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# MAKING CHANGE



LGBT Inclusion—Understanding the  
Challenges

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## About Catalyst

Catalyst is the leading research and advisory organization working with businesses and the professions to build inclusive environments and expand opportunities for women at work. As an independent, nonprofit membership organization, Catalyst conducts research on all aspects of women's career advancement and provides strategic and web-based consulting services globally. With the support and confidence of member corporations and firms, Catalyst remains connected to business and its changing needs. In addition, Catalyst honors exemplary business initiatives that promote women's leadership with the annual Catalyst Award. With offices in New York, San Jose, Toronto, and Zug, Catalyst is consistently ranked No. 1 among U.S. nonprofits focused on women's issues by The American Institute of Philanthropy.

**Catalyst's *Making Change* series is designed to give business leaders new perspectives on common workplace issues.**

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**LGBT Inclusion—Understanding the  
Challenges**

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## LGBT Inclusion at Work

More and more organizations recognize that creating a **lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT)** inclusive workplace is a competitive advantage. By successfully recruiting, retaining, developing, and advancing LGBT employees, organizations increase their ability to compete effectively for talent, minimize attrition costs, and gain wider access to LGBT consumer markets. These are just some of the reasons that initiatives focused on LGBT employees are

increasingly seen by organizations as a vital component of a broader diversity and inclusion strategy. Indeed, most Catalyst members feature policies and programs, such as domestic partnership benefits and LGBT employee network groups. While these are important first steps, Catalyst recognizes that LGBT inclusion is a complex issue and that organizations need to take additional steps to address the concerns of LGBT employees.

## Terms to Know A to Z

**Bisexual:** A person whose emotional, sexual, or romantic attractions are to both men and women. Bisexuals need not be “equally” attracted to, or have had equal sexual experience with, both sexes. Nor do they need to have attractions toward both sexes at the same time.

**Coming out of the closet:** The process of self-acceptance and disclosure of sexual orientation to others. People can disclose to none, some, or all of the people they know.

**Gay/Homosexual:** A woman or a man whose emotional, sexual, or romantic attractions are primarily to members of the same gender.

**Gender:** This term refers to the external, socially constructed rules, roles, behaviors, activities, and attributes that a society considers appropriate for women and men; gender categories are “women” and “men.”<sup>1</sup>

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This is an educational piece designed for line managers and diversity practitioners who want to gain a deeper insight into the challenges that lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) employees face at work. Human resources and diversity practitioners can use the information in this report to build stronger, more comprehensive LGBT-inclusion programs. Line managers will better understand the experiences of their LGBT direct reports, team members, and coworkers.

LGBT employees face a host of unique barriers that are often deeply rooted in dominant **heterosexist** cultural norms not obvious to the **non-LGBT** community. With this lack of awareness, inclusion initiatives may overlook many of the significant challenges that LGBT employees face, subsequently compromising the effectiveness of these plans to combat **homophobia** and drive change.

**Gender expression:** How an individual manifests a sense of femininity or masculinity through appearance, behavior, grooming, and/or dress.

**Gender identity:** One's inner sense of being a woman or a man, regardless of biological birth sex; different from sexual orientation.

**Gender role:** Rules assigned by society that define what clothing, behaviors, thoughts, feelings, relationships, etc., are considered appropriate and inappropriate for members of a given sex.

**Heteronormative:** Cultural rules (including social, family, and legal) that pressure everyone to conform to a heterosexual standard of identity.

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When some people hear about LGBT-inclusion initiatives, they think it is a discussion about sexual behavior in the workplace. As a result, people may see an individual's LGBT identity as a sensitive and private matter that falls outside of the concern of an employer and should be left at home.

These beliefs often lie at the heart of employee resistance to LGBT-inclusion initiatives. Therefore, it is important for diversity practitioners and managers to accurately communicate that the term "LGBT" refers to a person's

**sexual orientation, and/or gender identity** and mode of **gender expression**, *not an individual's sexual behavior or activity*. It is also critical to underscore that for both LGBT and non-LGBT individuals alike, sexual orientation, gender identity, and gender expression are defining individual characteristics that we all bring to work.

The goal of an LGBT-inclusion initiative is to create a workplace where LGBT employees have the same privileges that non-LGBT employees often take for granted. Diverse

## Terms to Know A to Z

**Heterosexism:** The attitude that heterosexuality is the only valid sexual orientation. Heterosexism denies, denigrates, and stigmatizes any non-heterosexual form of behavior, relationship, or community. Heterosexism often takes the form of ignoring or discriminating against LGBT individuals or discounting their experiences altogether.

