



Diversity Matters

Sexual Orientation

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Updated: Spring 2009

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Finding Positive Employers

Diversity has become increasingly important in employers' recruitment vocabulary. Sexual orientation has also become a significant element in the equality agenda of many organisations.

It is completely up to you whether to mention your sexual orientation or not, and when. You might decide that your personal life is completely separate from your work life. However, you may well decide to mention your sexual orientation during an interview, or you might be concerned that your future workplace should be a welcoming place for people with different sexual orientations. The following sections will aim to offer guidance in these issues.

Changes in Employers' Attitudes

Many organisations are becoming more and more responsive to the needs and requests of their lesbian, gay, bisexual and transsexual (LGBT) employees. Part of this has come as a response to changes in law, with the adoption of new equality legislation. Additionally, many employers want to develop a sense of justice in their organisations (the moral case), and would like to attract the best candidates, irrespective of their sexual orientation (the business case).

Some industries that have been perceived as quite conservative in the past, such as investment banking, are trying to appear more gay-friendly. They are beginning to realise that very bright candidates have been slipping through the net due to a misconception of themselves or their sector as not being particularly gay-friendly.

Awareness of LGBT issues, however, can be found now across all industries, as well as across all sectors. For example, Lloyds TSB has included training on LGBT issues as a vital part of diversity training for business leaders and front-line staff. Also some public organisations invest heavily on staff networks for LGBT employees.

Where to Look for Positive Employers

A good source of help when selecting positive employers can be found through Stonewall (www.stonewall.org.uk), a lesbian, gay and bisexual charity. Every year they publish Starting Out: The Lesbian and Gay Recruitment Guide (<http://www.stonewall.org.uk/workplace/1476.asp>), as well as the Workplace Equality Index (<http://www.stonewall.org.uk/workplace/1477.asp>). The former is a guide that is launched annually as a tool to help graduates and career-changers to find out more about gay-friendly employers. The latter is a list of the 100 most LGBT-friendly organisations in the UK, updated annually. This is worth looking at, as some employers who you may not think of as being particularly gay-friendly, actually are, so it makes for an interesting read.

You should also check organisations' equal opportunities policies, and whether they refer explicitly to sexual orientation. However, it is important for graduates to find out to what extent these policies are reflected on a day-to-day basis. Finally, it is also important to recognise what the attitudes of your future line managers and co-workers are likely to be, although realistically in most cases you will only be able to find out about these once you start working.

Support Available for LGBT Graduates

A good sign of the prevailing culture of a particular employer is to investigate whether there are established networking groups within the organisation. You may not wish to join, nor do you have to, but if they are publicised it's probably a good indication of the management's view on the subject. You could also find out whether there would be an opportunity to set up a new support group for LGBT staff, if there is not one running already.

Trades unions can be a good source of support. Many, such as the teaching unions, have specific information on their websites and hold separate conferences for gay members, often under the heading of 'equal opportunities.'

Further examples of diversity initiatives and activities can be found by checking out industry insights (<http://www.prospects.ac.uk/links/industries>).

Marketing Yourself and Disclosure

Disclosing your sexual orientation is a completely personal decision. There is no right or wrong answer to the question: 'Should I come out to a potential employer? And if so, when is the right time?' The decision to disclose your sexual orientation will depend on many elements, the most important of which will be you and what you are comfortable with, as well as the nature of the work you do.

It can be difficult, however, to hide your sexual orientation and it may not be the best thing to do in terms of your work. Recent research carried out by Stonewall (http://www.stonewall.org.uk/workplace/1473.asp#peak_performance) has shown that if people have a supportive workplace climate, with robust, inclusive policies they feel more comfortable to be themselves which then increases their productivity and performance.

Applications

There are both pros and cons to disclosing your sexual orientation in the application process, either through your CV or cover letter. Indeed, by including this information in your application, you are effectively 'outing' yourself to a prospective employer.

If you plan to disclose that you are lesbian or gay on an application form, you should ask yourself why it is relevant. Employers are interested in seeing specific examples that match the requirements and specifications they are looking for (i.e. commitment, reliability, teaching skills or being a member of an orchestra).

An employer will be interested in something like:

Treasurer - Lesbian and Gay Society. Responsible for: accounting; membership fees; balancing books for annual summer ball; budgeting; preparing books for auditing by the union treasurer; attending fortnightly committee meetings; negotiating with local companies for sponsorship.

They are less likely to be interested in:

Social Secretary - Lesbian and Gay Society. Responsible for: chatting to students at freshers' fair stand; showing them the best pubs and clubs; organising drinking competitions; arranging welcome parties at my flat.

