

WHEN DIVERSE WORKPLACES AREN'T INCLUSIVE

Moving from diversity to inclusiveness for LGBT employees requires action – and delivers rewards

By Melissa Campeau

In most parts of Canada, it would take some effort not to assemble a diverse workforce. And almost certainly, that diverse workforce includes members of the LGBT community.

While diversity has been a strategic focus for many organizations in recent years, assembling a group of employees with differing experiences and perspectives is really just the first step. To drive innovation, improve retention and realize all the promise of a diverse workforce, it takes something more.

"Inclusiveness takes diversity a step further by creating an environment where people's differences of thought and experience are actually appreciated and viewed as a business advantage," said Alison Grenier, head of culture and research at Great Place to Work Canada.

Without a culture of inclusion, diversity is largely unrealized potential.

"Many well-meaning organizations have jumped on the bandwagon to hire for diversity without having the programs and structures in place to truly bring diverse perspectives into the fold," said Grenier.

That's particularly true for many members of Canada's LGBT community. A 2014 study by Pride at Work Canada found 30 per cent of LGBT-identified respondents felt they experienced discrimination in the workplace, compared to just 2.9 per cent of the general population. In addition, 4.1 per cent reported some type of daily discrimination in their workplace, compared to just to 0.8 per cent of the general population.

Legally, Canadian employers are required to ensure their workers are protected from harassment and discrimination based on sexual orientation. There's a specific protection for gender expression and gender identity in some provinces, and in others that protection is implied. As of press time, Bill C-16, which would amend the Canadian Human Rights Act to add gender identity and gender expression to the list of prohibited grounds of discrimination, is on its second reading in the Senate.

Inclusion is not simply the absence of discrimination, however. Colin Druhan, executive director of Pride at Work Canada, points out more than half of Canadian LGBT workers aren't out to everyone they work with.

"That's the majority of an entire community not talking about their families at work, not making meaningful connections with their coworkers," said Druhan. "Being out at work is as simple as people knowing the name of your spouse or who the other parent to your kids is, whether or not you have kids, what kind of organizations you volunteer with, or just who you are as a person. These are details a lot of people don't have to think twice about sharing at work, but many people from the LGBT community feel they have to hide even these simple parts of their lives."

This presents an obvious obstacle to teamwork and engagement, and casts a shadow over an employee's relationship with their employer. Research by Great Place to Work indicates even at the best-rated workplaces, there are gaps between how different groups of employees rate the organization. For example, senior managers might give an organization a high ranking, but entry level

workers – who feel less included and less valued – might have a different experience and give it a lower mark. The research shows that while disconnect between diversity and inclusion is experienced by women, Aboriginal people and ethnic minorities, it's most pronounced for the LGBT community.

For organizations wanting to do the right thing and develop a competitive edge, that's an opportunity in waiting. Evidence says the more consistently all people in an organization consider their workplace great, the more that company can outpace competitors in areas including retention, extra effort and growth.

Get A Policy In Place

While creating a more inclusive workplace is more of a cultural commitment than a short-lived initiative, there are still concrete steps an organization can take. Great Place to Work Canada and Pride at Work Canada co-authored *Beyond Diversity: An LGBT Best Practice Guide for Employers*, a publication that highlights several strategies for making a more inclusive workplace for LGBT employees.

As a first step, the guide points out the importance of a formal, written policy one that seeks to protect the entire LGBT community.

"A lot of organizations have policy language around harassment and discrimination as it relates to sexual orientation, but no specific language on gender identity and gender expression," said Druhan. "This leaves out a huge part of the community."

Training For All

Organization-wide diversity training is a fundamental step to help educate employees on the expected code of conduct within the organization.

"If employees are receiving that message regularly and consistently, it will get through, especially if it's modeled by the most senior people in the organization," said Grenier.

Google, for example, offers Unconscious Bias at Work training to all Googlers on their first day of employment – setting the tone early to create inclusiveness from day one.

Beyond the organization-wide education, people managers require specific training. BMO, for example, runs a multiyear program called Learn From Difference, designed to engage the organization's people managers and employees in conversations about inclusion and to take action against bias.

"It's a people manager's responsibility to make sure they know the organization's discrimination and harassment policies, and also accept their specific role in ensuring compliance," said Grenier. People managers – rather than HR professionals – are often the first point of contact when employees have questions about such things as health benefits, dress code or which washroom to use for someone who has just transitioned.

"The thing I hear over and over again is, 'I don't want to say the wrong thing, I don't want to offend somebody, so I just won't talk about it,'" said Druhan. "The more people who have the tools to actually have effective conversations and ask and answer questions in a thoughtful, confident and respectful way, the more progress we'll see on this."

