



LGBTQ+ Employees and the Importance of Advocacy and Mentorship in the Workplace

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Abstract

Many LGBTQ+ employees who do not feel comfortable disclosing their gender identity or sexual orientation in the workplace lack empowerment and engagement. While a growing number of organizations display signs of progress toward inclusive practices, investing in employees through mentorship and advocacy may help increase these attributes. Through relevant research and an equal employment opportunity lens, this paper highlights existing protections against discrimination, employers' diversity statements and affirming policies, and the importance of advocacy in the workplace for LGBTQ+ employees as support for organizations striving to create more inclusive workplaces.

Introduction

This paper arose from a need to understand career optimism for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and other marginalized genders/sexualities (LGBTQ+) in the workforce. Investing in employees through mentorship and advocacy may help increase employee empowerment and engagement (University of Phoenix, 2023), attributes which are lacking for many LGBTQ+ employees who do not feel comfortable disclosing their gender identity or sexual orientation in the workplace (Deloitte, 2023). While a growing number of organizations display signs of progress toward inclusive practices, the results have not solidified into gains for the LGBTQ+ community in the workforce (Ellsworth et al., 2020). Workplace climate impacts the comfort and optimism of LGBTQ+ employees and may also contribute to a lack of representation. Through relevant research and an equal employment opportunity lens, this paper highlights existing protections against discrimination, employers' diversity statements and affirming policies, and the importance of advocacy in the workplace for LGBTQ+ employees as support for organizations striving to create more inclusive workplaces.

Inclusion and Representation

While representation matters, self-identification of LGBTQ+ employees are optional and voluntary because such disclosure may not come without risk. The United States Supreme Court ruled employer discrimination against a person based on sexual orientation or transgender status was prohibited under Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 (*Bostock v. Clayton County*, 2020), which was reaffirmed in 2021 with Executive Order No. 13988, 86 (2021). Regardless, halfway into 2023, 41 states introduced more than 525 anti-LGBTQ+ bills, some as harmful as restricting acknowledgement of the existence of LGBTQ+ people (Human Rights Campaign, 2023). Further, many states do not include anti-discrimination verbiage based on sexual

orientation, gender identity, or gender expression within their fair employment practices laws (Hentze & Tyus, 2021). With increased challenges to navigate in several states, LGBTQ+ employees still lack protections from threats of discrimination regardless of employers' claims to fostering inclusive environments (Baker & Lucas, 2017; Holman et al., 2018). Employers touting nondiscrimination policies, inclusive cultures, and equitable benefits may not be enough. While some employers may offer an anonymous or confidential way for employees to disclose their LGBTQ+ status, some disclosures either voluntarily shared or assumed within the workplace may result in threats and inequalities as the nation continues to contend with polarization.

Gender-exclusive language continues to appear across a variety of mediums (e.g., surveys, research, statistical reports, etc.) and it is not always clear if demographic questions ask for sexual orientation or for gender identity inclusive of non-binary options. In 2021, the American Psychological Association (APA) expanded upon the seventh edition publication manual's section on bias-free language and released their *Inclusive Language Guidelines* encouraging the wide-spread use of language which does not perpetuate harm or offense toward marginalized communities. The LGBTQ+ community is a valuable part of the American workforce, even when forced into the shadows. Perhaps consistent inclusive representation and enforced human rights protections may help to reveal the unique needs and insights of this population of workers.

Diversity Statements and Affirming Policies

Equal employment opportunity is a fundamental right, yet many employers are not required to post a statement related to being an equal employment opportunity organization. Many employers choose to publicly post an equal employment opportunity statement, providing an apparent safe space for members of the LGBTQ+ community to apply and work. Equality and

