

GAY, LESBIAN, BISEXUAL, TRANSGENDERED

The invisible minority

Staying in the closet can be toxic for gay or lesbian employees. The solution is recognition and support that comes from the top down

BY DIANE JERMYN

Five years ago, when Michael Bach began working as an IT adviser at the Toronto office of KPMG LLP, a Canada-wide accounting and professional services firm, he felt very alone in the organization as the only openly gay man in his area.

"In an organization of over 5,000, I didn't think that I could be the only one," Mr. Bach says. He credits KPMG with encouraging him from the start to be "out" within the organization when it came to LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered/transidentified) inclusion.

"The challenge to being LGBT is that we're the invisible minority," Mr. Bach says. "People don't naturally assume that you might not be straight, and because of that people might find themselves in an environment where someone is telling homophobic jokes or making comments that create an uncomfortable work environment."

"You can't necessarily see if a person is LGBT, so you don't know if the comments you're making are hurtful. What that does is compound the fear that coming out will be met with hostility and alienation. The consequence of that is that you just don't come out."

Having worked in the United States for many years where LGBT employee resource groups and networks were quite active, Mr. Bach felt that was something lacking in the firm. So after about six

months, he became the founding chair of pride@kpmg, a resource group for social support, mentoring and networking for LGBT people at the company.

Founding that group, along with six others, propelled Mr. Bach into the public eye within the firm, getting him the attention of the CEO and management committee. He approached them with the idea that if they were serious about diversity, they should put some resources behind it – and he wanted the job.

So they sent him away to write a business case, and it was unanimously approved by the management committee and senior partner. Now as national director of diversity, equity and inclusion for KPMG Canada, the role he created and the first person employed by the firm in diversity, he's responsible for the design, strategy and execution of everything to do with diversity in the Canadian firm.

"I'm not going to hide who I am or be ambiguous about it," Mr. Bach says. "I don't want to work for a company that doesn't want to have me for who I am or that isn't inclusive. KPMG fits the bill."

The company is one of about 12 out of this year's 45 winning diversity employers that specifically mentioned their LGBT people, according to Richard Yerema, editor of Canada's Top 100 Employers for Mediaworld Canada Inc., which oversees the selection of Canada's Top Diversity Employers. KPMG has been a leader in diversity



Michael Bach is the founding chair of pride@kpmg, a resource group for LGBT staff at KPMG. Today he is the company's national director of diversity, equity and inclusion. KEVIN VAN PAASSEN/THE GLOBE AND MAIL

A lot of issues around sexual awareness and gender identity come from people's fear of saying something wrong.

KPMG employee Michael Bach

issues, creating a national diversity advisory board last year, chaired by senior partner and CEO Bill Thomas, to advise on their Canada-wide strategy, and launching a revamped diversity, equity and inclusion intranet site that includes toolkits to help employees start new people networks, such as

a new employee group for Muslims.

Mr. Bach says it's important to have an organization formalize something. It sends a strong message that the groups matter as a population within the organization, especially when the message is sent from the top down. He's only had one discriminatory incident while working at KPMG, when a colleague, hostile toward him because of his sexual orientation, refused to get on an elevator with him. Mr. Bach brought the issue to the HR department and the company responded instantly with a reprimand for the employee. The man subsequently left the firm, Mr. Bach says, because his attitude was not in line with the values of the organiz-

ation.

"I've always admired the firm for taking that stand," Mr. Bach says.

Mr. Bach grew up in Toronto but didn't come out at work until he turned 30, when he worked for George Smitherman, the first openly gay man in Ontario's legislature.

"When I worked for a bank in the United States in the mid-nineties, it was a fake space," says Mr. Bach, who remained closeted back then for a number of reasons, the main one being fear for his job, a situation he describes as incredibly stressful and demeaning. "Sexual orientation wasn't really a topic of conversation. I was really living a contradiction in that I was not out in the workplace yet I was volunteering for all sorts of organizations in the gay and lesbian community."

At KPMG, sexual orientation and gender identification are topics included in the mandatory diversity training.

"It's very freeing to be able to go to work every day and talk about my same gender spouse in the same way that others talk about their spouses," Mr. Bach says. "My partner and I are getting married this summer, so what that means is that I can spend five minutes talking about that and feel like I'm part of the team – like I matter – and then do my job. I don't have to think about changing pronouns or not engaging my colleagues with my outside life."

