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Culture of openness boosts productivity

Accounting firm knows welcoming atmosphere has a positive impact on the bottom line

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What began as a small, informal group of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered people a few years ago has led to more communication and productivity at accounting firm KPMG.



TORY ZIMMERMAN/TORONTO STAR

Diversity director Michael Bach, right, helped start a support group at KPMG for his fellow gay and lesbian employees, such as senior director Corey Rosen.

The firm's Pride Group began about three years ago when Michael Bach, KPMG's director of diversity, and a few other gay and lesbian employees from Montreal, Toronto and Vancouver began to discuss how to get more representation in the organization.

"We now have around 50 members across the country," says Bach, who came out as gay when he was 16.

"We're still working on increasing that number because we know that there's about 3 per cent of the firm that self-identifies as lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgendered (LGBT). That came out of a recent survey that we did where we allowed people identify as to sexual orientation, but I would guess that that number is closer to 5 per cent and that there's a

good 2 per cent who won't identify, even on an anonymous survey."

The group's membership is spread among 11 of KPMG's 33 offices across Canada.

"We send out a quarterly newsletter to let people know what's going on in the different cities with respect to social or networking events," says Bach. "The newsletter also includes sharing experiences within the firm."

Most important, he says, is that it's an informal mentoring and support mechanism for people as they're coming out.

"Groups like this help people feel more comfortable about stepping out. It leads to engagement. It promotes people to be out in the workplace, because the cost of being in the closet actually costs the organization with the lack of productivity, people not being fully engaged in their jobs."

Bach says there is a mistaken belief that since the advent of same-sex marriage, Canada has become the land of milk and honey for the LGBT community. But just like racism and sexism, anti-gay comments have just gone underground.

"There definitely still exists bias toward LGBT people," he says. "We hear it in our offices and other organizations where jokes are made, comments that make people feel uncomfortable. It doesn't inspire people to come out when their co-workers are making derogatory jokes about their community."

Corey Rosen, KPMG's senior manager for international executive services, is also a member of the group, and says he hasn't experienced any problems with other employees.

"For some employees, it's comfortable for them to know they have backup if they receive any negative reaction," he says.

KPMG has several other employee support groups to foster diversity and understanding in the workplace.

One helps immigrant employees acclimatize to the Canadian business culture, another helps women and another helps parents of special-needs children. A new one is being created for the southeast Asian community.

The firm also maintains a mandatory web-based training program to encourage dialogue about diversity, ethnic and cultural issues.

And the company has launched a program for communications in the

workplace for managers. "It helps them understand human behaviour," Bach explains.

"It deals with subjects such as, is the person introverted or extroverted, and how things can influence them when they receive feedback. Or how people from different cultures will respond to feedback."

Bach says the Pride Group stresses that gays and lesbians are just as prevalent in accounting as in any other industry.

"I think the stereotype that gays and lesbians are hairdressers and decorators is long gone. I think LGBT people are in every aspect of life, be it accounting, law or medicine."