

Calgary gets "inclusive"

Diversity programs open the way for gays

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The scale and scope of diversity programming is widening as corporations begin to realize the full value of tapping into a wider range of groups in the workforce, developing programs specifically targeted to these groups, according to diversity leaders across Canada.

It's a trend that came as welcome news to Chris Post, a tax partner at KPMG's Calgary office. The accountant spent 20 years living in the closet and came out last year as openly gay, bringing a same-sex partner to the annual Christmas party for the first time.

"Certainly there was some reluctance and anxiety, but to my delight there has really been no negative reaction whatsoever," says Post. "I've received fantastic support from some of the most senior people."

What prompted Post, and a growing number of workers at KPMG, to come out was the launch of a support network the large accounting firm recently developed to provide support for gay and lesbian workers.

In a traditionally conservative industry, located in the most conservative major city in Canada -- Calgary -- Post had his reservations about how the move might affect his career.

He's not alone. A study conducted by Leger Marketing found 60 per cent of respondents believe revealing their sexual orientation at work can hurt their career. Another three-quarters felt employers fail to ensure gay and lesbian rights are respected in the workplace.

But the trend toward more inclusive, open workplaces isn't limited to the gay and lesbian community. Corporations like KPMG and several others in the financial industry say it's reflective of a move to a much broader definition of diversity.

"I'm certainly seeing a trend with my colleagues in diversity across the country that it is about inclusiveness in the workplace and less about the definitions set down in the (Employment Equity Act)," says Michael Bach, national director of diversity for KPMG.

Bach, who is also openly gay, says the company has made a concerted effort to address all aspects of diversity, including women, visible minorities, aboriginals, ethnicity and culture, people dealing with elder care, parents, disabilities and other areas.



CREDIT: Grant Black, Calgary Herald

Chris Post, a tax partner at KPMG's Calgary office, worked for 20 years before coming out as a gay man.

"I don't think you can run a large corporation in this day and age and only use legislation as you're guide," says Bach. "You need to look above and beyond."

Bell Canada has taken a similar stance on broadening the scope of diversity programs by addressing everything from age to religion to level of education to family status.

"We do embrace diversity and it's part of our corporate culture and an important part of our overall business strategy," says Jeff Meerman, a Bell spokesman.

He says managers routinely contact human resources to

access the company's diversity support programs, which include things such as a multi-denominational religious holiday calendars, online diversity training, newsletters and advisory committees that review the company's plans and policies.

There is a bottom line benefit to inclusion. A large study by gay rights advocacy group Stonewall Scotland found 36 per cent of gay employees will change careers if discrimination goes unaddressed and 55 per cent of gay workers facing discrimination report a negative impact on their productivity.

At the same time, gay employees who come out in the workplace earn about 50 per cent more than closeted employees, according to the study.

Calgary may seem an unlikely city for this trend to become apparent, but the recent success of the first OutGames in the city speaks volumes about how perceptions are changing across Canada, say organizers. It's just a sign of the times.

"We are experiencing more aspects of diversity than we ever have before," says Post.

Beyond their internal workforce, more companies have also been tapping into the buying power of the lucrative gay and lesbian demographic.

In the U.S., the gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered (GLBT) community spent more than \$640 billion in 2006, a number that is forecast to reach \$1 trillion by 2012.

The intense war for talent also gives companies another reason to focus on the trend in its workforce, says Bach.

"We are very concerned about the war for talent," says Bach. "You have to have a work environment that is inclusive for all and as attractive as possible to anybody and everybody," he says.

While some companies and industries have not yet taken this broader approach to diversity, Bach is betting it's just a matter of time as generations and values shift in coming years.

"Diversity is a living, breathing entity that changes with the times and you have to adapt to that," Bach says.

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