

How organisations can help their LGBTQI+ employees as they face divided experiences

*LGBTQI+ people face divided experiences. They're increasingly represented in media, and have more accessible information and wider access to legal marriage. At the same time, unprecedented criminalisation is excluding trans people from specific spaces and vital services. **Jordana Moser, Jonathan E Booth and T Alexandra Beauregard** describe the current state of play for LGBTQI+ inclusion and outline further steps that organisations can take to support their LGBTQI+ employees.*

As we near the end of Pride month, it's important to reflect on not only the celebrations and progress that have been made within the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and intersex (LGBTQI+) community, but also the challenges that remain. One such challenge includes how organisations can best support their LGBTQI+ employees. How can they successfully celebrate diverse identities without perpetuating stereotypes, or outing individuals against their wishes? How can employers ensure that LGBTQI+ voices are represented in the design and delivery of organisational initiatives without adding extra (unpaid) labour to their existing workloads?

Here, we give an overview of the current state of play for LGBTQI+ inclusion and then outline further steps that organisations can take toward inclusivity.

State of play

Research on LGBTQI+ employee inclusion shows that while the situation has improved over time, inclusion remains elusive for many. According to the [Human Rights Campaign Foundation](#), nearly half of LGBTQ workers in the US are closeted at work, while 36% of straight workers say they would be uncomfortable hearing an LGBTQ co-worker talk about dating and just under 60% of straight workers think it's "unprofessional" to discuss

sexual orientation or gender identity in the workplace. In the UK, LGBT rights charity [Stonewall](#) finds that more than one third of LGBT workers have concealed their sexual orientation or gender identity within the past year to avoid discrimination, a significant minority of LGBTQI+ individuals would not feel comfortable reporting homophobic or transphobic bullying in the workplace to their employers, and nearly one third of transgender workers who identify as non-binary don't feel able to wear work clothing that represents their gender expression. Looking at corporate signals, only 34% of FTSE250 company websites mention sexual orientation ([Stockdale et al., 2018](#)), and only 17% of FTSE100 company websites refer directly to transgender individuals ([Beauregard et al., 2018](#)).

Moving toward inclusion

While there is no 'silver bullet' to make organisations more inclusive for LGBTQI+ employees, there are steps organisations can take to bring themselves closer. We review three such steps below:

1. Adopt queer-friendly signals and systems

Signals and systems are the bread-and-butter of making a workplace more inclusive; you can have one without the other, but for optimal effectiveness, organisations really need to think about both. *Signals* provide a visual cue that LGBTQI+ identities are welcome in an organisational context – think rainbow lanyards, gender-neutral language in company documents, acknowledgement of significant days to the queer community (such as Pride month, International Day Against Homophobia and Transphobia, National Coming Out Day, and Trans Awareness Week), and pronouns in email signatures. However, signals by themselves aren't enough – organisations that occupy this space are often accused of "rainbow washing," or supporting the queer community in name only.

These visual indicators need to be complemented by *systems*, which are processes that facilitate the authentic inclusion of LGBTQI+ identities with as little emotional labour needed from LGBTQI+ workers as possible. Systems are how organisations can show employees (and society at large) that they're really serious about inclusion: that they're walking the walk, rather than only talking the talk. Queer-friendly systems include ensuring all workspaces have gender neutral bathrooms, including fields for legal and preferred names, pronouns, and gender-neutral honorifics on hiring documents and

other organisational forms (such as event bookings or benefit enrolment forms), and developing processes that acknowledge and accommodate employees who transition during the course of their employment, e.g., by allowing employees to access and update their HR systems data at any time.

2. Create employee resource groups (ERGs)

ERGs are also known as affinity groups, employee networks or employee forums and they offer numerous benefits to both employees and organisations. Colgan and McKearny (2012) found that LGBTQI+ ERGs enable employees to develop inter-organisational networks of support for things like training, locating resources, networking, and sharing challenges. ERGs have the added benefit of providing ties outside of one's team, meaning that these ties are likely to sustain regardless of where an individual moves within an organisation (Moser and Ashforth, 2020).

Despite their importance, ERGs are rarely given sufficient resources from organisations to facilitate their activities. Groups are typically run by volunteers who take on the mission of the ERG on top of their regular job. Despite such positions being considered little more than an extracurricular, group leads and members are often tasked with diversity and inclusion tasks that central organisational teams like HR don't feel qualified to carry out on their own and/or don't want to pay an external consultant to do, such as drafting statements denouncing or supporting current events or creating more inclusive policy language (Tiku, 2020).

In order to best equip ERGs to elevate rather than burden employees, organisations should embed groups into the fabric of their organisational structures. In other words, ERGs need to be legitimised by organisational leadership. One way of conferring legitimacy is to ensure a member of the C-Suite is appointed as a champion for a given ERG (Bethea, 2020). Another way of conferring legitimacy to ERGs is to allow group leaders and committee members to allocate a percentage of their job role time to ERG-related commitments (Bethea, 2020). Allowing for this formal allocation of time implies that these activities are considered a central priority of the organisation, rather than something to be squeezed in when – or if – possible. This workload allocation should be made in formal documents, such as contracts, but should also be reflected in any timekeeping tools utilised by the organisation, such as timesheets. Finally, legitimacy can also be imbued through financial means, such as offering a bonus or salary increase

for labour provided to ERGs (Starling, 2020).

3. Collective engagement and allyship

Perhaps the most important part of authentically including LGBTQI+ employees at work is to engage in dialogue about what authentic inclusion looks like for the employees at that organisation specifically. Cisgender and heterosexual friends and work colleagues may ask LGBTQI+ individuals to educate them about transphobia/homophobia, asking, with the best of intentions, ‘what can I do to help?’

However, it’s important that organisations put enough scaffolding in place that the onus to educate and to determine a way forward doesn’t always fall onto the shoulders of marginalised employees, as this can be cognitively and emotionally depleting. Rather, this work should be shared with cisgender and heterosexual colleagues, who can take accountability for educating themselves, as well as determining ways in which they can use their privilege and majority status to dismantle transphobia and homophobia. Indeed, for programs to be effective and widely used, it’s important to have genuine buy-in, communication, involvement and leadership from LGBTQI+ individuals. However, LGBTQI+ employees should not be expected to always do the heavy lifting in designing, enforcing, and informing inclusive initiatives. These activities should be a collaboration between LGBTQI+ workers and allies.

In sum

Organisations only exist in situ, and at present, there’s a bifurcation in the LGBTQI+ experience: on the one hand, never before has there been so much queer representation in media, such widespread legal acknowledgement of gay marriage, so much accessible information about the different identities a person might adopt. And yet, on the other hand, what we’re also seeing is an unprecedented criminalization of LGBTQI+ people, particularly trans people. Never before have so many laws been passed to exclude trans people from such specific areas in society (such as [bathrooms](#) and [sports](#)), [withhold healthcare](#) from trans people, or make it [functionally impossible for young trans people to access gender affirming care](#) through public health services.

As such, this is a key moment for organisations to communicate to their employees that, regardless of changes in the political climate, their workplace is somewhere employees’

whole selves are acknowledged and celebrated – and we hope this post will provide useful guidance as to how to put that into practice. Happy Pride!

- *This blog post represents the views of its authors, not the position of LSE Business Review or the London School of Economics.*
 - *Featured [image](#) by [Mapbox](#) on [Unsplash](#)*
 - *When you leave a comment, you're agreeing to our [Comment Policy](#).*
-