**In the closet (Closeted):** LGBT individuals who do not openly disclose their sexual orientation to others. People can disclose to none, some, or all of the people they know.

**Lesbian:** A woman whose emotional, sexual, or romantic attractions are primarily to other women.

**Homophobia:** The hatred, hostility, disapproval, or fear of people who are identified as, or assumed to be, lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender.

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employee representation has a positive effect on business results, as it allows the organization to effectively leverage all talent. Therefore, it is important to all employees that LGBT employees be engaged in the business and not subjected to unfair discrimination, disadvantage, or violence.

**homosexual**, or any other **sexual minority**. However, the terms “LGBT” and “gay and lesbian” cannot be used interchangeably; bisexual and transgender individuals are an important and different, though frequently neglected, part of the LGBT community.

## What Does “LGBT” Mean Anyway?

LGBT is a commonly used acronym to describe people who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender, as well as individuals who identify as **transsexual**, **queer**,

Language describing sexual orientation, gender identity, and gender expression can change across cultures. In the United States, the terms straight, gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender are among the most common and have specific

**LGBT:** This is the acronym most commonly used in the United States to address the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender community. The acronym can vary in a number of ways, including GLBT and GLB, and can include additional letters, such as Q (queer; also questioning); and A (straight ally).

**Non-LGBT:** Anyone who does not identify as part of the LGBT community; most commonly refers to straight/heterosexual individuals.

**Out employee:** An employee who discloses his or her LGBT identity to a few, some, or all of his or her coworkers.

**Queer:** A fluid term with numerous meanings. It is commonly used to describe sexual orientation and/or gender identity or gender expression that does not conform to heterosexual norms. The term is often used to refer to the general LGBT community. It can be either a positive or a negative term, depending on the context in which it is used.

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meanings and history based on their linguistic use. Terms used in other countries and other languages can have widely different meanings. When developing LGBT initiatives in different regions, organizations need to be familiar with the local LGBT culture and make sure they use region-specific terms.<sup>2</sup>

LGBT individuals are considered invisible minorities—a non-majority group not easily recognizable to others, the way gender or racial minorities are. Because it is often difficult to

discern an individual's LGBT identity, many LGBT employees have a choice to make about disclosure. Some choose not to disclose their LGBT identity at work at all, while others choose to disclose to all or only a select number of coworkers. Understanding the specific experiences associated with this choice—to remain closeted or to come out to all or some people—will better enable organizations to support all LGBT employees. It is important that all LGBT employees, regardless of disclosure, feel safe at work.

## Terms to Know A to Z

**Sex:** This term refers to the biological characteristics that define an individual; sex categories are “female” and “male.”<sup>1</sup>

**Sexual minority:** Individuals who do not identify as part of the sexual majority or cultural mainstream (e.g., straight). Individuals can identify as gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, or queer, for example.

**Sexual orientation:** A term commonly used to refer to a person's emotional, romantic, or sexual attraction to individuals of a particular gender (women or men).

**Straight/Heterosexual:** A person whose emotional, sexual, or romantic attractions are primarily to members of the opposite sex.



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## Understanding the Challenges and Implementing Change

At Catalyst, we believe that the cornerstone of an effective LGBT-inclusion strategy is having a firm grasp of the subtle and unique barriers that LGBT employees face. Many of these obstacles result in large part from culturally prescribed attitudes about gender and expressions of gender identity.

Catalyst's expertise on gender and underrepresented groups in the workplace positions us well to provide insights about

the specific barriers to LGBT inclusion. Furthermore, by highlighting the needs of LGBT women, we continue to support organizations in making change for the advancement of *all* women.

*LGBT Inclusion—Understanding the Challenges* is the first in a two-part series on LGBT inclusion. It defines the LGBT community, describes the current state of legislation, and identifies the main components of the business case for LGBT inclusion. It also exposes some of the most common barriers

**Straight ally/LGBT supporter:** An individual who identifies as non-LGBT and who supports the LGBT community in a direct way, such as attending LGBT group meetings, acting as an executive sponsor, or volunteering at an LGBT group event.

**Transgender:** People who identify with the characteristics, roles, behaviors, or desires of a gender different from the one they were assigned at birth. This is an umbrella term that can be used to include transsexuals, cross-dressers, and other gender-variant people.

