

Coming out

David Shields introduces the workplace programmes at Stonewall

Whether and when to come out will often be one of the hardest decisions any gay person will ever make. Do you tell family and friends? If so how? What reaction will you face? How will it affect relationships?

But when you take the plunge and come out for the first time, the sense of relief is palpable – someone else finally knows what you have kept secret for, in some cases, many years.

Life would be so much simpler if that first revelation about your sexual orientation sufficed for a lifetime. However, the reality is that lesbian and gay people spend their entire everyday lives coming out to someone – whether it is doctors, workmates, hotel receptionists or even the builder who comes to your one-bedroom flat to do work.

You weigh up the consequences of who to tell, what problems it could provoke, who needs to know, who deserves to know and who, out of total self-preservation, you would never tell.

Society is changing rapidly. Fifteen years ago, when representations of gay people on TV barely existed, when lesbians and gay men faced routine discrimination and there was not one piece of equality legislation on the statute books, coming out was a tougher decision and mostly involved telling family and friends. It most certainly did not involve telling your employer and workmates.

Gay people simply did not come out at work and those who did saw their lives become fodder for tabloid witchhunts. During the 80s and 90s the papers were full of teachers who had been hounded out of schools, gay police officers targeted by colleagues, and even vicars exposed and branded 'pulpit poofs' on the front page.

Being gay actively barred you from some careers including being a judge or working for the security services because gay people – particularly men – were seen as a security risk. The most infamous of all employers was the armed forces. Not only was it the only aspect of life where being homosexual was actually illegal, gay and lesbian personnel were actively rooted out and sacked.

But the last decade, and in particular the past five years, has seen a massive shift in social attitude and considerable legislative change. Until 2003 it

was perfectly legal to sack a lesbian or gay man from a job simply because they were gay. The sacked employee had no legal redress and any case taken to a tribunal or court was dismissed out of hand since the employer had done nothing illegal.

But the change in employment law in 2003 finally put an end to the legal discrimination of gay employees. It has made a huge difference to thousands of gay people's lives. Tribunals have come down hard on employers who now allow discrimination of gay staff and several organisations have found themselves paying compensation of up to £120,000 to employees. Even bishops and the Church of England are not exempt as the Bishop of Hereford discovered recently after discriminating against a gay youth worker. Nobody can opt out of gay employment law.

But robust legal protections are not enough to create new and safe working environments for gay and lesbian staff. These come through the commitment of men and women in organisations who want to improve diversity and expand opportunities for everyone.

As a gay employee you might have the full protection of the law but what good is that if you do not feel comfortable about coming out to start with?

Firstly, everyone's decision to come out at work is entirely personal and that should be respected. Some people might want to come out to a few trusted colleagues, others might decide to tell a supportive manager, some might spend their whole working lives never coming out at all. Employees should never feel obliged to come out and, crucially, if someone knows that a workmate is gay and is not out, they should never be outed to colleagues. Privacy as well as openness has to be respected at every level of the organisation.

An inclusive and supportive organisational culture is essential if a lesbian, gay or bisexual employee is to have the confidence to come out. Staff members who do not feel they will be supported properly are not likely to come out, fearing the response of colleagues and managers alike.

At Stonewall we work with almost 400 major British organisations through our Diversity Champions programme. They range from police

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forces, retail and investment banks, to law firms, local authorities, government departments, major retail companies and universities. Every aspect of British employment life is now covered under the membership and between them these organisations employ over four million people.

By joining the programme, these organisations are committing themselves to improving the working environment for their lesbian and gay staff. They are beginning to successfully implement a range of initiatives aimed at improving awareness of sexual orientation in the workplace, giving equal pension rights, strong anti-bullying policies, better networking opportunities and mentoring programmes to enable the career development of gay staff and the support of gay community groups through sponsorship.

Companies that use these methods to encourage lesbian and gay employees to have the confidence to come out are those striving to make the workplace fairer for all staff. They are solid examples of good practice being used by employers across the country.

But apart from wanting to genuinely see diversity improve, astute employers also see the business sense in making their workplaces more gay friendly.

Employees who are able to be out about their sexuality are more productive, happier staff. It is a lonely and isolating experience when you can not discuss the things that other people take for granted – not being able to say what you did at the weekend because you do not want people to know you have a same-sex partner. Consider not being able to bring that partner to work functions where heterosexual people feel more than happy to bring theirs, or to ask for compassionate leave if that partner gets sick or worse.

Stonewall's own research and experience has found that staff who feel able to come out at work, and who are confident that any harassment they might face from colleagues will be dealt with seriously, are less likely to leave and look for employment in more supportive environments.

Organisations with good policies around sexual orientation also become the employer of choice for many, especially graduates. This in turn allows employers to pick employees from the widest possible pool of talent – which is ultimately beneficial for any business.

Monitoring sexual orientation alongside race, gender and disability can demonstrate whether gay people are actually applying for jobs and getting them, as well as whether existing gay staff are developing their careers, rather than reaching the 'pink plateau' – which for gay people is so similar to the 'glass ceiling' and 'snowcap' historically encountered by women and people from ethnic minorities. Effective

monitoring can assess whether gay employees are comfortable being out at work, able to report bullying and harassment and, crucially, whether they are more likely to leave than their straight colleagues.

Some organisations have been anxious that sexual orientation monitoring might offend people. We need to move away from the attitude that sexual orientation is always a private matter that should remain hidden. Stonewall does not believe that people who do not want to disclose their sexual orientation should feel they have to. But equally, we believe strongly that individuals should have the choice to be able come out and be themselves in the workplace, without fear of damaging their careers or facing discrimination if they do.

But even the worst employers can eventually become among the best if they are committed enough to change. Once, coming out in the Royal Navy meant certain dismissal and a loss of home and pension. Now openly gay staff are not only allowed to march at Pride events across the country, they are allowed to do so in uniform.

The benefits for a gay person who feels able to come out or be out comfortably where they work should never be underestimated. One definite thing we have learned during our time working with hundreds of organisations over the past seven years is that people perform better when they can be themselves. ■