



Creating an Employee Resource Group for Mental Health

A Toolkit by Mind Share Partners



Mind Share Partners is a nonprofit changing the culture of workplace mental health so that both employees and companies can thrive.

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Summary

STEP 1: Understand the Differences

Mental health employee resource groups (ERGs) pose unique challenges. Consider the stigma around mental health, which is often an unseen condition, to guide a multi-pronged engagement strategy. Consider how mental health is distinct from wellness and disability to shape a broad communication strategy and appropriate framing.

STEP 2: Know Your Culture

Understand how open, knowledgeable, and supportive your company culture is to mental health. Use these insights to inform the structure, framing, and activities of your mental health ERG.

STEP 3: Make the Case

Equip yourself with the facts to communicate the importance of workplace mental health to company leaders and other employees.

STEP 4: Choose a Name and Set Parameters

Decide on the audience and mission of your ERG. For example, a mental health-specific ERG has a focused audience, but requires careful language and framing to navigate stigma. A health or disability-related ERG, on the other hand, can feel easier but creates the challenge of balancing the needs of a wide variety of health interest groups.

STEP 5: Comply with Workplace Regulations

Your ERG must remain open and voluntary to everyone (including allies) and must not create an environment where anyone feels like they are being pushed or forced to disclose a mental health challenge or condition. Collaborate with your HR or legal team to abide by your company's policies.

STEP 6: Engage All Staff

Use a wide variety of communication channels to allow employees to participate at a level that they are comfortable with and to spread awareness about mental health throughout the company.

STEP 7: Plan Meaningful Activities


Decide on a portfolio of activities based on the culture of your company and the needs of your employees. This can range from informing company policies to offering skill-building trainings for workplace mental health.

Introduction

As demand for mental health support [continues to grow](#), many leading companies are creating mental health-focused employee resource groups (ERGs). ERGs are not only a helpful internal resource for support but also a way to signal an organization's priorities. A mental health ERG can increase employee engagement and loyalty, strengthen culture, and set a company at the forefront of HR and diversity & inclusion (D&I) best practices.

This toolkit, created by [Mind Share Partners](#), will equip you with the facts, questions, and considerations for creating an ERG to support mental health at work. It is informed by insights drawn from the scientific literature, Mind Share Partners' programs, input from our team of clinical and professional advisors, as well as interviews with best-in-class companies, such as Google, Johnson & Johnson, and RetailMeNot.

If your company is exploring an ERG that supports employee mental health, please [reach out to us!](#) We'd love to hear from you.



Did you know?

[1 in 5](#) professionals will manage a diagnosable mental health condition this year such as depression or bipolar disorder. In fact, [up to 80%](#) will manage one at least once in their lifetime.

Understand the Differences

Creating an ERG for mental health in the workplace poses unique considerations and challenges different from ERGs for women, racial minorities, the LGBTQ community, and others.

Mental health conditions can be invisible. Unlike many identity markers (such as race or gender), mental health conditions are often “invisible.” At the same time, mental health is also fluid, meaning that each individual is at different points of the mental health spectrum between 100% healthy and extremely challenged.

What this means for you: This unseen demographic may require more work on your end to not only motivate buy-in from leadership at your company for this invisible health issue, but also to reach out to those who need support but may be hesitant to engage openly.

Mental health is more than just wellness. In Mind Share Partners’ [professional communities](#), we have heard that programs labeled as only stress or wellness can actually deter those who are managing diagnosed mental health conditions. The experience of everyday stress can be vastly different from a mental health condition, and lumping all experiences under wellness, without specifically mentioning mental health conditions, can dilute the message and alienate those managing mental health conditions.

What this means for you: While nuanced, this is an intricate balance to strike—that of creating a safe community for a stigmatized topic while remaining open and encouraging of others to join. Make space for those who are managing things that are difficult to talk about. Take people’s experiences seriously and compassionately, and don’t shy away from hard or uncomfortable topics.

Mental health is distinct from general disability support. Often, mental health is tucked away within disability ERGs. While mental health can be disabling for many, we’ve found that most people dealing with mental health conditions strongly resist that coupling. Many mental health conditions are temporary, and labeling mental health conditions as a disability only serves to further their strong stigma in the workplace. Note that this framing applies to many other types of disabilities as well, and we’ve seen a positive trend of companies shedding the “disability” framing altogether.



