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How liberal is your office?

A survey shows that between 6 and 8 per cent of people who work in corporate settings identify themselves as being lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender, prompting the question: What biases do they face?

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When a study conducted by Catalyst on visible minorities in the workplace turned up 466 respondents who self-identified as LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender), the non-profit group dedicated to promoting an inclusive workplace knew they were on to something.

"There isn't a lot of data on LGBT available in the corporate community," said Deborah Gillis, VP North America for Catalyst, where expanding opportunities for women has been a focus since the organization was founded in the 1960s.

With that survey, which had looked at career advancement experiences, they saw an opportunity to explore advancement issues in the LGBT community.

With the support of Scotiabank, Catalyst completed a qualitative survey of another 232 LGBT corporate employees and compiled a report based on both surveys.

What they saw came as no surprise to Gillis.

"We think that women continue to be underrepresented, even though they make up 50 per cent of the workplace and the majority at university," she said.

"So it's no surprise that these communities face a struggle."

One of the points raised by respondents is the lack of understanding and awareness of the LGBT community, contributing to an environment where they were faced with homophobic comments and jokes.

This definitely creates barriers for that community, said Michael Bach, national director of diversity, equity and inclusion, at KPMG LLP (Canada), part of a global network of professional firms providing audit, tax and advisory services.

An adviser on the study and an openly gay male, Bach believes the research finally gives a voice to this community and exposes the covert bias in the corporate sector.

In Canada, he points out, even though we have same-sex marriage and domestic partner benefits, "what you can't legislate is opinion."

Sexual orientation, while not a water-cooler topic in the workplace, is intrinsic in everyday life, Bach says. In an office setting, for instance, someone might have a photograph of their opposite-gender spouse on display. Is it alright in that workplace for an LGBT individual to display a photograph of their partner?

"It's not talking about sex," Bach said, "but about having a workplace that's safe and inclusive so you can talk about what you did on the weekend. If my partner and I went off to a bed and breakfast in the wine country, I want to be able to share that.

"If I deny that because I'm afraid of homophobia, then I'm going to have to lie to you. Or, if I have to correct myself in terms of the use of pronouns, the tension and fear that comes with it is enormous. It creates a really almost hostile work environment because you're so stressed out."

Through self-identification surveys, it is estimated that somewhere between 6 to 8 per cent of people who work in corporate settings are LGBT.

"We are seeing people who are more comfortable with self identifying, especially if it's anonymous," Bach said.

Another difficulty when an employee wants to be honest about their orientation is the ongoing concerns about coming out in every new situation, whether it's their boss, team, new client and so on.

"For them, it's not a one-time decision," Gillis said. "Does the environment allow them to do that?"

The dilemma they must face is the importance they place on being their authentic self and combating role models versus concerns about what this might mean for their careers.

"The barriers are very similar to women in a sense," Gillis said.

But while women report feeling excluded from the old boys' network, these respondents are excluded from what might be called "the straight old boy's network."

That could be the reason why the study shows male gays feel the most accepted, Bach says.

"They have male privilege. It doesn't surprise me that lesbians face a double bias, of gender and sexual orientation."

The ramification of hiding the truth of their sexual orientation extends beyond the office, Gillis points out.

"Think about their mothers or fathers. Can they have a portrait of their own son or daughter on their desk at work? Can they say, 'I attended the wedding of my daughter and her partner?' These are broader issues for businesses to grapple with."

It comes back, she says, to that question of an employer creating an inclusive environment.

"Everyone needs to feel they can bring themselves to work and not feel they must self edit."

Once you've managed this, then employees will contribute fully, the study shows.

"Once an employee feels included, their career satisfaction commitment to the organization increases," Gillis said. "This is a key driver to the success of a company."

"And not only does the employee contribute more when they're happier at work, she said. When you're happier at work and committed, you feel supported you are also more inclined to talk in a positive way about your employer. Employee and customer loyalty are the

result."

Bach agrees.

"One woman was so well received in coming out she is so loyal to the workplace that did this, IBM. It's a safe place to work."

This will have an impact how others feel about the company, too, he said.

"I'm going to go back and talk about my work experience positively to my friends and family, who would absolutely make decisions based on the way an organization treats me."

Companies have a responsibility to educate themselves, he said, not just because it's good for business but because it's a basic human right that everyone works in a safe, non-discriminatory environment.

"If an organization is not presenting a safe space for people in terms of their gender, ethnicity and physical ability, they're losing out on talent."

For Gillis, the fact Scotiabank sponsored the research and that it was released in the heart of the financial capital of Canada with representatives from some of the largest businesses in the country shows that corporate Canada is seeking to understand diversity.

"Awareness," she said, "is a first step to action."

To download the study, go on line at www.catalyst.org

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