**Transsexual:** Transsexuals change (or seek to change) their physical characteristics to a gender different than what they were assigned at birth—for example, individuals born as males seek to change their sex to female. These changes can include sex reassignment surgery and/or hormone therapy.

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to inclusion that result from a high-stakes decision that many LGBT employees must make at work—to stand out from their colleagues and **come out of the closet** or to attempt to blend into the crowd and remain **in the closet**. Furthermore, it identifies the concerns that LGBT employees encounter as they advance in their careers, and it discusses the specific challenges of transgender employees.

*LGBT Inclusion—Implementing Policies, Programs, and Practices*, the second report in the series, offers practical advice to help organizations begin to address the barriers to LGBT inclusion outlined in this report. It will identify in-depth programs and policies that drive LGBT inclusion and detail how organizations can encourage and reinforce LGBT-inclusive behaviors among employees.

## LGBT Employees: A Diverse Population

The LGBT population is extremely diverse. The group includes people of different genders, races, ethnicities, ages, national origins, locations, and generations. LGBT individuals can have vastly different challenges and expectations for what it means to be a “woman” and a “man” depending on the culture in which they live.

Catalyst research has shown that women in the United States and across the world face both subtle and overt barriers to advancement in the workplace, including stereotypes, lack of senior or visibly successful women role models, inflexible workplaces, and lack of mentoring.<sup>3</sup>

Research suggests that women who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender (LGBT women) face barriers that are attributable to both their LGBT identity and their status as

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women. Exacerbating the issue, discussions on the LGBT population in the popular press consistently focus on men,<sup>4</sup> which influences the way in which LGBT women are received in the workplace.

Moreover, empirical evidence indicates that perceptions, experiences, and overall satisfaction in the workplace differ between LGBT women and men. Specifically, LGBT women are more likely than LGBT men to report feeling less included, having fewer social networking opportunities, and being less aware of company diversity efforts.<sup>5</sup>

## Do Not Make Assumptions

People often think that LGBT employees are always recognizable by their social interests, clothing, personality traits, or their friends and family relationships. People also assume that LGBT employees have a particular lifestyle—

that LGBT people are often single, do not have children, and are not close to their families. These assumptions are based on stereotypes—generalizations we make to differentiate categories or groups of people.<sup>6</sup> Although these characteristics are sometimes true, they are potentially true of *any* employee. There are employees in many organizations that do not fit these common stereotypes. Just like non-LGBT individuals, there is a wide variation among LGBT employees. It is important not to assume that people are LGBT or non-LGBT unless they clearly state it.

Moreover, many LGBT employees are in committed relationships, have children, and are very close to their families. Research shows that same-sex couples are raising children in at least 96 percent of all United States counties. In addition, at least one-third of lesbian couples and one-fifth of gay male couples in the United States are raising children.<sup>7</sup>

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Emily<sup>8</sup> is a new director in Research and Development at a major international corporation. When Emily's co-director took her out for a drink to welcome Emily to the company, she politely inquired, "Do you have a boyfriend or husband?" With this statement, and without any prior knowledge of Emily's life, the co-director automatically assumed that Emily was heterosexual. In order to create a more LGBT-inclusive culture, employees can instead ask, "Do you have a partner?" Then Emily does not have to "correct" her co-director's assumption, and merely answers as she wishes.

## Who is Affected by LGBT Inclusion?

### Everyone

The failure to create an LGBT-inclusive workplace can have negative effects that extend far beyond LGBT individuals. LGBT inclusion affects not only LGBT employees, but also their families, friends, coworkers, and **straight allies/LGBT supporters**. Research shows that approximately 70 percent of heterosexual adults in the United States know someone who is LGBT.<sup>9</sup> Because anyone is potentially affected by LGBT inclusion, clear and consistent messages about LGBT inclusion should be directed toward all employees.

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**Kristine** is a 32-year-old LGBT woman who works in a multinational organization and is in a long-term committed relationship with another woman. It is important for Kristine to feel that her organization welcomes her as an LGBT employee. At work, Kristine would like to display pictures of her partner, Stephanie, at her desk. Kristine would like to talk about her weekend activities when coworkers discuss their weekends. Clearly, Kristine is affected by LGBT inclusion at work. Yet there are many other people and many other workplaces that can be affected by LGBT inclusion:

- ◆ Does Kristine's supervisor feel comfortable asking about her weekend plans?
- ◆ Kristine's partner, Stephanie, would like to display a photograph of Kristine on her desk—can she do this?