What this means for you: Take care to use language that is appealing, engaging, and empowering. Recognize the differences and embrace the nuances and complexities across the mental health spectrum. Be intentional about making sure that those who are managing mental health challenges feel safe and heard.

Mental health is stigmatized. While conversations about stress, wellness, and mindfulness have increased dramatically in recent years, talking about mental health conditions like depression and bipolar disorder can still be uncomfortable. Often, mental health stigma still results in negative stereotypes about the conditions themselves as well as the individuals managing them.

What this means for you. Make sure employees know that your ERG isn't only for those who might be struggling—it's also open to those who want to learn more or support others as well. Use language that affirms a safe and supportive environment. Stay committed to confidentiality and be transparent about times that you can't keep things confidential (e.g., crisis situations).

Did you know?

High-achieving professionals aren't precluded from mental health conditions. A [2018 UCSF study](#) found that mental health conditions are just as prevalent in entrepreneurs.



Know Your Culture

Despite recent trends around reducing stress and burnout in workplaces, the topic of mental health conditions like depression and anxiety remain an unspoken topic in many workplaces. Cultures that are not comfortable with discussing personal challenges, that don't have a healthy work-life balance, or that are overly focused on positivity can make it hard to talk about mental health.

Before you begin mobilizing a mental health ERG at your company, assess the current state of your organizational culture around mental health.

- How openly do people at work talk about mental health?
- Is anyone open about their mental health condition? How are these people viewed?
- Do people talk about “mental health,” “depression,” and “anxiety,” or mostly just “stress”?
- Are people hesitant to engage in difficult conversations?
- Are people encouraged to take care of their mental health needs?
- How much weight does a mental health reason carry when taking time off (outside of a formal leave of absence)?
- Has leadership vocalized support for the mental health of their employees?
- What kind of resources have been dedicated to employee mental health already?

Knowing the answers to these kinds of questions can help inform the mission, vision, and operational management of your ERG.



Here are a few real-life examples of how this can play out:

At a **Johnson & Johnson** TEDx Talk, an executive spoke openly about the importance of mental health and told a story about his daughter's struggles. That speech inspired another employee to partner with him to start a mental health Employee Resource Group (ERG) so other employees wouldn't feel hopeless, isolated, or unable to share with anyone because of the stigma. Given that J&J was already a company whose products related to health (including mental health), the employee focused on building awareness and developing events training to educate J&J employees about mental health in the workplace.

Zillow Group had a representative attend Mind Share Partners' annual [Mental Health at Work mini-conference](#) in 2018. She was inspired to bring what she learned back to Zillow, taking a leadership role in the existing disability ERG and helping to build clearer mental health support for their employees. The information shared in the conference (as well as by Mind Share individually), helped her to hone group identity and purpose around mental health.



"Not acknowledging that millions are dealing with mental health conditions is costing an enormous amount both in terms of dollars and cents and, more importantly, people's lives."

Arianna Huffington

[Mental Health at Work Conference](#), 2018

Make the Case

With any ERG, you'll need to be able to answer the "why" to your company leadership. Supporting mental health at work is not only the right thing to do, but it's also what's best for business. However, it remains a heavily stigmatized topic in many workplaces, and with this comes misconceptions about mental health, who it affects, and how it shows up at work.

Here are just a few statistics drawn from scientific research that we've found helpful when communicating the importance of workplace mental health.

Prevalence

- 1 in 5 Americans suffers from a mental health condition such as depression or anxiety in any given year. ([SAMHSA, 2015](#))
- Up to 80% of people will have a mental health condition at some point in their lives, even if it's temporary. ([Schaefer, 2017](#))
- 3 out of 4 of mental health conditions are not considered "serious" and can be temporary. ([SAMHSA, 2016](#))

Stigma

- 8 in 10 employees don't seek treatment because of fear and shame. ([NAMI](#))
- 95% of employees who have taken off time due to stress named another reason, such as an upset stomach or headache. ([Deloitte, 2017](#))
- People who perceive negative stereotypes and stigma about mental health conditions hide their condition and avoid seeking help. ([Clement, 2014](#))