anti-discrimination statements are not enough. Policies supporting LGBTQ+ employees may provide safe spaces when guided by workplace compliance of such policies. The results of organizational compliance with anti-discrimination policies designed to provide equal employment opportunities have a positive impact for the employees and the organization. One study directly linked workplace diversity policies with positively affected organizational innovation and higher organizational performance (Hossain et al., 2020). Further research linked workplace diversity statements and affirming policies to enhanced organizational marketing capabilities which directly and positively influence customer satisfaction (Patel & Feng, 2021). Alternately, a study including LGBTQ+ employees within several federal agencies—which are required to have anti-discrimination policies that fully protect LGBTQ+ employees—found reports of worse treatment, less respect, perceptions of less fairness, and lower levels of job satisfaction than their non-LGBTQ+ colleagues concluding LGBTQ+ employees are more likely to consider leaving their organizations (Cech & Rothwell, 2020). Cech and Rothwell (2020) confirmed these negative experiences were only compounded for racial and ethnic minority LGBTQ+ employees. For example, University of Phoenix (2023) found 65% of Black Americans in the workforce are actively looking or expecting to look for a new job, a percentage that is likely higher for those employees in the LGBTQ+ community. Regardless of outwardly posted statements and policies, organizational culture and demographics are likely to dictate informal workplace inequities.

Advocates and Mentors in the Workplace

Crenshaw (1989) developed a model for intersectionality that explained how social identities such as gender, sexual orientation, and race influence an individual and how society treats the individual. Within this context, LGBTQ+ workers may be perceived as being

oppressed because of their gender identity, gender expression, or sexual orientation. Many organizations developed formalized support of employee resource groups (ERGs) to increase employee diversity and engagement (Green, 2018). ERGs provide a secure space where participants can discuss shared experiences and develop strategies to promote stakeholder engagement and inclusion. As the adoption of LGBTQ+ support practices increase, the influence of LGBTQ+ individuals are of importance. Fletcher and Everly (2021) suggested the lack of clarity of outcomes from LGBTQ+ support practices created a hindrance to theoretical and psychological foundations of the effects of organizational support for LGBTQ+ workers. Even when there are settings with human rights protections, there still may be fears associated with the disclosure of LGBTQ+ identities. Interpersonal relationships are influential to identity disclosure or concealment. The psychological safety of members is critical when considering the fear that may be associated with workers' identity concealment. University of Phoenix (2023) identified a need for advocacy support through networking and mentoring opportunities among multicultural groups. The creation of ERGs establishes a space for advocacy within organizational environments. As employees continue to participate in decision-making, there are opportunities to develop skills and self-concept of professional identity. Through ERG membership, employees can navigate organizational dimensions, culture, and reinforce allyship.

The use of communities of practice framework helps to understand how ERGs also function as learning communities (Green, 2018). In ERG groups, member exchange of experiences and engagement provides insights into the levels of employee personal motivation for joining. Group engagement demonstrates a community of practice framework that is reliant upon shared interest and is fluid as membership evolves over time (Green, 2018). Previous research on ERG groups shared practices of formal and informal educational activities that

reinforce learning for members and extended employee populations (Green, 2018). Informal learning activities such as mentoring are influential in promoting change, though University of Phoenix (2023) found that many American workers lack advocacy and mentorship in their careers. Communities of practice help to foster collaboration as well as create opportunities for mentorship. ERGs provide a platform for employees at varied levels to strengthen organizational relationships, improve the visibility of members, and amplify their voices. With the increase of support resources extended to ERGs, group members can include their involvement in their professional development plans and extend their network internally and externally. Mentorship and professional development in the workplace provide a space for workers to navigate professional and personal experiences (Kamen & Apple, 2023).

Conclusion

Self-identification of LGBTQ+ employees are optional and voluntary because such disclosure may not come without risk, and workplace climate directly impacts the comfort and optimism of LGBTQ+ employees. Organizations striving to create more inclusive workspaces have options to better support their LGBTQ+ workforce. Notably, organizations should recognize and address harmful anti-LGBTQ+ bills by enforcing existing federal protections against discrimination while also adopting anti-discrimination verbiage based on sexual orientation, gender identity, or gender expression. The results of organizational compliance with anti-discrimination policies designed to provide equal employment opportunities have a positive impact for the employees and the organization. Workplaces devoted to DEIB should push beyond compliance and inclusivity statements toward more formalized demonstrations of support, such as through the creation of ERGs. As communities of learning and practice, ERGs establish a space for advocacy by fostering collaboration and creating opportunities for

mentorship while helping employees share experiences, navigate organizational dimensions, and reinforce allyship. The platform ERGs provide may help LGBTQ+ employees strengthen organizational relationships, improve visibility of members, and ultimately amplify their voices.

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