- ◆ Can Kristine's siblings discuss their plans with Kristine and her partner for the upcoming holiday?
- ◆ Is Kristine's mother able to proudly talk with her coworkers about the house that Kristine and her partner recently purchased?
- ◆ Is Kristine's father able to share his daughter's marital status with his coworkers and whether Kristine is coming home for the holiday?
- ◆ Can Kristine's best friend feel comfortable bringing her to an after-work event and introducing Kristine to coworkers?

This example shows that many individuals are affected by LGBT inclusion in the workplace; in reality, there are probably more.

## The Current Landscape: What Are Companies Doing for LGBT Inclusion?

Many organizations are building LGBT-inclusive cultures. The number of *Fortune* 500 companies that provide domestic partnership benefits for same-sex couples has increased from 96 in 1999 to 254 in 2006. In addition, the number of *Fortune* 500 companies that included non-discrimination policies for gender identity and/or gender expression rose from two in 1999 to 82 in 2006.<sup>10</sup>

Catalyst member organizations, which are typically *Fortune* 500 companies and leading professional services firms, are striving to create inclusive cultures for all employees. A number of organizations have made LGBT inclusion a core part of their diversity efforts. For instance, *Curve*, a U.S.-based magazine targeting LGBT women, named the top ten companies for lesbians to work. All of these companies are Catalyst members.<sup>11</sup>

## LGBT Inclusion and Catalyst Members

The *2006 Catalyst Member Benchmarking Report* showed that Catalyst member companies and firms are working proactively to create equal opportunities for LGBT employees:<sup>12</sup>

- ◆ Eighty-two percent of member companies and 89 percent of member firms offer domestic partner benefits for same-sex partners.
- ◆ Sixty-five percent of member companies and 57 percent of member firms have LGBT employee network groups.
- ◆ Fifteen percent of member companies and four percent of member firms have an LGBT mentoring program.

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In addition, Catalyst member companies are leading LGBT diversity efforts in the United States:

- ◆ Catalyst member companies comprise 55 percent of the organizations that received perfect scores on the Human Rights Campaign's Corporate Equality Index, a national rating system that assesses a company's treatment of LGBT employees, consumers, and investors.<sup>13</sup>

Indifference to the needs of LGBT employees is now the exception, not the norm.

## Understanding the LGBT Legislative Landscape

There is wide variation in legislation that protects LGBT individuals across the globe. In the majority of states in the United States, there are no anti-discrimination laws that protect LGBT individuals, nor is there federal legislation. As of 2006, organizations can legally fire employees based on their sexual orientation in 33 of 50 U.S. states; it is also legal to fire an employee based on their gender identity in 42 of the 50 U.S. states.<sup>14</sup> Therefore, otherwise successful employees can be fired specifically for being gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender and have no legal recourse.

**Tanya** worked for a consumer products company in the United States for 11 years. She was rated as a model employee and a high achiever. When Tanya's boss learned she

was bisexual through a fellow employee, she was fired. The law in her state allows Tanya's boss to terminate her because of her sexual orientation.

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In response to the lack of consistent legislation for LGBT employees, many businesses in the United States have chosen to actively provide consistent protection by creating anti-discrimination policies and statements to protect LGBT employees and domestic partnership benefits so that health and insurance benefits can be extended to same-sex partners.

In some areas outside of the United States, federal legislative protection for gays and lesbians has been in place for a long time. For example, legislation allowing gay marriage and civil unions exists in many Western European countries. In these regions, as federal governments have frequently enacted protective laws for LGBT citizens, many businesses have not needed to create unique internal standards for LGBT employees. In particular, Scandinavia has been a world leader in LGBT-inclusion policy. Norway was one of the first

countries in the world to enact anti-discrimination laws protecting homosexuals in areas other than employment, in 1981; Denmark legalized same-sex civil unions in 1989.<sup>15</sup>

In still other parts of the world, legislation in some countries regards being LGBT as illegal and sometimes punishable by prison or even death.<sup>16</sup> LGBT individuals both inside and outside of work must hide their sexual orientation, gender identity, and/or gender expression to protect their safety. Organizations often find it particularly difficult to support LGBT inclusion in regions where an LGBT-identified individual can face severe legal consequences.

With different social and political histories for LGBT inclusion in each region, we recognize that it is difficult to address the different needs of all LGBT employees in a global organization. Therefore, it is important that organizations



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start to address LGBT inclusion by building a consistent, inclusive culture in which all employees have equal opportunities. This requires clear and consistent policies and statements that both respect and reinforce LGBT inclusion while remaining sensitive to local, cultural differences.