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Beyond Diversity points out that recruiting and hiring staff may need special training, too, with a particular focus on unconscious bias. Job postings, for example, may use gendered language or applicants might be discounted for wearing clothing not considered "gender appropriate."

A candidate might be perceived poorly in a phone interview because their voice or way of speaking doesn't match cultural assumptions. Or a recruiter might not know how to handle conversations with references who aren't aware of a candidate's gender transition (and who knew them as another gender, with another name).

Engage your resource groups

An employee resource group (ERG) for LGBT-identified workers can benefit both its members and the organization as a whole. The group can provide a social network, offer a place to develop leadership skills, help foster new recruits and help acclimate onboarding employees.

Managed effectively, these groups can also provide valuable direction for business development.

"Using ERGs to really inform your practices, making that a two-way dialogue, can help you find out from the members' perspectives what doesn't feel fair or inclusive about the workplace," said Grenier.

ERGs can also help an organization identify the right spokespeople to help cascade a message to particular areas of the business.

"If you're working in a unionized environment, for example, we're seeing much greater success when we pass on material to the actual union itself or the union reps," said Druhan.

"In some organizations, there's a real hesitancy to take training that comes directly from HR, so sometimes it's about finding those people in the organization, at all levels, who can be champions for this type of work and can speak to people in a way that's going to make sense to them."

Note Who Isn't Represented

Within both the ERGs and the company as whole, HR should consider whether there's representation for all of the LGBT community.

Research finds many organizations have made progress in terms of diversity and inclusion when it comes to sexual orientation, but often fall short when it comes to supporting employees with diverse gender identities and expressions.

Statistics also show significant unemployment and underemployment for trans Canadians, which can compound the problem.

"If trans people are kept out of the workforce, they're not there to be champions on the issues that challenge them," said Druhan.

He points out that organizations may need to look to external groups such as Pride at Work or local community groups to understand who's missing from internal representation and what challenges members of that absent community face.

Beyond Diversity notes that while most people in and out of the workplace are accepting of gay, lesbian and bisexual people, the same can't be said for people undergoing gender transition – a population that continues to face discrimination, isolation and fear in the workplace.

With that in mind, Beyond Diversity also encourages organizations to offer specific support for gender transition in the workplace. Intuit and TD Bank, for example, both offer complete or nearly complete coverage for employees' gender affirmation surgery and many related expenses.

Ask Questions, Take Measurements

To move the needle, measurement is a must.

"I'm a really strong proponent of data and data collection," said Grenier. "I think sometimes organizations are reluctant to collect data on this issue because they think, 'We don't want to get in trouble for asking this question or that question.'"

However, she points out, it's perfectly legal to ask questions about sexual orientation or gender expression or identity, as long as an

organization specifically states what that information will be used for and doesn't use that information against its employees.

Legal firm Grant Thornton, for example, surveys employees annually to understand employee perceptions, to measure progress and to inform its inclusivity priorities.

Inclusivity partners in each business unit share the results and help teams develop action plans that are locally relevant.

Take It From The Top

All the best-laid plans for measurement, training, policy, ERGs and more are still likely to fail without support from the top.

"I feel this is the most important piece," said Grenier. "There absolutely needs to be buy-in at the most senior level of the organization."

At TD Bank, for example, the company's Diversity Leadership Council meets bi-monthly to set priorities and monitor progress in all areas of diversity and inclusion. The group, made up of senior representatives for all locations and business lines, reports quarterly to the senior executive team.

Buy-in from the top can be realized in many ways. Having LGBT leaders who are out can demonstrate an organizational commitment to inclusion and help with recruitment and retention. Encouraging LGBT employees to develop leadership skills through mentorship programs can help those employees feel more engaged and shape their goals for the future.

Beyond Diversity notes an increasing number of organizations now look at the inclusiveness of individual leaders as part of their balanced scorecard review. This might assess whether a leader takes such steps as encouraging employees to take ongoing inclusion education or reviewing the demographics of pay and promotions within a team.

If You Build It, Rewards Will Come

"All the strategies we outline in the report are important pieces of the puzzle," said Grenier. "Not one of those steps all by itself will mean your organization is more inclusive, but if you put all these pieces together it's going to move you in that direction."

Inclusive workplaces don't just happen, but it's work that brings plenty of rewards.

"We know that inclusive workplaces are more innovative, that people stick around longer. We know that high trust workplaces – where all people feel they can bring their perspectives to the fold – are stronger financial performers as well," said Grenier.

"It makes good business sense, and it's also the right thing to do."

