

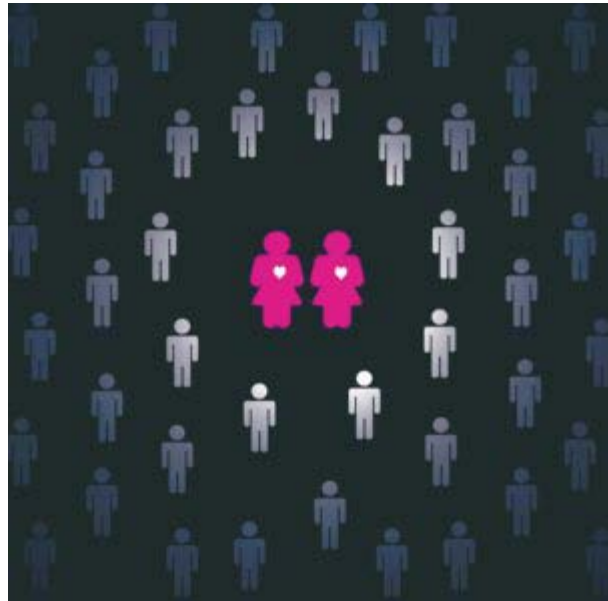
Is it OK to be gay at work?

By Jason Rhyno Date November 4, 2010 [job/life](#)

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It's difficult to answer 'No, it isn't okay to be out at work' when many of the world's largest companies are devoting mass quantities of money, resources, and people to, not only sexual diversity, but diversity in general. And they are proud of this fact, raising a vibrant rainbow flag underneath their own logo. From accounting firms to technology companies, our big corporations are marching in the parade. Even CSIS dropped in at this year's Pride Parade in Toronto — and they weren't even undercover.

Yet it's also difficult to answer 'Yes, it's okay to be out at work' when there is still an unnerving amount of [gay youth suicides](#); when a New York (New York?) [candidate for governor](#) remarks that he doesn't want children "...brainwashed into thinking that homosexuality is an equally valid and successful option — it isn't." Not to mention a [homophobic Tweet](#) from an [Olympic gold medalist](#), or the 'discharge' of [First Lieutenant Dan Choi](#), a former infantry officer in the US Army, after he came out during a news interview. At the time of writing this article, a federal US judge deemed ['Don't Ask, Don't Tell'](#) unconstitutional, [ordering an injunction](#) stopping the enforcement of the policy; a policy which the former US soldier pointed out directly conflicts with the Honour Code soldiers are taught at military academy: don't lie. 'Don't Ask, Don't Tell' forces you to lie, he said in an interview, and "hiding and lying aren't army values."



Aspects of our culture seem to say one thing, while the policies of democratic institutions say another. Individuals are equally confused about the subject. During an editorial meeting when discussing this story, a colleague said, "Oh, I don't think that belongs at work." This was odd, especially considering that this was the same person who, weeks before, pointed out that when people say 'That's so gay,' what they really mean is 'That's stupid.' After asking what, exactly, she meant by 'doesn't belong at work,' she responded by asking, "Well, why is it important?" It was a good question. And a good place to start.

"From an organizational perspective, we as employers are looking for our people to be as engaged in their work as possible," explains Michael Bach, director of diversity at [KPMG](#). "There are lots of studies that show engaged employees are more productive and therefore organizations are more profitable. It affects so many aspects of the way we function as organizations when our people are engaged, and there are many studies that show if somebody has to leave something at the door — and that can be anything, but specifically their sexual orientation or gender identity or expression — if they have to deny that in any way, then they are not engaged in their work. So really, it's ultimately about our productivity."

For companies, everything ultimately comes down to the bottom line, and having a strong image as a champion of diversity, especially here in North America, allows companies to be seen as open and welcoming, making them all the more attractive to young grads. But it begs the question, how much of this is simply PR?

Bach, who is frequently asked by other companies to consult on diversity strategies, and maintains a blog titled [Diversity Dude](#), acknowledges that "there are some organizations that it is lip service, but I can also say there

are an equal number of organizations where its not. I'm a firm believer in making sure that the culture is up to speed before we start talking about it externally." For Bach, if an organization hires a contingent of people from diverse backgrounds without ensuring that their culture is open, it will backfire. "Make sure your culture is open and inclusive and welcoming, and then go to market with it. But until you do the work internally, you should not try to broadcast something that's just not true."

