

Listen carefully: The voice of transgender employees is not being heard

Jonathan Booth, Assistant Professor of Organisational Behaviour and Human Resource Management, discusses why transgender voices in the workplace are not being heard and proposes solutions for fixing this issue...



Given advances in the gay, lesbian and bisexual movement over the last several decades, society assumes that advances have been similar for the transgender community (those whose gender identity does not correspond to the sex they were assigned at birth). Despite the increasing public presence of transgender (or 'trans') individuals in entertainment and media settings, and growing protective legislation, the world of business and management has not yet followed suit in paying greater attention to the needs of transgender employees. In a [paper](#) co-authored with [Alexandra Beauregard](#) (Middlesex University), [Lilith Arevshatian](#) (Kingston University), and [Stephen Whittle](#) (Manchester Metropolitan University), we analysed the website content of FTSE 100 companies in search of references to transgender individuals. We find that only 17% of these firms refer directly to transgender ('trans') individuals in their employer branding, diversity and value statements, illustrating the extent to which trans voices are largely unheard within UK workplaces.

We propose *five* main reasons why trans employees may lack a voice:

- **To protect themselves.** Some trans employees do not exercise direct voice mechanisms because they are trying to protect themselves from challenges to perceived notions of 'normal' gender identity. Trans employees may want to avoid awkward exchanges with colleagues asking 'who/what are you?' and/or seek to avoid termination, discrimination, and overt physical and verbal aggression from colleagues, customers, and the general public.
- **Trans voices may be subsumed by the larger LGBT community.** There has been a tendency in the fight for equal rights to lump the T with the LGB. This may have had some benefits given that the larger group could protect smaller factions in promoting rights and societal recognition. Yet, lumping gender identity with sexual orientation rights may have quelled trans voice by blurring the two causes when both are distinct and important societal issues. Additionally, the LGB community could be up to three times larger than the trans community – which may further explain why organisational efforts to support the LGB community are more widespread.
- **Some individuals have just blended in.** Some trans individuals may simply want to "pass" in their workplace and blend in like chameleons. Therefore, they may assimilate by affiliating with members of their post-transition gender, and no longer identify as trans.



- **Multiple, diverse voices within the trans community create more noise than clarity.** The word *transgender* is an umbrella term that includes those identifying as transsexual, intersexual, third genderist, genderqueer, and agenderist. Different identities and challenges may require different voices, and coordinating these voices within a cohesive message can be challenging. It may be difficult for cisgender individuals (those whose gender identity corresponds to the sex they were assigned at birth) to listen and understand because of their own confusion or biases with individuals who, for example, identify as a third gender or are gender fluid (e.g., their gender identity fluctuates across time).
- **Personal employment situations may limit trans employee voice.** Transgender workers often find themselves at the **lower end of the wage spectrum**. In part time and/or low-skilled work, voice options may not be as plentiful. Transgender unemployment in the UK was estimated at between **14-37% in 2007-2008, compared to** a national average of 5% at that time.

Due to a lack of voice options, trans individuals are generally unheard and run the risk of feeling silenced and marginalised. And those who are silenced and marginalised generally go unheard. Thus, it is a vicious cycle that unfolds which likely provides insight into the high rates of **depression and anxiety in the trans community**. With little to no voice available, employers are likely to remain in the dark, not knowing that trans employees exist and/or how to help them.



What can be done?

Governments can provide laws that protect workers from discrimination and unfair dismissal, but as they do not continuously monitor employers, firms should strive to be proactive in implementing direct voice mechanisms for transgender employees. Policy should be in place in advance of hiring a transgender recruit, regardless of whether the employer has knowledge of the applicant's identity or not. First steps include ensuring that the work environment is inviting for all employees, and that basic amenities are available, such as toilet facilities that respect gender identity. Through a process of induction, training, communications, and internal and

external materials, employers can educate and socialise staff to value diversity and appropriate interpersonal interaction. Managers are key in delivering this message to their teams and ensuring that inclusive practices are carried out. Managers must therefore be mindful of their followers, and undertake regular training on how to manage diversity.

A collective voice

Given the limited number of transgender employees in a specific workplace and their possible reluctance to disclose their gender identity, it may be difficult for an individual employer to establish transgender social networks in the workplace. However, employers can collaborate to create a transgender employee network for employees within this employer consortium. Indirect forms of voice, such as unions or employee-management codetermination efforts, should ensure inclusive language is employed across all communications, and transgender issues should be integrated into discussions on the conditions of work. Unions, for example, can provide grievance mechanisms if a trans employee has issues with an organisation or its representation. Unions should also work with employers and governmental agencies to educate the public regarding transgender individuals and their concerns in efforts to promote a better society.



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