

Opening the door on corporate Canada's closet

Last Updated: Friday, June 26, 2009 / 3:11 PM ET [Comments93](#)[Recommend88](#)
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Nino Montagnese's career moment of truth came eight years ago.

The then-sales executive at a Toronto-based vacation travel company had just split with his long-time love interest, a change that negatively affected his work performance.

The problem was that Nino's partner was male. But the 32-year-old native of Castlemore, about 45 kilometres northwest of Toronto, had not told anyone at work that he was gay.

"I just felt I wouldn't have been able to grow at the company," said Montagnese, who asked that the name of his former employee be withheld.



Nino Montagnese, vice-president of marketing and sales for Air Canada Vacations, says a personal crisis forced him to tell his employer he was gay. (Air Canada Vacations)

As he became more distracted at work, Montagnese decided to explain to his vice-president why he was having trouble on the job.

The vice-president's response was a "what can I do for you" rather than the nervous silence that Montagnese feared.

"It was like a weight had been lifted from my shoulders," he said.

Montagnese is now vice-president of marketing and sales for Air Canada Vacations, the leisure travel arm of Air Canada, and said that he couldn't imagine hiding his sexual orientation anymore.

Montagnese admits that if he hadn't faced a personal crisis almost a decade ago, he might still be in the closet in the workplace — just like a number of his acquaintances.

"I have gay friends [with prominent companies] and people in their workplaces still don't know about them," he said.

Personal (un)comfort zone

That is the contradiction gays and lesbians can face in corporate Canada, said Michael Bach, director of diversity, equity and inclusion at KPMG, a large Toronto-based business consultancy.

Essentially, Bay Street has become more open to gays and lesbians in the past decade, says Bruce McDonald, co-founder of the Toronto-based Canadian Gay And Lesbian Chamber of Commerce.

"Things in Canada are going very well," he said.

But, the atmosphere in the corridors of financial power is still not open enough to make those in the lesbian, gay, transgender and bisexual (LGTB) communities comfortable about disclosing their sexual orientation, KPMG's Bach said.

"The reality is that people are not out at the workplace," he said.



Michael Bach, director of diversity, equity and inclusion for KPMG, says many gays and lesbians are still not divulging their sexual orientation at work. (KPMG)

Years ago, firms shunned any involvement in events such as Pride Toronto, which occurs in June and includes awards recognizing gay and lesbian accomplishment on the job, art shows, music

performances, parties and a large parade.

Now, more companies are sponsoring Pride events, according to a count on the Pride Toronto website.

With banks, beer companies and business consultancies leading the charge, a number of corporations either have sent volunteers or sponsored floats in the parade and plan to help at other events during the weeklong celebration.

Another group — PrideAtWork — now counts Home Depot as its latest sponsor, says Bach, who is co-chair of the group that helps gays and lesbians in the workplace.

Despite all the corporate goodwill, experts say prejudice is still ingrained in many organizations.

"All the -isms didn't go away. They went underground," Bach said.

It is about jokes at the coffee machine that assume all the participants are interested in the opposite sex; it is the Monday morning stories about weekend dinner parties during which the gay person stays quiet; it is the desk barren of personal photos in order to avoid awkward questions.

"We still don't have the tools to discuss [how to promote equality of sexual-orientation in the workplace], says Bruce Goudy, Canadian leader of the Beyond program, which tries to ease workplace issues for gays and lesbians at Ernst and Young.

Goudy and Bach pointed out that workplace discrimination does not manifest itself in overt refusals by management to promote gay and lesbian executives.

Instead, the jokes at the water cooler and the inability to talk about one's partner leads to a feeling among gays and lesbians that talking openly about their orientation would be a career limiting move, they said.

13 still equals zero

Goudy says he has seen estimates that between six and 13 per cent of the members of Canada's workforce are same-sex oriented.

"[But] there is not one openly gay or lesbian person who is a CEO of a Fortune 500 company," Bach said.

Bach says breaking down barriers in the workplace is difficult because, while racial and religious differences are sometime obvious, sexual orientation usually is not.

"It does become a challenge," he said.

A study released in June by the Catalyst group, a Toronto-based non-profit organization that promotes diversity in the workplace, was one of the first Canadian attempts to get a better understanding of the barriers faced by gays and lesbians on the job.

The Catalyst report confirmed that gay and lesbian stereotypes do not mesh with the view of a successful executive that straight people sometimes hold.

"A mismatch between LGBT stereotypes and those of successful leaders may also cause LGBT employees to be overlooked for important opportunities," Catalyst noted.

Even this well-considered study was only able to survey 466 people who identified themselves as LGBT out of a total sample of 17,908.

(The Catalyst survey was designed to elicit answers about gay and lesbian issues, not to act as a representative sample across all Canadian business. Thus, the usual restrictions concerning sample size and confidence limits that affect polls do not apply.)