Business Case

- 62% of missed work days can be attributed to mental health conditions. ([NAMI, 2015](#))
- \$17B and 217 million days is lost in the U.S. in productivity each year. ([Finch, 2005](#))
- Employees whose mental health conditions are being attended to provide better customer service. They also have more favorable co-worker interactions, higher productivity, and less healthcare-related expenses. ([NAMI, 2015](#))
- Every dollar invested in creating a mentally healthy workplace generates \$2.30 in benefits to the company. ([PwC, 2014](#))

Work's Effect on Mental Health

- Unhealthy workplaces can worsen existing conditions or cause new ones to develop. ([Stansfeld, 2008](#))
- Workplace factors that can impact mental health include low social support, poor communication, unclear instructions and role, and organizational change. ([WHO, 2010](#))



Want to learn more?

Check out our [issue](#) and [resource](#) pages to inform yourself about the prevalence, causes, and impact of mental health in the workplace.

Choose a Name and Set Parameters

Once you've evaluated the state of mental health at your company and developed the case for a mental health ERG, you will need to define its form and function.

Define the Audience

Defining your audience and whether people identify with it can be tricky for a mental health ERG. The stigma around having a mental health condition can be discouraging already, and the belief that you either have a mental health condition or you don't can make it even more challenging. In reality, mental health is a spectrum, which can make it equally hard to carve out a clearly defined group.

Here are some example ERGs, their audiences, and the implications for recruitment and participation.

From its inception, **Zillow Group's ERG** has focused on disability and allies as well as mental health. **The ADAPT Network "Able and Disabled Advocates Partnering Together"** brings together a wide array of experiences. As a result of its ambitious scope, the group has faced some challenges around honing group identity and purpose. The wider group approach, however, has been able to mobilize more people with a shared interest in health.

Johnson & Johnson's "Mental Health Diplomats" ERG is part of the Alliance for Diverse Abilities Employee Resource Group and targets three categories of people: 1) those managing mental health conditions, 2) caregivers, and 3) allies. A J&J leader speaking openly about their daughter's struggles with mental health allowed for a much broader conversation about mental health at work and created a larger community of support.

Verizon Media Group's* Neurodiversity ERG's mission is to create an inclusive workplace for "Minds of All Kinds." This includes employees who may have or be caretakers of loved ones who have neurological differences such as ADHD, Dyslexia, Autism, Anxiety, Depression, OCD, Fragile X, etc. The ERG provides all employees with access to information and tools, helps employees get connected to the resources and accommodations they may need, and raises awareness and educates Verizon Media Group's broader employee population about neurodiversity.

** Verizon Media Group includes AOL, Yahoo, TechCrunch, Tumblr, HuffPost, and Engadget.*

Remember, there isn't necessarily a "best" target audience. Consider your company culture as well as the needs of your employees when deciding.



Name Your ERG

When naming a mental health ERG, it's important to consider elements of inclusivity, empowerment, and appropriate language that is tailored to the culture of your company.

Here are a variety of examples:

Mental health-focused ERGs (or subgroups):

"Mental Health Anonymous," Google

"Mental Health Diplomats," Johnson & Johnson

"Neurodiversity Employee Resource Group," Verizon Media Group

Other ERGs that include mental health as a subset:

"Ability & Friends Network," Nike

"AbilityQ," Qualcomm

"Able@," Airbnb

"Access Adobe," Adobe

"ADAPT (Able and Disabled Advocates Partnering Together)," Zillow Group

"Advocates for Disability Awareness and Education (ADAE)," Walmart

"Covestro Accessibility Resource Effort (CARE)," Covestro

"disAbility," Microsoft

"Disability Employee Resource Group," Accebytre

"EnableIn," LinkedIn

"EY AccessAbilities," Ernst & Young

"gSpectrum," Genentech

"KPability," Kaiser Permanente

"RMN Rx," RetailMeNot

"Special Needs and Abilities Network," Intuit

A Note on Language

Language has a tangible impact on how people understand and advocate for mental health at work. Use language that is accurate and sensitive to employees' experiences. For example:

Avoid words like "crazy" or "sane." These words are based on a historically negative perception of mental health conditions and reinforce inaccurate stereotypes about individuals managing them.