## Building a Business Case for LGBT Inclusion

To be effective, a change effort needs a strong rationale that creates a sense of urgency and motivation for the desired change—namely, how it affects the bottom line.<sup>18</sup> Making the connection between LGBT inclusion and business results is essential if LGBT inclusion is to be considered a business imperative.

There is robust evidence that creating an LGBT-inclusive workplace can be good for business.<sup>19</sup> Here we outline three

## LGBT Legislation Around the World<sup>17</sup>

**Gay marriage legalized:** Belgium, Canada, Netherlands, South Africa, Spain, United States (Massachusetts)

**Civil unions or partnerships with same rights as married heterosexuals:** Denmark, Finland, Iceland, New Zealand, Norway, Sweden, United Kingdom, United States (California, Connecticut, New Jersey, Vermont)

**Civil unions or partnerships with lesser rights:** Argentina (one state), Czech Republic, France, Germany (three states), Ireland, Luxembourg, United States (Hawaii, Maine)

mechanisms by which LGBT inclusion can enhance financial profitability:

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**Engage Employees.** LGBT inclusion motivates LGBT employees to do their personal best by maximizing the value of their contributions. It also enables these employees to be authentic at work. When LGBT employees are included, they are able to build valuable networking and mentoring opportunities and be better leaders. LGBT employees who face discrimination at work are less satisfied with their careers and may self-select into positions that offer an LGBT-friendlier work-group yet afford a lower salary.<sup>20</sup> In turn, the decision to work only in these environments can lead to decreased career opportunities. Research shows that 25 to 66 percent of gays and lesbians feel that they endure discrimination at work.<sup>21</sup>

**Reduce Costs.** Research recently showed that a significant minority (12 percent) of lesbian, gay, and bisexual employees left their last jobs because of discrimination.<sup>22</sup> Other research

suggests that in corporations the average cost of the loss of a skilled worker is estimated at more than 100 percent of an employee's annual base pay and benefits.<sup>23</sup> By creating a workplace culture that is LGBT-inclusive, organizations can eliminate differential turnover among LGBT employees and potentially realize significant savings.

**Increase Revenue.** Promoting LGBT inclusion can have a direct impact on financial performance. It can help increase revenue by tapping into LGBT markets and attracting new customers, building customer loyalty, and keeping growth strategies robust and up-to-date. The LGBT consumer market buying power is valued at \$660 billion in the United States as of 2006; in 2011, it is estimated to exceed \$835 billion.<sup>24</sup> Additionally, research shows that the UK lesbian and gay market, assessed at approximately 3 million people, earned over £70 billion in 2005.<sup>25</sup>

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Research consistently finds that LGBT consumers have a deeper loyalty to products offered by companies that have progressive policies towards LGBT employees; 88 percent of gay and lesbian adults and 70 percent of heterosexuals are likely to consider purchasing a brand that is known to provide equal workplace benefits to all of their employees, including gays and lesbians.<sup>26</sup> Companies that promote LGBT inclusion can increase their ability to tap into and retain an LGBT consumer base.

## Going Further: Devising a Strategy to Address Key Barriers Faced by LGBT Employees

Heteronormative beliefs and expectations of how women and men should feel, think, and behave are dominant in most workplaces. These beliefs include the notions that women and men have essentially different and oppositional

biological and psychological attributes and that individuals should marry someone of a different gender and have children. Often the gender identities, sexual orientations, and/or modes of gender expression found among LGBT employees violate these heterosexual norms. For example, lesbian, gay, and bisexual employees may date or marry people of the same gender. Transgender employees also challenge heterosexist gender norms by identifying with a gender that does not “match” the sex they were assigned at birth.

Because an individual’s LGBT identity is not as visible as other demographic characteristics, such as race, many LGBT individuals have a choice of whether to disclose or hide this aspect of their identity. This decision is not easy. Often employees will grapple with this dilemma, considering the likelihood that coworkers may distance themselves for fear of

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being identified as LGBT by association, because they are homophobic, or for other reasons. As out employees, they might also be excluded from projects or clients because coworkers are uncomfortable working with someone who is LGBT. Yet the decision to come out or remain closeted is not just informed by the organizational climate of the immediate work environment; reactions at previous organizations as well as from friends, family, and the community often influence whether employees choose to reveal or hide their LGBT identity. In addition, there are LGBT employees who believe that coming out is not a choice because their affect, mannerisms, and the way they dress mark them as LGBT.