Mr. Bach says pride@kpmg members and others who are self-identified as LGBT are liv-

ing across the country from Atlantic Canada to southwestern Ontario to Prince George, B.C. The first partner to come out after they started pride@kpmg was in Calgary.

"You'd be amazed at what a little education can do," Mr. Bach says. "A lot of issues around sexual awareness and gender identity come from people's fear of saying something wrong. So we tackle it in a direct, matter-of-fact manner, as we would do educational awareness about skilled immigrants. That sets a tone of respect and legitimacy. We're not giggling or joking about it. We want to make sure people are prepared so that everyone is comfortable."

Why does it matter so much? People want to feel that they matter, Mr. Bach says. They need to be counted and acknowledged that they are just as important as anybody else.

"Our diversity profile tool tells us that about four to five per cent of our people identify themselves as LGBT," Mr. Bach says. "People who are not LGBT may also be affected as they may have a sibling, friend or relative who is. My mother would never work for an organization where she couldn't talk proudly about her gay son."

"It's really about creating a healthier work environment that includes and respects people. I know so many people that have said, because of this, I've brought my partner to a Christmas dinner or event. You don't have to feel like you're hiding a dirty little secret."

» Special to The Globe and Mail

FROM PAGE 1 » LAW

Law firms losing talent – and money – as women depart

"Even if you're on a restricted-hours arrangement, it's never going to be a 9-to-5 job," Ms. Gudas said. "We don't make widgets, we don't make pieces of plastic. We provide advice. And advice is a global thing, it's an around-the-clock thing."

While women now account for more than half of Canada's law school graduates, they make up only around 25 per cent of partners at Blakes, the law firm says, a number similar to most other major Canadian law firms. Remedying this is not just a human-rights issue: It affects the firms' bottom line.

Not only are firms missing out on talent that heads elsewhere, they are losing money. When a fourth-year partner-track associate lawyer leaves a firm, according to a 2005 esti-

mate from Catalyst Canada, it means a \$315,000 loss due to the costs of training and recruitment.

Blakes employment lawyer Holly Reid, 34, is on maternity leave with a three-month-old baby boy. She already has a three-year-old girl. When she returned to work in Blakes' Toronto office from her first maternity leave, she was allowed to work just four days a week, and she plans to do this again. But she knows of other women who start off in corporate law and then leave before having kids, assuming the two worlds are incompatible.

She acknowledges that with both partners working, life will still be no picnic, no matter what her law firm's flexible work policies are. Having co-workers who understand the stresses she is under helps, she



Aldona Gudas returned to work at Blake Cassels after securing the promise of reduced work hours. JOHN MORSTAD FOR THE GLOBE AND MAIL

says. For example, when she has had to run home and pick up a sick kid from daycare, fellow lawyers are willing to pitch in.

"The policies are great," Ms. Reid said. "... I think that they're very important because

obviously it shows the firm's commitment, and it can produce sort of a cultural change. But I think at the end of the day from my perspective it's really about having the support of the people you work with on a day-to-day basis."

A 'THINK TANK' ON WOMEN'S ISSUES

A 2008 report by the Law Society of Upper Canada warned that women were "leaving private practice in droves" because the profession had failed to face up to the reality of having more women practising law.

The report made a number of recommendations, including urging firms to continue to bring in maternity leave programs and flexible work arrangements, provide extra networking opportunities for women and to provide mentors for women with an aim to increasing their number in leadership roles.

The report also called for the establishment of a kind of think tank on the issue, called the Justicia project. So far, Blakes and more than 45 Ontario law firms have signed up for Justicia, which is meant to design best practices and common standards for programs meant to attract and retain women in the profession.

Participating law firms will also track demographic data about their work forces in order to measure progress in the retention and promotion of women.

» Jeff Gray



Diversity & Inclusion

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Diversity and inclusion can be defined in many different ways. What does it mean to us?

Diversity and inclusion is a commitment to recognize and appreciate the variety of backgrounds and characteristics that make individuals unique, and to provide a work environment that promotes and celebrates individual and collective achievement.

These unique backgrounds and characteristics may include a person's culture, ethnicity, family background, religious beliefs, gender, sexual orientation, gender identity, education, age or generation, languages spoken, marital status, physical, mental or learning disabilities, hobbies, interests, beliefs and affiliations.

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