Interviews

Much the same applies. Remember, if you do decide to use an example like the one above at an interview, it's possible that you may be asked a follow-up question. The interview is your chance to perform well and to show the recruiter your enthusiasm. You should try as much as possible to feel comfortable with the examples and the answers you will give. For instance, you may use your commitments within the LGBT society of your university to show some of the useful skills that you have acquired.

At the same time, always remember that an interview is a two-way process, and it is your chance to know more about the organisation, also in terms of how LGBT friendly it is. If you decide to let the recruiter know your sexual orientation, you could ask questions about the value of diversity in the organisation, or whether they have a support network for LGBT staff. If they don't, you can ask why.

An outright question, such as 'are you gay?' is extremely unlikely. As with any question of a personal nature, you may wish to ask for clarification as to the relevance of the question to the job.

Employment

Once in work, what you say, or don't say, about your sexual orientation is again up to you. You might consider your private life as private and separate from work or you might want to tell everyone at once because you have always done so. You might decide to tell your immediate colleagues first or you might want to tell your manager so you feel you have support from the top of the organisation.

Before you do anything, talk it over with someone. Ideally, this will be someone in work who understands the ethos of the organisation and whose judgment you trust. Finally, always remember that you should follow the path that will make you comfortable and allow you to perform well in the workplace.

Your rights

The Law

On 1 December 2003, the Employment Equality (Sexual Orientation) Regulations 2003, (www.opsi.gov.uk/si/si2003/20031661.htm) which ban discrimination on the grounds of sexual orientation in employment, came into force. The purpose of this piece of legislation is to outlaw unacceptable treatment.

The regulations relate to employment and training across England, Scotland and Wales, whatever the size of the organisation, both in the public and the private sector. The application and selection processes are also covered, as well as work-based benefits. A key concern for gay employees over the years has been that they may be teased, bullied or neglected. The regulations have made it far more explicit that discrimination, which results in harassment and victimisation, is illegal. The legislation also protects those people who are discriminated against because of the sexual orientation of the people with whom they associate – their family members and friends, as well as perceived sexual orientation.

Different Types of Discrimination

The legislation has defined three types of discrimination in the workplace:

- Direct discrimination, when you are treated less favourably than others on the basis of your sexual orientation.
- Indirect discrimination, when criteria or principles disadvantage people of a particular sexual orientation. For example, if an employer offers benefits only to heterosexual partners of employees, and not same-sex ones.
- Harassment, an unwanted conduct that violates a person's dignity, or creates an intimidating, hostile, degrading, humiliating or offensive working environment.

What to Do if you Have Been Discriminated Against or Harassed

If you feel that you have been discriminated against or harassed at work on the basis of your sexual orientation, you should firstly speak to someone in the organisation. Speak to your line manager, superior manager, or someone in the Human Resources office, tell them what has happened and ask them to take action. You can also talk to the trade unions, if you are member of one. Keep a written record of any harassment to show your employer.

If you cannot resolve the matter informally, you can submit a formal grievance to your employer. If you are not happy with the outcome of this, you can then submit an appeal. If you are not satisfied after having tried these different routes, you can then seek legal advice, with a view of taking your employer to an employment tribunal.

Useful information on this can be found at Stonewall (<http://www.stonewall.org.uk>). The charity also publishes guides on preventing the bullying and harassment of gay employees. Finally, DirectGov (www.direct.gov.uk) lists useful advice and ACAS (<http://www.acas.org.uk>) also offers help.

Top Tips

- **Know the organisation.** Do your research and find out about your potential employer. Read their website and check the organisation's position on diversity.
- **Be open-minded.** Do not just assume that some sectors will be more open-minded than others. Keep a positive attitude and be ready to have your stereotypes challenged.
- **Have a great CV.** Get it checked at your university careers service, and if you feel comfortable, include any involvement in an LGBT area that shows transferable skills you have acquired.
- **Be confident.** Whether you disclose your sexual orientation or not, just be yourself and remain positive during the recruitment process. Think about your unique set of experiences and skills, such as for example, dealing with preconceptions in a positive way.
- **Network.** Go to career events, especially those targeted at LGBT graduates, where you will get a chance to meet new people that might help you in your job search. Do not forget all the people you already know: family, friends, classmates, etc. Do not be shy and ask for advice.
- **Ask, ask, ask.** During an interview, take the opportunity to ask about the company's policies on diversity and whether they have any LGBT support staff.
- **Acknowledge** that discrimination exists but remember it can be challenged.
- **Identify other appropriate sources of support**, e.g. professional LGBT support groups, campaigning organisations and employment rights specialists.
- **Be out if you want to be.** Whether you decide to be 'out' or 'to stay in the closet', reflect over the pros and cons of disclosure. Do what makes you feel comfortable. Coming out involves risk taking, empathy, sensitivity and above all, leadership and principle. These are all qualities that intelligent employers should welcome.