The reality is that the coming-out process is a personal and emotional experience that happens across the lifespan, and the decision to come out must be made with each new co-worker, client, or manager.<sup>27</sup> For many LGBT employees, the

decision with each of these people can be met with negative consequences both personally and professionally. Therefore, it is important that organizations take deliberate measures to ensure their inclusion strategies address the specific barriers associated with either choice, regardless of whether it is to stand out or to blend in.

**Standing Out From the Crowd: Out Employees.** For an LGBT employee, engaging in activities such as discussing one's personal life, sharing information about family members, displaying photos of one's spouse and children—activities that non-LGBT employees routinely engage in—can show non-compliance with unspoken heterosexual norms. There is abundant evidence that people who challenge these and other gender norms are often met with social disapproval, and in some cases, even violence.

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Research consistently reports that one-quarter to two-thirds of LGBT employees encounter extensive discrimination in the workplace.<sup>28</sup> Given the significant risks attached to disclosing LGBT status, it is no wonder that many employees choose to remain in the closet.<sup>29</sup> Still, many employees choose to take the risk and make the decision to disclose their identity and come out to one, a few, some, or all of their colleagues.

One reason for taking the risk to come out is to forge better working relationships with coworkers and clients. By sharing their personal lives, social activities, and relationships, just as their non-LGBT coworkers do every day, LGBT employees often develop more effective personal connections that may form the basis of more effective professional relationships. These ties extend to the organization as well. Research has found that employees who disclose their sexual orientation at work are more loyal to and more aligned with the goals of

their organizations and have higher levels of job commitment and job satisfaction.<sup>30</sup>

As described above, when LGBT employees feel comfortable coming out at work there are significant potential benefits both to the business and to the individual. Therefore, it is especially vital for organizations to support out LGBT employees. Organizations can do this by:

- ◆ Increasing sensitivity and awareness among both LGBT and non-LGBT employees;
- ◆ Educating employees through LGBT diversity training;
- ◆ Examining social activities that reinforce heteronormative values (such as exclusive husband-wife functions and children-centered activities) and hosting more inclusive activities;
- ◆ Providing LGBT anti-discrimination policies and statements as well as domestic partner benefits;

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- ◆ Developing LGBT-inclusive programs such as resource groups, networking, and mentoring programs.

**Blending In: Closeted Employees.** Other LGBT employees may evaluate their current workplaces, assess information from present and past experiences, and decide not to openly disclose themselves as LGBT. Concealment of LGBT identity is often a necessary method of survival in workplaces non-welcoming of LGBT employees.

Closeted employees closely monitor discussions about their personal lives and loved ones. This means that they must constantly and carefully examine each of their thoughts and actions—all day, every day.

There are many stereotypes of the attitudes and interests of LGBT individuals, which others often use as indicators of

LGBT identity. Closeted LGBT employees must monitor the way they dress, their interests in gender-stereotypic activities, such as sports, film, and even their musical interests, because they might not be seen as gender-appropriate. Women and men, both LGBT and non-LGBT alike, have a wide range of interests. So-called gender-appropriate interests are merely culturally based stereotypes.

The monitoring needed to keep an individual's LGBT identity hidden can be draining and damaging for LGBT employees. Constant vigilance requires an enormous effort that likely detracts from energy LGBT employees could be expending on the job, and they may not perform as well as they could. This self-monitoring, therefore, may protect them from discrimination, but it is not without costs.

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Social distance between LGBT and non-LGBT employees can result in decreased interaction of LGBT employees in social networks. For example, coworkers may not understand why an LGBT employee constantly avoids conversations about family and personal life. At the same time, closeted LGBT employees may distance themselves from other LGBT employees to protect themselves from being identified as LGBT by association.<sup>31</sup> Consequently, closeted LGBT employees often utilize fewer supportive resources in their organization, such as LGBT employee resource groups and valuable formal and informal mentoring relationships.

In addition, closeted LGBT employees often face the assumption from peers and supervisors that they are not authentic or honest people, and these assumptions can compromise their image as trustworthy coworkers and affect ongoing interactions and opportunities for advancement.

