

# The Asset of Diversity

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*Canada's LGBT community still faces significant barriers in the workplace. Too bad for employers, since fostering diversity is sound business.*

Even if your business isn't struggling to stay afloat, you're looking at every budget line very carefully. Why should you care about investing in diversity right now? Amidst widespread uncertainty, diversity may not appear to be a business priority, but it is a key component of a successful strategy as companies seek to create a competitive edge in a highly globalized economy. Organizations should therefore develop practices that leverage diversity, foster inclusion, and increase awareness, accountability, and action.

A particular area of concern remains the full inclusion of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) community in the workplace. According to a recent Catalyst report, [Building LGBT-Inclusive Workplaces: Engaging Organizations and Individuals in Change](#), "LGBT individuals represent up to 21 per cent of the population." Yet Canada, a country with legislated human rights protections for LGBT individuals and a supportive legal climate, is still home to significant workplace barriers for LGBT employees. One lesbian woman was quoted as saying that in her workplace, "There was active or tacit discrimination, homophobia, and harassment, in which LGBT employees were forced to be closeted or silent in the face of abuse. This is very stressful, and has negative effects on health and productivity."

More frequently, the issue is not that of overt discrimination, but is rooted in a lack of knowledge or awareness of the LGBT community. This often leads to a reliance on stereotypes, which can lead to a form of subtle yet potent discrimination; thus, creating a workplace culture in which LGBT employees don't feel comfortable being themselves. Catalyst quoted another woman as saying, "As a lesbian woman, I have sometimes had to fend off occasional stereotypes of lesbian women as all butch and muscular and ungainly—I'm none of these."

The challenge presented by stereotyping is faced by all minority groups, but why should a business care? In order to create a work environment that attracts and retains the best talent, the company culture should be one in which employees can bring their "whole self" to work. This means accepting religion, dress, and something as basic as a packed lunch. Employees who can bring their whole self to work are more productive and will draw on all of their cognitive and emotional resources to solve problems.

Teamwork research done over the years indicates that diverse teams are capable of developing higher-quality solutions to puzzle tasks than homogeneous teams. In today's economy, no company can afford not to be seeking the best, the brightest, and the most diverse workforce to better meet client expectations and improve productivity.

Organizational leaders who understand the broader bottom-line benefits of diversity should be eager to implement LGBT-inclusion programs. LGBT-inclusive workplaces can increase employee engagement by allowing employees to be authentic and spend less effort on “self-editing”; reduce costs by decreasing turnover, absenteeism, and presenteeism; and increase revenue generation by encouraging LGBT employees to help the organization tap new markets and increase customer loyalty. Indeed, an LGBT-inclusive workplace benefits the entire business.

Something as simple as including LGBT colleagues in day-to-day conversations, as you would any other colleague, will help you to contribute. Be open to learning more about the LGBT community and help eliminate stereotypes. And, if you are asking why it matters to you, stop for a moment and imagine what it would feel like going to work if you didn’t even feel comfortable enough to put a picture of your husband or your wife on your desk. Imagine fearing this would lead to your colleagues treating you differently, or that it might hinder your chances of a promotion.

It’s important to note that everyone has a role to play in contributing to a more inclusive work environment. As a manager or senior leader, you are a key cultural-influencer with an ability to set a tone for the entire office. This tone should lead to a workplace in which LGBT employees are comfortable and feel safe coming out, if they so choose. Partnering with organizations like [Pride at Work Canada](#) can help to send a message that your organization supports its LGBT people and provides them with the opportunity and courage to come out.

Ensure that LGBT employees have access to and can benefit from your organization’s programs and policies, and that all employees understand that a zero-tolerance policy with regards to homophobia will be enforced.

Just as importantly, education can help to improve awareness and eliminate stereotypes. There are many organizations, such as Global Learning and the Finan Diversity Group, which can help organizations address training needs to create that awareness.

This is why KPMG is partnering with the Women’s Executive Network to organize a special event that will feature personal stories from such speakers as Ontario Education Minister Kathleen Wynne. Our goal is to provide a platform for discussion and to raise awareness of the challenges that LGBT individuals continue to face in the workplace.

In today’s economy, you’re too busy to not get the best out of your team and your colleagues. We can each contribute to a more diverse, inclusive, and productive workplace.