



Back to Gays still fear workplace bias

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Michael Bach "came out" at age 16 but was back in the closet – at work, at least – during his 20s.

Reflecting on that painful choice, Bach says there were moments when he feared losing his job.

"I really was concerned at times I was going to face issues of discrimination, that I would be rejected by my colleagues," he said. "And, in fact, I lived in the United States for several years and was worried I could be fired as a consequence."

By the late 1990s, Bach had reached a crossroads. He was working for George Smitherman, Ontario's first openly gay MPP.

"I took that as an example to say, 'I am going to live an authentic life,'" he said. "I realize I may find myself in situations where I am going to face overt discrimination, but at the same time, I am also going to be able to sleep well at night."

Now 38, Bach is the national director of diversity, equity and inclusion at KPMG LLP. He believes workplace discrimination is "still prevalent" for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender individuals despite human-rights protection in Canada. Quantifying the exact depth of the problem is tricky because it is not known how many really fall into that category.

A study, jointly released yesterday by Catalyst and the Bank of Nova Scotia, takes a crack. Entitled "Building LGBT-Inclusive Workplaces: Engaging Organizations and Individuals in Change," it suggests workplace barriers lead to restricted career advancement for LGBT employees. It also argues stunted growth hurts companies' overall productivity and profitability. While the research fails to quantify the exact "bottom-line benefits" to businesses, executives insist there is a business case for diversity.

Bach and others participated in a panel discussing the report yesterday.

"LGBT-inclusive workplaces can increase employee engagement by allowing employees to be authentic and spend less time self-editing. That reduces costs by decreasing turnover," said Deborah Gillis, Catalyst's vice-president for North America. "It can also potentially increase revenue by encouraging LGBT employees to help the organization tap new markets and enhance customer loyalty."

For its part, Scotiabank sees a "definite correlation" between employee engagement, customer loyalty and profitability, said Cory Garlough, vice-president of global employment solutions.

The report is based on two surveys. The first focused on career advancement in corporate Canada with more than 17,000 respondents from 43 different companies. About 466 people identified as LGBT. The second survey centred on LGBT inclusion, reflecting the views of some 232 LGBT individuals. While qualitative findings have no margin of error, quantitative data are considered accurate nine times out of 10.

Among its key findings, LGBT women reported "less friendly workplaces" than their male counterparts. It also found LGBT women are "out" to 50 per cent of their workgroup, whereas men disclosed to 72 per cent of their colleagues.

Esther Dryburgh, 36, an executive with IBM Canada Ltd., "struggled" to come out at work because she was worried about climbing the corporate ladder. "I work in the financial services sector. It is very male-dominated, so I was trying to prove that being a woman wasn't going to actually impact my career."

She came out five years ago during a speech to IBM's top executives. Now one of them, she contends an inclusive workplace builds loyalty, saying, "One of the quotes my partner made once I came out at IBM: 'You'll never leave. They are more supportive than your family.'"



IBM's Esther Dryburgh, left, and KPMG's Michael Bach were among panel members discussing a study making the case that workplace diversity benefits the bottom line. (June 3, 2009)

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