

Gay and Transgender Issues in the Workplace

I Can't See Myself in your Mantel

Posted: 13 Oct 2010, 10:30AM

It became common knowledge among my siblings as we grew older that the photos we saw of ourselves on our grandmother's living room mantel really hadn't been there all year. We watched our mother do the same with her grandchildren, pull photos out of drawers and place them prominently for family visits.

Corporations that picture us in ads in gay periodicals or in gay event programs are doing the same. They want us to feel special and welcome during our brief visit. At the recent Out and Equal conference in Los Angeles, several major companies had photos in their ads of two women with their child, two men getting married, two men with their children, and two women with their heads romantically touching. And while those great ads were much more meaningful to me than the ones that celebrated diversity with colored balls or scrabble pieces, I knew that once I left the conference, I wouldn't see my picture again until I came back next year or opened a gay magazine.

The one recent exception to this practice of pulling the photos out of the drawer for special occasions is the ad by Hewlett-Packard in a recent *New York Times* magazine supplement that proudly presented to their estimated four million readers worldwide the photo of two black women nuzzling. There were no innocuous references to "LGBT," an acronym that is often used by the lazy or embarrassed. There were no rainbow-colored figures that winked at the gay readers but were looked over by most others. Hewlett-Packard said quite clearly to me, "We support our gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender family members without hesitation throughout the year."

For many, many years, the vast majority of gay couples living together would "straighten up the house," when family or co-workers visited. Pictures of the couple together, and of their gay friends in relationships, would be hidden in drawers so as not to alert or offend heterosexual people. That's called "heterosexism," the belief that heterosexuality is nature's intention, and that homosexuality needs to be accommodated politely, but not proudly, as a poor substitute.

Most corporations with which I'm familiar, even those with a 100% rating from the Human Rights Campaign on their [Corporate Equality Index](#), are heterosexist. Their hearts are in the right place, especially in the Office of Diversity and Inclusion, but the homosexuality of some of their employees is not something they'd like to publicly celebrate. One company that comes to mind didn't want their gay employees to hang a banner celebrating "Gay Awareness Month" outside the factory for fear that passersby might take offense. But they didn't ask their black employees to keep their Black History Month banner in the drawer.

A next step in the diversity initiatives of corporations needs to be deciding whether or not to keep the pictures of their gay and transgender employees in the drawer except when necessary. While I applaud and appreciate every step that has been taken by companies to create a safe and productive work environment for all of their employees, I'd like it to be as clear to the average person looking at

corporate ads in *Entertainment Weekly*, *Ebony*, *Sports Illustrated*, and *The Economist* that companies not only have black, Latino, Asian, and female employees, the family members most often shown in photos, but gay and transgender people too. What might those ads look like? Companies don't need my guidance there. They've already received it from their gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender employees, and most of them have already created bold ads that say, "We're proud of these people." It's just that the ads are kept in the drawer for most of the year.