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## Like minds converge in affinity groups

By David Hughes  
For ajcjobs

For decades, professional groups and associations designed to bring together women, African-Americans or other people with similar interests have provided a setting to network and develop skills.

In recent years, large companies have borrowed the concept, creating in-house organizations referred to by names such as alliances, forums and networks. Examples include Coca-Cola's Latin Employee Forum and Gay & Lesbian Employee Forum.



LEITA COWART/Special

Mike Zerous, (center) chairman of the affinity group at ChoicePoint leads a discussion with the group. Left is Ash Hassib, right is Peter Vennel.

But few corporations have anything quite like ChoicePoint's Men Championing Diversity group.

On a recent weekday, about a dozen men got together over lunch in a ChoicePoint conference room, joined by a few emissaries from the Alpharetta company's Women's Alliance. The women asked the men to help pass out water to runners at an upcoming road race fundraiser. The visitors thanked the men for help building a Habitat for Humanity project. And they asked the men to attend the ChoicePoint Women's Conference this fall to show support for the professional development session that will attract company employees from across the country.

Although the Men Championing Diversity group is different from many affinity groups — especially in that nearly half of the people at the table were middle-aged white men — its culture mirrors those based on gender, race or sexual orientation. As with most groups, professional development is mixed with leadership development, with some civic-minded initiatives rounding out the mission.

"They are a supportive network for associates with like interests," said Laura Young, ChoicePoint's director of diversity. "Maybe some of them haven't had the opportunity for a leadership role with the company, so they can chair a group or lead an affinity group project."

In metro Atlanta there is no shortage of local chapters of national professional organizations. Some, such as the American Business Women's Association, have dozens of chapters in the metro area.

At the Gwinnett chapter of the women's association, the 50 members get together to establish business connections, pursue educational opportunities and, of course, network.

"For me, [joining] was absolutely the best thing I've ever done for myself, both professionally and personally," said Anne Pasquini, who is finishing up a two-year term as president.

The senior education consultant with Manhattan Associates said swapping business cards is not the only practical benefit of membership.

"This has provided an opportunity for me to develop my public-speaking skills and leadership skills," Pasquini said. "I was a little reluctant to join an association, because I thought it would be stuffy. But that wasn't the case. It's a very diverse group, and we are committed to recognizing when people do well."

One format most of the groups have in common is working toward a conference or big annual event, when a motivational or professional speaker will kick off a meeting, typically followed by workshops, panel discussions and, of course, networking.

This year, the Atlanta Business League, a group of African-American professionals, has brought in political candidates for statewide office as well as business and civic leader Felker Ward to address its monthly gatherings at the Atlanta Life Financial Group building in downtown Atlanta.

"We'll have three professionals come in and give five-minute presentations during the meeting," said Leona Barr-Davenport, president and CEO of the Atlanta Business League. "So our members can build a relationship with the presenter, and it might even turn into a business opportunity down the line."

Many of the affinity organizations were formed decades ago to support groups of people underrepresented in the work force. For example, a man founded the American Business Women's Association in the late 1940s to create a professional development resource for the women who entered the work force in large numbers during World War II.

Commercial real estate is still a male-dominated field, but in the early 1980s women and men in real estate sales were almost completely segregated. Women sold residential property, and men handled the office and shopping center deals.

In 1982, those women who did sell commercial real estate in Atlanta formed Commercial Real Estate Women of Atlanta, a group that still meets monthly at different locations around metro Atlanta.

"At the time, women needed the support, but now hundreds of women sell commercial real estate here, including some of the biggest players," said Gina Adkins, who helps with the group's communications and specializes in marketing and public relations for the real estate industry.

Adkins leads the communications committee, one of the association's seven committees. Her group puts out a newsletter and maintains the Web site ([www.crewatlanta.org](http://www.crewatlanta.org)), which solicits support for community service projects and posts job listings, as well as providing general information.

She said the real networking takes place while people are working on committees.

"It's a place to do business now," she said, "and not so much of an organization of women needing support because they felt lonely among all the men in the business."

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