Say "mental health conditions" or "challenges" over "mental illness," "issues," or "problems."

From Mind Share Partners' [professional communities](#), we've learned that "mental illness" implies permanence, often has a negative and severe connotation, and typically carries preconceived notions (shown to be inaccurate given the [efficacy of modern treatment](#) and the prevalence of mental health conditions in high-performing professionals like [entrepreneurs](#)).

Consider the pros and cons of saying "mental health conditions" vs. "mental health" or "mental wellness." The latter are much more inclusive buckets, can be more inspirational, and may allow more people to self-identify. They are less stigmatized as well, and can fit a less open company culture. However, we've also heard that higher level words like "wellness" can result in some hesitation by individuals managing diagnosed mental health conditions who are concerned that they might not be understood.

Comply with Workplace Regulations

While it is important to put the needs of your ERG members first, there are legal rules that any ERG at any company must abide by. However, don't let legal concerns discourage you. There are concrete ways to navigate workplace policies while still creating a safe and supportive environment for your ERG members.

Say that your ERG is open to everyone. This includes people across the mental health spectrum as well as caregivers and allies. Framing a mental health ERG as only for people with mental health conditions will inadvertently require employees to disclose their condition by participating, which is protected by the [Americans with Disabilities Act \(ADA\)](#). At the same time, you can't turn away someone from joining, regardless of their health status, due to similar [discrimination policies](#). Employees must always be able to join whether they identify with the target audience of your ERG or as allies.

Say that joining or participating in the ERG does not mean that you have a mental health condition. Again, companies must not create a situation in which people feel they are being pushed or forced to disclose any type of health history or condition. Using inclusive language avoids this pitfall and encourages people who may be reluctant to join due to stigma.

Frame participation as completely voluntary. This includes anything from attending a session to sharing personal experiences to mental health. Regularly remind employees that they only have to participate to the extent that they are comfortable. Share that while employees are free to disclose a mental health condition or challenge if they choose, companies cannot discriminate against a person for their condition. And, of course, never ask someone whether they have a mental health condition.



Collaborate with your HR and legal team or leader. For mental health ERGs in particular, it's important to meet with HR and legal when forming and operating your ERG to ensure that you're abiding by rules and regulations like the ADA. Mental health can be a difficult subject, so be prepared with your supporting evidence and examples (like those provided in this toolkit) of how to create mental health ERGs legally and effectively.



Everyone can do their part to make mental health conditions normal and okay to experience in the office. Especially if you are a manager or a leader, be vulnerable and share your own challenges, whether mental health-related or not. All of this is hard, but critical, work.

Kelly Greenwood

Founder & CEO, Mind Share Partners

From Forbes: [“This World Mental Health Day, Consider How You Can Reduce Stigma At Work”](#)

Engage All Staff

Unlike other ERGs, a unique challenge facing mental health ERGs is the strong social stigma around mental health conditions. Unless your organizational culture is exceptionally open and supportive of mental health, it's likely that some people will be hesitant to engage with a mental health ERG.

To more effectively engage employees, consider the following practices:

Engage all staff across multiple channels of communication. To normalize mental health at your company and to comply with workplace regulations, include all staff across the full spectrum of mental health. This avoids singling out people as individuals who need mental health support. Each individual may have different comfort levels around discussing mental health at work. Providing different means of communication like email, anonymous response surveys, or simply a drop-in model at a private location can make it easier for individuals to participate.

RetailMeNot's "RMN Rx" utilizes multiple D&I Slack channels, a weekly board of internal events, regular in-person meetings, remote participation in discussions, and monthly company-wide emails. Using multiple modalities of communication allows for wider engagement suited to an individual employee's need and comfort level.

Leverage private channels of communication. As your outreach develops, you may want to offer private channels of communications to reduce the barriers or need to self-identify.

Google's "Mental Health Anonymous" is an anonymous email listserv. In order to minimize the perception of risk by employees, even the group's organizers do not know the participants' identities. By doing so, they are reducing the barriers to involvement and prioritizing getting employees into the group for support.