[Xerox](#) has maintained an LGBT group for the past 20 years, called [GALAXe](#). Marc-Antoine Saumier, president of GALAXe's Montreal chapter, says that the message of inclusivity is voiced internally as well as externally. This is important as "if there is any discrimination to any LGBT employees, you have to talk about it. If you don't talk about it, the policies have no way of being applied." Xerox uses an internal website to foster conversation by posting information on Pride Month and other diversity initiatives. "They are sharing information with the general public at Xerox about why diversity is important and why we have these policies."

LGBT groups like GALAXe and pride@KPMG not only spread knowledge to other employees, they also provide a host of other services, like mentoring programs, scholarships, leadership programs and networking opportunities. For Lucy Zhao, president of [Out on Bay Street](#), an organization created by MBA students, networking was one of the main motivators for her to become involved, but it also helped fill the gap between graduating and working. "I was in marketing at the time so it was a really good fit, and I was really enthusiastic about exploring the community, especially as a woman in the corporate gay world. There isn't that many of us, and I wanted to build up that community and show that there are lesbians in the corporate world — we don't all do social science!"

More to the point, however, these organizations create a space where people can be themselves. "If you're thinking about how you're going to have to lie when you're at work, and you're there for 80 percent of your day, it's going to be extremely stressful on you and your life," says Zhao. This type of stress can lead a closeted person to have health issues, cautions Bach, and it hinders career progression. "You're not going to be engaged and because you're not engaged, there's a chance you're going to miss out on opportunities," he warns, "because people won't see you as connected to the job."

While Saumier was never closeted, he did avoid breaching the subject at work. "My career at Xerox was working very hard but not talking that much about my personal life, up till about 2006, at which point I participated at a conference in Montreal during the [Outgames](#) called Out for Business. That really opened my eyes, hearing other companies and executives talking about their experiences being out, and I said 'this talks to me and I should be out at work, as well.'" He discovered that his colleagues never had an issue with him being gay, just that they didn't know how to ask about it. "That's also another thing that is very important: people don't talk about it because they don't know how to ask the question."

"It's a message and conversation that many straight, white male employees have a hard time accessing. I think that a lot of straight, white, able bodied men don't understand the privilege that they've experienced in their lives," says Bach, who encourages straight, white, able-bodied men (SWAMS) to ask the stupid question or say the stupid thing, and not be embarrassed by it. "If someone says something that is inappropriate, I don't chastise them, I don't get angry. I think it is an opportunity for me to help someone understand better." Saumier agrees, adding that "we can take it in our own hands to share, and it is not to impose it on them, but it's to include them in our conversation."

Bach also points out that "when you look at the word 'diversity' in the dictionary, it simple means 'different,' it doesn't mean 'different from straight, white, able-bodied men'. So, in the grand scheme of things, and this is my approach, it's about everybody. Its making sure that everyone has the ability to succeed and that there aren't things getting in the way."

So is it okay to be out at work? Yes, but there are still geographic areas and sectors that are catching up to the current cultural make-up of society. The important thing is to do research, advises Paul Bowman, a career counsellor at Queen's University. He recommends taking a look at [Canada's Top 100 Employers](#), published annually in [The Globe and Mail](#). But, he says, "There is the official party line of inclusivity and diversity and equality in the workplace; then there is actual practice." [LinkedIn](#) is a great resource to connect with people in those firms because often there will be an LGBT employee group within that firm. Get the names of the HR people and contact them directly, and ask them about their programs or for the names of people you can potentially contact for an informational interview. This, stresses Bowman, is a critical piece of the research, so don't be shy.

You can also contact groups like [Pride at Work Canada](#) or Out on Bay Street, which often have campus reps, and respond quickly to emails (we know first hand). Check with your school to see what resources are available. And remember, as Marc-Antoine Saumier says, "Once you are comfortable, be yourself, everywhere." *jp*