Still, the Catalyst report noted in its limited poll that less than 75 per cent of gay men had come out at their companies and 50 per cent of women were public about their sexual orientation.

The cost to companies

For companies, ignoring gay and lesbian employees can result in real economic costs, Goudy says.

First of all, placing social barriers in the way of executive advancement means that competent gay and lesbian employees get stuck in dead-end jobs, he said.

Worse still for the company, these workers could leave for firms that are more accepting of same-sex employees, Goudy said.

Gays and lesbians have started to get recognition that they are important consumers. It is estimated that by the year 2011, gays and lesbians will buy an estimated \$835 billion US worth of goods and services, according to Witeck-Combs Communications.

Thus, firms that promote diversity in their workplace have a better chance at accessing this growing stream of cash, Bach noted.

Executive efforts

Getting rid of workplace prejudice against gays and lesbians is more difficult than removing barriers to racial minorities, Goudy says.

"Communication is the key [to solving the problem]," he said.

Especially important, Goudy says, is getting senior executives to make their workplaces "gay friendly."

The Toronto-Dominion Bank gets high marks for its efforts in the diversity area, Bach said.

In the past five years, Ed Clark, the president and chief executive officer of TD Bank, has pushed aggressively to remove barriers for gays and lesbians at the bank.

"Ed is a leading supporter of TD's Employee Pride Network and has been active in events organized by the network," wrote Paul Douglas, TD's executive vice-president of commercial banking, and chair of the bank's diversity leadership council subcommittee, in 2007 in the Ivey Business Journal at the University of Western Ontario.

Bach and Goudy say it is important for straight employees to realize that the worker in the next cubicle or down the hall might be gay or lesbian. Thus, when they make inappropriate jokes or comments, people do take offence, they said.

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[Tony 42](#) wrote:Posted 2009/06/29

at 10:21 AM ETSad as it is, bigotry toward gay people is alive and well in Canada. Just read some of these posts. Disappointing.

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[Shifty Calhoun](#) wrote:Posted 2009/06/29

at 9:51 AM ETGoudy says he has seen estimates that between six and 13 per cent of the members of Canada's workforce are same-sex oriented.

Given that Dan Savage (a prominent sex columnist and homosexual rights advocate) says the American gay population is between 2 and 3 percent, I have to question the above "estimates".

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[DudleyDooright](#) wrote:Posted 2009/06/29

at 8:54 AM ETThere are so many more important issues! When will the gay and lesbian "community" stop whining for attention based on who they're sleeping with? Nobody cares who I sleep with. Know why? Because I'm not talking about it. It's private. I would far rather be recognized for what I have accomplished.

What I would like to see is are groups called:

"Gays and Lesbians Against Child Poverty"

or

"Rainbow Alliance to Eliminate Leprosy"

Put all that energy and enthusiasm to work for a good cause, people!

Nobody cares who you're sleeping with when you're accomplishing something good.

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[Pete Trudeau](#) wrote: Posted 2009/06/29

at 8:16 AM ET Another non issue brought to light. I'll get my parade costume ready!

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[Platonic mojo](#) wrote: Posted 2009/06/29

at 8:00 AM ET To Zacker05(part 2),

you said: "As for the 45 year old "straight" man in your explanation, I would suggest that this hypothetical person has been gay his whole life and has finally come to terms with the fact that he could no longer live a lie."

I would say that in some cases this might be true.. but why would you assume it the case for everyone? Does this not create a problem for explaining the existence of bi people or people who through their lives switch between both kinds of relationships? IT might even be the case that in some cases they might have convinced themselves that they have always been gay as a reaction to both the religious bigots that say they can switch at the turn of a light, and the gay community that educates them that they "might" have been born that way. Maybe they were, maybe they werent. Id rather not put sexuality in a box.... I thought that breaking down such boxes was they very point of glbt rights movements.... Personally I dont see myself as being born straight.

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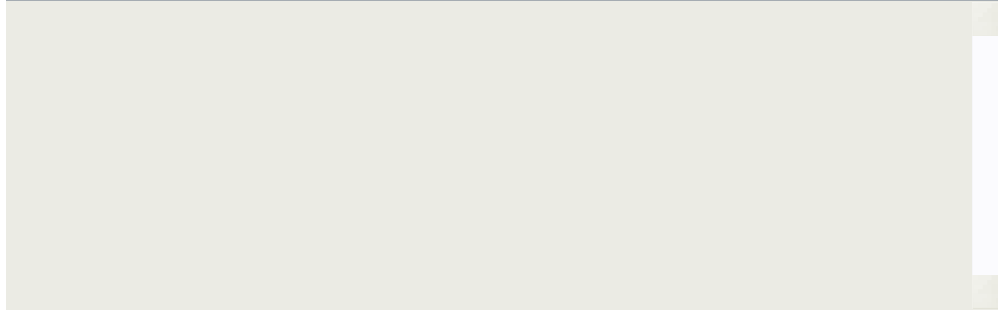
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