Research has shown that heterosexual people have negative attitudes toward gay men and lesbians when they discover an individual's LGBT identity from another person or through guesswork or deduction, as opposed to direct disclosure from the LGBT employees themselves.<sup>32</sup>

Organizations need to support all LGBT employees, whether they are selectively out, fully out, or closeted. Organizations can make all LGBT employees feel included by:

- ◆ Making LGBT inclusion an organizational priority;
- ◆ Creating LGBT resource groups that are accessible to all employees;
- ◆ Maintaining membership confidentiality for all company LGBT resource groups;
- ◆ Posting materials about LGBT employee benefits, programs, and activities on a public space available to everyone, such as the intranet or company-wide emails.

## Moving Up the Ladder: LGBT Employees and Career Development

Choosing a career in a particular field or industry is a complex task for everyone, LGBT and non-LGBT alike. To build an optimal career track, most employees consider a number of individual and employment factors. These may include their personal interests and skills, career rewards, financial payoff, as well as job location and the possibility for travel.

Yet LGBT employees have to consider an additional set of criteria. Because fully LGBT-inclusive workplaces, professions, and industries have been traditionally quite few, LGBT individuals have to weigh their ability to integrate their LGBT identity with their work interests, skills, and the location of the job. As such, LGBT employees face difficult dilemmas as they develop and manage their careers. Furthermore, even when LGBT employees succeed in their careers, they face

additional challenges. The increased visibility of employees as they rise in their careers, for example, can increase the risk of making their LGBT identity involuntarily public. As a result LGBT employees may face work environments that are LGBT non-inclusive, or individuals might not be ready to fully disclose their LGBT identity and deal with the ramifications.

Despite these risks, many LGBT individuals still prioritize their career interests and therefore find themselves in work environments that might not be fully LGBT-inclusive. As we explain in more detail below, the barriers to advancement that LGBT employees face are complex and embedded throughout many organizations.

**Moving Up the Ladder.** In many fields, career development means advancing into a managerial position. Success as a leader often brings increased visibility and the development



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of personal relationships, both internally, with coworkers, managers, and senior leadership, as well as externally, with clients, business contacts, and industry leaders. LGBT employees may question whether it is safe to disclose their LGBT identity in either context.

For example, managers are often requested to attend client dinners, work-related off-site functions, and social gatherings. These social events frequently require that a spouse or partner attend, and conversations often blend the personal and professional. LGBT employees must not only decide whether they can disclose their LGBT identity safely, but they also have to decide whether they can bring their partners to workplace functions. Moreover, they may feel compelled to disclose details of their lives as LGBT persons.

Paula, a gay woman in her late 20s, is a district manager at a major multinational organization in the middle United States. She loves the work, performs well, and has received numerous promotions. Her organization has few out LGBT employees in leadership positions. Therefore, although Paula has a partner, she is not out at work. Paula's fellow managers frequently talk about their spouses and weekend plans with family and friends. Should Paula talk about her partner and their weekend plans as well?

**Geographic Mobility.** Often, frequent travel and relocation are a prerequisite for advancement to a leadership position. Managers can be asked to relocate within their home countries or to a different region completely. While relocation can create difficulties for all employees, LGBT employees face a unique set of obstacles and concerns that can often lead to discrimination as their careers progress. For example, they

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may be asked to relocate to a geographic area that is non-welcoming to LGBT individuals, or they may have to relocate without sufficient partner relocation benefits and resources. LGBT employees in non-welcoming work environments can put their careers in jeopardy if they have to tell a supervisor about their same-sex partner.

**Supporting the Advancement of LGBT Employees.** As LGBT employees advance in their careers, they must navigate challenging aspects of LGBT inclusion. Organizations can take steps to support LGBT employees in their career development.

- ◆ As employees move up the ladder to leadership positions, organizations can convey clear and consistent messages that LGBT employees and their partners are welcome at work-related events. By making sure that invitations and promotional materials welcome both spouses and partners, organizations send a strong message that LGBT inclusion is valued.

Henry has worked for a *Fortune* 500 company for four years. To be promoted at this organization, it is important that employees work across multiple offices. Henry is out to a select number of coworkers but not his supervisor. He is hesitant about being relocated to offices in towns that might be LGBT non-inclusive. How does he address this with his direct supervisor?

- ◆ When considering employees for significant travel and relocation, both human resources professionals and managers must be sensitive to the needs of LGBT employees. With training, managers who want to be supportive will have the tools to ask the right questions and understand the importance of holding all conversations in strict confidence.

