



## LGBT @ Work: Building the Business Case for LGBT-Positive Workplaces: Part 1

BY ANNEMARIE SHROUDER

When is Pride happening in your community and who in your office is celebrating it? If you know the answers, chances are you have an LGBT-positive (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender) and inclusive workplace, and are reaping the rewards both inside and outside of your organization. Pride is 37 years old. On June 28, 1969 New York Police Officers raided a gay bar in Greenwich Village and the Stonewall Riot ensued. This event mobilized the gay community in New York and around the world. Since 1970 Pride marches and parades have been held around the world in the summer months. What began as resistance has in many cities become an affirmation and a celebration as gay rights and recognition improve. Communities across Canada from Prince George to Halifax will be celebrating Pride at various times this summer.

In 1996, sexual orientation was added to the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms as a prohibited ground for discrimination. Still, a 2002 Public Service Employee Survey in Ottawa cites 5% of respondents as victims of harassment or discrimination at work because of their sexual orientation. Stonewall's Guide (UK, 2007) lists the individual impact of bullying and harassment of LGBT employees as low self esteem, demotivation, stress, anxiety, and depression. This also significantly impacts the organization: low staff morale; increased absenteeism; decreased productivity; recruitment and retention problems; costly legal action; damaged image and reputation; loss of client and customer confidence.

More insidious than homophobia is heterosexism, the beliefs and practices that assume heterosexuality is the only natural, normal, and acceptable sexual orientation. With it comes the common assumption that everyone is straight—until proven otherwise. Being lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender at work can therefore also be a minefield for subtle reasons.

According to Out and About, a publication by Canadian Heritage and Parks Canada "for LGBT employees, simply being themselves at work presents a problem. For some constantly wondering whether to come out is an ongoing source of stress which can limit the quality and authenticity of their workplace relationships, sap their productivity, and even affect their health."

IBM Canada's Client Executive Richard Branston and Diversity Program Manager Brad Salavich state that being closeted at work means being more guarded about participating in social activities and personal conversations, being less engaged, and as a result, being less authentic. "How effective can people like that be in workplaces that are so built on our social networks and our ability to interact with the people we work with?" Salavich adds.

LGBT-positive workplaces include environments like at IBM where, Branston explains, heterosexuality is not assumed, and employees' choice of language creates an opening for LGBT colleagues to come out, should they so choose. It means executives include gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender people when they are talking about diversity, and there is zero tolerance for inappropriate comments and behaviour.

Bruce Goudy, a partner at Ernst & Young in Toronto, notes the environmental change is measured mostly by people's comfort levels, and the matter-of-fact status sexual orientation now has in their workplace. "LGBT (staff) were talked about before, now they are being talked to about LGBT issues," Goudy adds.

The bottom line is comfort. "It's about making [LGBT] people feel comfortable in their work environment. And [it's about being] clear to others that this is a company where they should feel comfortable," says Scott Mullin, VP, Government and Community Relations, TD Bank Financial Group.

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