Case Studies

Marc works as a consultant in an independent consultancy focusing on the public sector. He graduated from the London School of Economics and Sciences Po in Paris, following the Double Degree programme offered by these two institutions. After being awarded an MSc in International Affairs, Marc worked as an analyst in a large investment bank before starting his career in consulting.

I have always been open about my sexual orientation, both during my studies and at work. I found that my sexual orientation can be a great way to make new friends, for example through the LGBT society at university. Being honest and open about being gay helped me in establishing new relationships, both during my studies and at work.

As part of the initial training while working in the investment bank, I participated in a variety of courses in New York for two months. During these months in the USA, I found out about a fantastic support network for LGBT staff at the bank and I got involved in many activities. After I moved back to London, I didn't get involved with the LGBT staff support network here, as its members were far less active than in New York.

As I moved into consulting, I found that I am much happier with a small office environment, where I can be very open about my sexual orientation and feel very comfortable talking about it. Having local government authorities and councils as clients helps in feeling relaxed about my sexual orientation, due to the very inclusive environment there.

I think coming out is 'an everyday endeavour' and I think it might be easier to do it sooner, rather than later. I often mention my boyfriend in conversations with colleagues and being open and honest about it has resulted in more positive and accepting attitudes in other people as well. I would suggest that you do your research before joining an organisation and see if you would fit in its culture, also in terms of acceptance of LGBT people. It might take courage and strength to be open, but it is worth it and will make your life easier.

Peter studied on the four-year Master of Pharmacy programme at King's College in London. After university, he started working as a pharmacist for a large company.

While I was at university, I did not disclose my sexual orientation, especially during the first year. Coming out for me was a slow and gradual process. I started telling friends first, receiving in general a positive response, apart from a couple of people who took longer to accept it. I was not involved in the LGBT society or other activities at university, and looking back at it, I think I missed out on some great social opportunities.

When I started working, I disclosed my sexual orientation after a few months, and everyone was very supportive. At first I was hesitant and did not know what to do. I asked some friends for advice and I reflected on the pros and cons of coming out at work. In the end, I thought that being honest with my colleagues and my supervisors would pay off in terms of trust and confidence. Also, it would make it easier for me to talk about my weekends and the social activities I take part in.

I admit that I have been very lucky since I never encountered an episode of discrimination. This fact helped me in coming out not only with my friends and co-workers, but also with my line managers. Being honest is a risk, but I am very glad I decided to take it.

Coming out or not is a personal choice. I would suggest to students and graduates to be themselves and feel comfortable about disclosing (or not) their sexual orientation. You should reflect on the pros and cons of coming out and also wait for the right timing. There is no general advice or 'rules of thumb' that will suit everyone. You should think about your personal circumstances, and always remember that there are laws and institutions to protect you against discrimination and harassment.

Contacts and Resources

Jobs and Work

- ACAS, www.acas.org.uk/index.aspx?articleid=1461
- DirectGov, www.direct.gov.uk/en/Employment/ResolvingWorkplaceDisputes/DiscriminationAtWork/DG_10026540
- Equality and Diversity, www.wmin.ac.uk/page-886
- The Gay Business Association (GBA), www.gba.org.uk/
- Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Rights, www.tuc.org.uk/equality/index.cfm?mins=21&minors=21
- Trades Union Congress (TUC), www.tuc.org.uk/
- Workplace Equality Index, www.stonewall.org.uk/workplace/1477.asp

Advice, Policy and Research

- Equality and Human Rights Commission, www.equalityhumanrights.com
- Regard (National Organisation of Disabled Lesbians, Gay Men, Bisexuals and Transgendered People), www.regard.org.uk
- Stonewall, www.stonewall.org.uk

News

- Gay Times, www.gaytimes.co.uk
- The Pink Paper, www.pinkpaper.com

Reference

- Employment Equality (Sexual Orientation) Regulations 2003, www.opsi.gov.uk/si/si2003/20031661.htm
- Employment Equality (Sexual Orientation) (Amendment) Regulations 2003, www.opsi.gov.uk/si/si2003/20032827.htm