but need to improve	<b>4</b> Doing this to best of ability



## Communication

Best practice		Reality (comments)	
• Regular and meaningful communication with members			
• Most appropriate communication methods, e.g. internet, intranet, e-mail, newsletter			
• Communication of network activities and achievements to the organisation			
• Communication of objectives, achievements etc. with senior and line managers			
• Communication of action on feedback to members			
Overall assessment score (Insert a score 1-4 as outlined below)			
<b>1</b> Not doing this	<b>2</b> Just starting to do this	<b>3</b> Doing this but need to improve	<b>4</b> Doing this to best of ability



## Support and recognition

Best practice		Reality (comments)	
• Support from the CEO			
• Support from top, senior and line management			
• Support from the organisation/Health Board			
• Link with Human Resources (especially in terms of initiatives that are more appropriate for HR, i.e. flexi-time, crèche facilities etc).			
Overall assessment score (Insert a score 1-4 as outlined below)			
<b>1</b> Not doing this	<b>2</b> Just starting to do this	<b>3</b> Doing this but need to improve	<b>4</b> Doing this to best of ability



## Resources

Best practice		Reality	
• Dedicated and devoted committee			
• Diverse skills and disciplines on committee			
• Mixed levels within the committee and some senior women on the committee			
• Project management skills on committee			
• Optimum number on a committee 6-8			
• Administration support, i.e. secretary			
• Budget			
Overall assessment score (Insert a score 1-4 as outlined below)			
<b>1</b> Not doing this	<b>2</b> Just starting to do this	<b>3</b> Doing this but need to improve	<b>4</b> Doing this to best of ability



## Potential value-added network activities

Best practice		Reality	
• Activities and events that meet the needs of the members			
• Variety of activities			
• Network being kept alive			
• Educational context in terms of providing training courses and guest speakers			
• Professional aspect to the network			
• Events with guest speakers			
• Feedback sought from members in relation to activities			
• Action on this feedback			
• Visible action			
• Examples of activities: mentoring and shadowing opportunities, training and development opportunities and learning sets			
Overall assessment score (Insert a score 1-4 as outlined below)			
<b>1</b> Not doing this	<b>2</b> Just starting to do this	<b>3</b> Doing this but need to improve	<b>4</b> Doing this to best of ability



## Where the network is in relation to the five-factor model

Date of previous audit (if applicable): \_\_\_\_\_

Date of this audit: \_\_\_\_\_

Last year's Ratings	This year's rating (enter 1, 2, 3 or 4 as appropriate)	Actions required
<input type="checkbox"/>	Initiation and evolution <input type="checkbox"/>	
<input type="checkbox"/>	Communication <input type="checkbox"/>	
<input type="checkbox"/>	Support and recognition <input type="checkbox"/>	
<input type="checkbox"/>	Resources <input type="checkbox"/>	
<input type="checkbox"/>	Potential value-added network activities <input type="checkbox"/>	



# Appendix B

## Data-gathering Tools



## Focus group participants

Focus groups were conducted in four of the health board regions: the Eastern Region, the Midland Health Board, the North Eastern Health Board and the North Western Health Board. As the women's networks from the North Eastern and the North Western areas are quite active it was decided to hold two separate focus groups for each of these, one for the steering committee members and the other for the network members. All of the focus groups were poorly attended which was quite disappointing. The following table gives an outline of the numbers invited and the numbers that actually attended. The questions used during the data gathering stage, are listed in this Appendix.

**Table 1: Numbers invited and numbers that attended the focus group sessions**

Location of network	Number invited	Number attended
ERHA	53	6
MHB	26	6
NEHB	12 from steering committee 40 members	1 attended the focus group and spoke with three others from the steering committee. 7
NWHB	18 from steering committee 38 members	5 3

## Questions for benchmarking organisations

- Q.1. When was the network established and why?
- Q.2. How was it established?
- Q.3. What is it called?
- Q.4. Who are the members – levels, ethnicity and breakdown of ethnicity amongst levels?



- Q.5. Is there a steering committee and who comprises this?
- Q.6. What traits/skills are required by a committee?
- Q.7. What was the impetus to join? Was it self-driven or compulsory?
- Q.8. What have been the main objectives of the network?
- Q.9. Have these objectives been met?
- Q.10. How has the network evolved?
- Q.11. How has the network been supported/funded?
- Q.12. How often does the network meet?
- Q.13. What factors have enabled success?
- Q.14. What factors have inhibited success?
- Q.15. What events have occurred as part of the network?
- Q.16. Have there been any obvious tensions within the group?
- Q.17. Have there been any obvious differences due to various ethnic participants, particularly in terms of objectives, i.e. women-based objectives/ race-based objectives?
- Q.18. Has the network been officially evaluated?
- Q.19. What do you think participants have learned from being part of the network? How have they benefited?
- Q.20. How do you think the organisation has benefited from the network?
- Q.21. In what way do you see the network evolving in the future?
- Q.22. What would you like to see achieved by the network?
- Q.23. Is there anything that the network needs to do differently?
- Q.24. What is your view on the overall benefits of single gender groups?

### Focus group questions with steering committee members

- Q.1. What were (i) your reasons for becoming involved with the network and (ii) your expectations of a women's network?
- Q.2. What do you think has been achieved since the network was established?



- Q.3. What have you gained personally from your involvement with the network?
- Q.4. What have you enjoyed and what have you least enjoyed?
- Q.5. What factors have enabled success of the network, and what have inhibited success?
- Q.6. Going forward what does the network need to do differently to be successful?
- Q.7. What are the key skills required by a committee?
- Q.8. What is the ideal number to have on a committee?
- Q.9. How long should a committee last?
- Q.10. What is your opinion on the role of the Office for Health Management (OHM) to date with the network?
- Q.11. Is there any other support or guidance that the OHM could provide?
- Q.12. What in your opinion are the potential benefits and disadvantages of single gender groups?

### Focus group questions with network members

- Q.1. What were (i) your reasons for joining the network and (ii) your expectations of a women's network?
- Q.2. What do you think has been achieved since the network was established?
- Q.3. What have you gained personally from your involvement with the network?
- Q.4. What have you enjoyed and what have you least enjoyed?
- Q.5. What factors have enabled success of the network, and what have inhibited success?
- Q.6. Going forward what does the network need to do differently to be successful?
- Q.7. What is your opinion on the role of the Office for Health Management (OHM) to date with the network?
- Q.8. Is there any other support or guidance that the OHM could provide?
- Q.9. How could networks help each other nationally?
- Q.10. What in your opinion are the potential benefits and disadvantages of single gender groups?