

Gay and Transgender Issues in the Workplace

Making Rhyme & Reason on College Grads Coming Out at Work

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Jack and Jill came out in school,
but went back in the closet.
Jack was sad, and Jill was mad,
and their employer lost 'cause of it.

A writer for *Jungle Campus*, an employment magazine aimed at college students, asked me:

Should gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender graduates come out at work?

A better question, I suggested, is how and when—not *if*—they should come out on the job.

In today's work world, there is no good reason for a qualified gay or transgender person to seek employment in anything other than a company that wants them to be out of the closet. The majority of companies, at least in the United States, Canada, and the United Kingdom, understand the value of diversity, and how the corporation's ability to compete in the marketplace depends upon their willingness to be proactively inclusive.

Prior to applying for a job at—or accepting an invitation from—a company, a gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender person ought to first do a little research on the Web. By entering in their search engine "Human Rights Campaign Corporate Equality Index" (or in the U.K., "Stonewall"), he or she can quickly find out how the company has been rated in its efforts to create a safe and productive work environment for gay and transgender people.

The reporter also asked:

Should gay and transgender graduates include involvement in gay-related organizations in their resumes?

Yes. In applying for a job, I would be sure to include information on involvement in gay and transgender organizations. If you omit the truth here, you're starting a pattern of deception that will be hard to stop. On the other hand, I would balance the gay and transgender entries with other activities so that the potential employer doesn't fear they would be hiring an activist whose sole interest is gay or transgender equal rights. Most major companies would be glad to have a gay or transgender person out of the closet because they know that such personal secrets negatively impact individual and team productivity. But they also want the out employee to be really good at the work he or she is hired to do. Being highly qualified is what needs to come through loud and clear on a resume or in an interview.

How should a gay or transgender college graduate come out at work?

Once someone starts work, it's best not to walk in with a bullhorn and announce, "Hi, I'm Brian, and I'm gay." What works best in coming out at work is if this information is shared casually, such as by using the proper pronouns when reporting on your dates or your partners, displaying pictures of your beloved in your work area, joining the company's gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender Employee Resource Group (ERG), and by speaking up at a meeting—when relevant—that, "From my experience, that won't sell well in the gay community", or "Other gay people might find that offensive."

How do you come out to your manager?

It's great if our manager is aware of our sexual orientation so that when we need a day off because our partner's parent has died (or some other personal issue arises) we don't have to fumble through an excuse for our needs. Some managers may not feel they need to know if an employee is gay, but it is generally helpful if they do. To come out to your manager, ask if you can meet with him or her privately. When you meet, say simply, "As a gay person, I'd like to be a resource for you on anything related to gay and transgender issues, if they come up." If he or she asks you how you are feeling so far with the group, be honest. If the group needs diversity training on the issues, ask your manager if it's possible to have it provided.

What can a gay or transgender person do at work to make it easier to be out?

- Getting a mentor at work would be a great way to navigate through some of the issues that might arise. A gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender employee—or a heterosexual ally—who has some seniority can be found through the company's gay ERG, or through the Offices of Human Resources or of Diversity and Inclusion. Introducing yourself to the people working in those offices is always a good idea, especially if you're not sure who in the office you can safely talk to.
- Be aware that for the first time in your life you're entering a world that is multi-generational. People considerably older than you grew up with different attitudes toward gay and transgender people, and have been less exposed to the openness of younger generations. That doesn't mean that they're hostile—some of them may have gay children—it just means that you should be aware that they may not be as openly affirming as your friends at school.
- Don't use the word "queer" at work—or any other gay or transgender words that might not be understood by others or worse yet, be offensive. Understand that many older gay people hate the word "queer" because it was used so viciously against them when they were young. Consider the fact that a gay employee can be charged by another gay person with creating a hostile work environment, so be sensitive and respectful.

As is true with all of life, coming out at work as gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender, and fitting comfortably into a new job in a company requires patience, open and honest communication, and a good sense of humor.

Jack and Jill came out at work,
and the profit share grew fast.
Jack had glee, and Jill was free,
and the company said, "At last!"