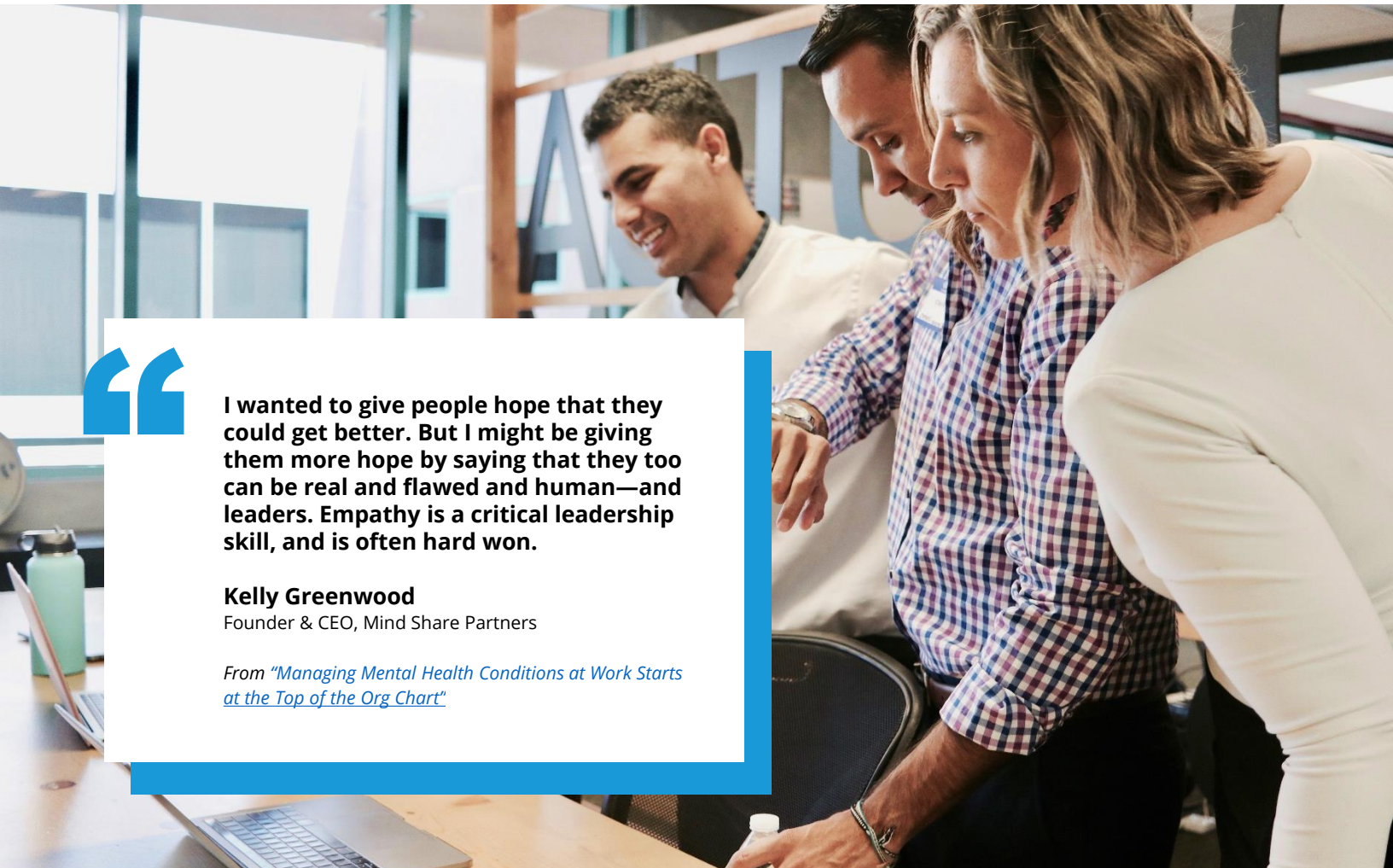


Get leadership support. Business leaders have the ability to set the standard for organizational values and culture. Managers, and especially executives, have the opportunity to [become leader allies](#) by making mental health a priority at their companies. By sending an all-staff Slack message, sharing a story at a team meeting, or modeling self-care and vulnerability themselves, company leaders can make mental health at work matter and model the culture change they want to see.

An executive at **Johnson & Johnson** shared openly about the importance of mental health, which not only inspired an employee to start J&J's "Mental Health Diplomats" but made mental health something that was okay to talk about in the company.