## Gender Identity and Gender Expression: Transgender Employees at Work

Transgender inclusion is the protection and inclusion of employees on the basis of their gender identity and/or gender

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expression. Gender identity is defined as the inner sense of being a female or male, regardless of biological birth sex. Gender expression is how an individual manifests a sense of femininity or masculinity through his or her looks, behavior, grooming, or dress. Yet gender identity and gender expression are different from, and do not predict, sexual orientation, which is a term commonly used to refer to a person's emotional, romantic, or sexual attraction to individuals of a particular gender (women or men).

Because transgender inclusion is very new territory for most organizations, transgender employees are often not protected by existing sexual orientation anti-discrimination policies and statements. This lack of policy, combined with a lack of public education on the transgender community, often leads to misunderstandings and discrimination at work.

The traditional cultural norms and stereotypes of gender identity and gender expression are infrequently challenged at

work. Most employees conform in behavior and dress to the gender norms that our culture assigns to each biological sex. Transgender employees challenge the norms and beliefs about the relationship between gender and biological sex. By disclosing themselves as transgender in the workplace, they can do a number of things that break the mold: transgender employees may change their names, ask coworkers to refer to them with a new pronoun (using the term "he" instead of "she"), and dress in a way that does not conform to gender norms and behaviors prescribed for their biological sex.

Breaking the "rules" of gender identity and gender expression is, by nature, extremely public and sometimes a necessary component of transition. In fact, transgender employees who elect for surgery may have to live their new gender role for at least one year in order to be deemed eligible. Therefore, transgender employees are frequently at risk for facing extreme discrimination. Coworkers are often confused about the process; they may feel uncomfortable

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when transgender employees start using a different bathroom or dressing in a different manner.

Transgender employees who transition from living as one gender to living as another gender face a difficult process—this is not an easy or overnight process that happens on a whim. Society can make this transition arduous—from strangers questioning their gender to coworkers confused about which pronoun to use—and the responses are not always positive. To transition, transgender individuals must

see a medical professional and rigorously discuss their thoughts on their gender identity, may take hormones, and may possibly participate in expensive surgery.

Organizations are often inexperienced in supporting transgender employees. Rather than letting the arrival of a transgender employee in an organization create confusion, organizations can incorporate transgender education into their LGBT-inclusion efforts, as well as include gender identity and expression in their diversity and inclusion policies.<sup>33</sup>

Jenna, a male-to-female transgender employee at a *Fortune* 500 company, told her supervisor that she was planning to have sex reassignment surgery. She explained that living fully as a woman for at least one year was one of the necessary prerequisites for the surgery. Jenna had always been a top performer in the company, was well-liked by others, and was considered a “team player.” Because this is a key learning

opportunity, Jenna’s supervisor needs to be able to turn to a human resources or diversity practitioner on staff for direction on how to manage the situation appropriately, ensuring that Jenna is supported and that her coworkers are educated on the process. Dealing with the questions, concerns, or even fears that Jenna’s coworkers might have is an important facet of transgender inclusion.

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## In Summary

LGBT initiatives are a core aspect of effective diversity and inclusion initiatives in more and more organizations in the United States and across the world. Making the connection between LGBT inclusion and business results is essential if LGBT inclusion is to be considered a high priority business issue. By successfully creating an LGBT-inclusive culture, organizations can compete in the war for talent, minimize attrition and its associated costs, and gain wider access to LGBT consumer markets.

In order to build and maintain effective LGBT-inclusive initiatives, employees throughout an organization need to have an accurate understanding of the challenges LGBT employees face throughout their careers. Deciding whether to stand out or blend in with their coworkers is a complex decision that many LGBT employees make in their careers. LGBT employees who decide to come out at work develop

stronger, more personal interactions with coworkers and clients. These interactions are often the key to building effective and profitable professional relationships. Yet supporting closeted LGBT employees is equally important. Because closeted LGBT employees often utilize fewer supportive resources in their organization, they can miss out on important professional development opportunities.

What can organizations do to systematically create an LGBT-inclusive culture? We recognize that there is not an easy answer. Educating all employees on LGBT inclusion is vital to the success of an initiative. Many senior executives and line managers may currently, or potentially, have LGBT employees reporting to them. With education on the barriers that LGBT employees face, managers can create a more even playing field for everyone. Managers need to work with diversity practitioners to create clear and consistent messages on LGBT inclusion throughout an organization.

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In upcoming work, we will help organizations identify the key steps to building a strategic and customized LGBT initiative. By understanding current organizational needs and setting a

solid strategy for an LGBT-inclusion initiative, organizations can foster a truly inclusive culture and create lasting change.

## Endnotes

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