Get ready for responses. Depending on your culture, you may see varying levels of engagement that are unique to the wants and needs of your company. This could mean remaining flexible around the target audience and the overall purpose of your mental health ERG or preparing to ask for additional resources to support high demand. It's okay to not get it right the first time. Keep the conversation going to continue shaping your ERG to address the needs of your employees.

A leading website building and hosting platform was surprised by the amount of positive reception it received when it started its mental health ERG, and had to quickly pivot to dedicate time and resources to meet the interest.



I wanted to give people hope that they could get better. But I might be giving them more hope by saying that they too can be real and flawed and human—and leaders. Empathy is a critical leadership skill, and is often hard won.

Kelly Greenwood
Founder & CEO, Mind Share Partners

From "Managing Mental Health Conditions at Work Starts at the Top of the Org Chart"

Plan Meaningful Activities

There are many types of activities and functions that your mental health ERG can organize around. The type of activities and their frequency will be informed by your company culture, your target audience, and the wants and needs of the employees who join.

Here are a few goals and activities to consider for your own ERG:

Policies & Procedures

- Work with HR leaders to incorporate mental health benefits in the company benefits package.
- Partner with HR or the recruiting team to better communicate a mentally healthy workplace culture in job openings.
- Collaborate with HR to ensure the inclusion of mental health in diversity conversations.
- Work with HR and managers to standardize the implementation of accommodations that support employee mental health.
- Educate staff about mental health benefits (the barrier is often that the benefits are hard to understand, not that they don't exist).

Company Culture

- Create a community for employees to feel connected and supported by fellow colleagues and peers that share a common experience.
- Encourage leaders to speak out in support of mental health.
- Normalize talking about mental health in the workplace.
- Cultivate a more open, supportive, and authentic company culture.

Skill-Building

- Organize educational events and trainings for employees to learn tools, experiences, and best practices around navigating mental health at work.
- Provide a forum for skill-sharing, self-solving, and self-care for employees.
- Equip employees and managers on how to talk about and handle mental health symptoms and conditions that arise at work.
- Refer employees to outside services and [resources](#).



Here are a few activities by existing ERGs:

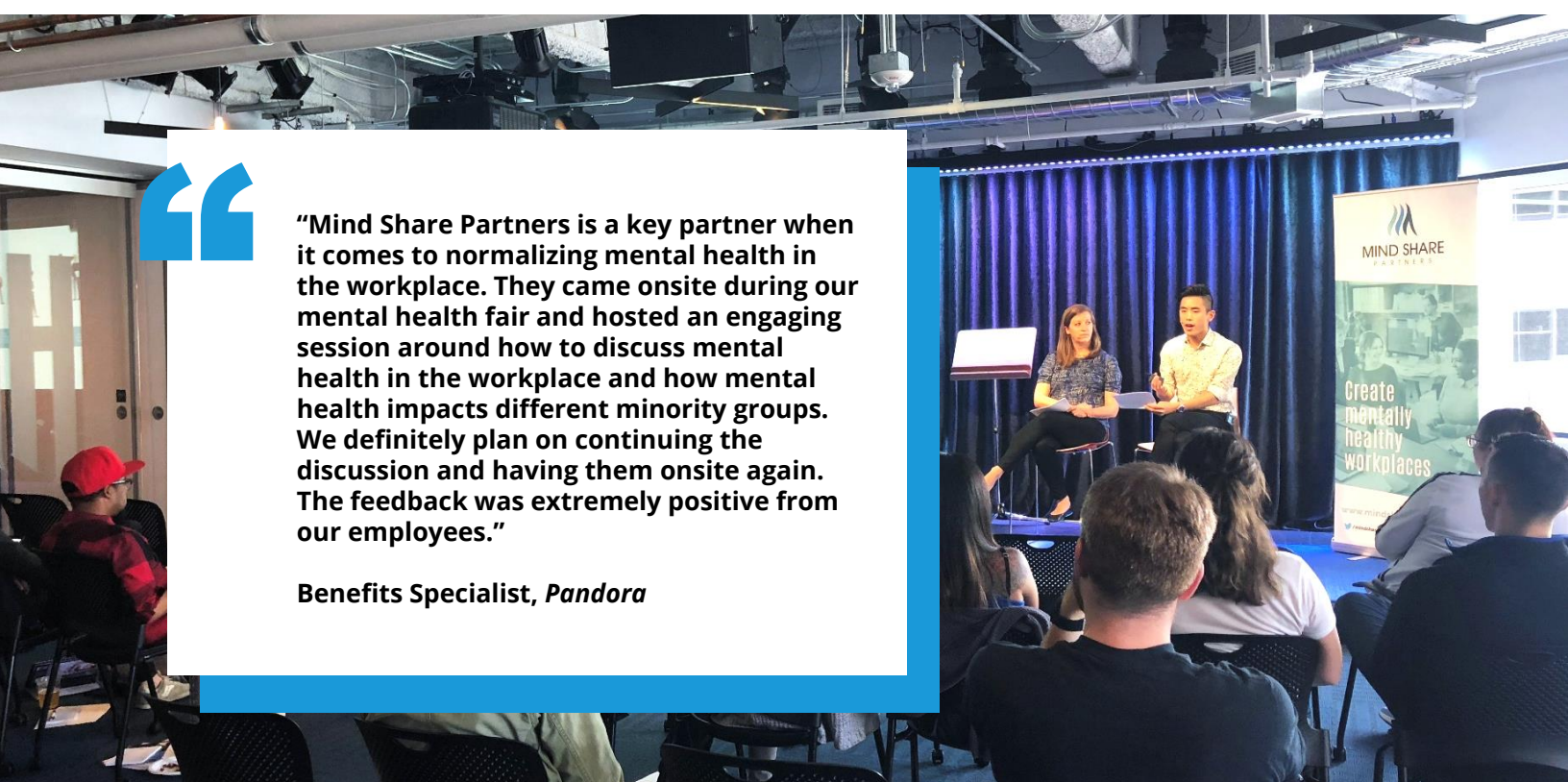
Johnson & Johnson’s “Mental Health Diplomats” organizes monthly meetings for their global members of almost 1,000 employees in 60 Chapters worldwide with 90 sites mobilized for World Mental Health Day globally in 2018. Additionally they have trained 300 employees in Mental Health Awareness.

Verizon Media Group’s “Neurodiversity Employee Resource Group” provides a global network of support to employees in 26 cities around the world. The meetings connect people with their peers and is a safe space for employees to share their experiences, talk about pressing and prevalent issues, and offer support to one another.

Google has held two *Mental Health at Google* employee-led conferences, where employees led sessions on topics of interest, including accessing benefits and understanding depression. Employees could access the event in-person or via streaming; follow-up events in worldwide offices gave additional chances to dive into the topic.

RetailMeNot’s “RMN Rx” created a Wiki page that has specific guidance around the company’s benefits and policies as well as a running list of mental health resources (white papers, articles, books, etc.).

A leading website builder and hosting platform’s ERG brought in Mind Share Partners for a [workplace mental health workshop](#) that dispelled mental health myths and equipped managers and colleagues with the skills to build safe spaces, facilitate hard conversations, and learn tools and strategies to navigate and normalize mental health at work.



“Mind Share Partners is a key partner when it comes to normalizing mental health in the workplace. They came onsite during our mental health fair and hosted an engaging session around how to discuss mental health in the workplace and how mental health impacts different minority groups. We definitely plan on continuing the discussion and having them onsite again. The feedback was extremely positive from our employees.”

Benefits Specialist, Pandora

Conclusion

With the right planning and approach, you can set your mental health ERG up for success by tailoring its mission, structure, communication channels, and activities to fit the culture and meet the needs of your organization. While mental health ERGs are just one of [many ways](#) to create a mentally healthy workplace, a successful ERG can increase the morale, engagement, and effectiveness of your employees and teams while putting your company at the forefront of organizational culture and wellness.

Interested in learning more?

[Connect with us](#) to learn more about our workplace mental health workshops or how we can help set up your company's ERG.

Looking for a community outside of work?

We understand that not every workplace has the right resources or culture for a mental health ERG (yet!). Mind Share Partners' [professional communities](#) program offers confidential forums for working professionals to provide support and best practices as they navigate their mental health at work.



Mind Share Partners is a nonprofit changing the culture of workplace mental health so that both employees and companies can thrive.

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