

Empowering employees to stand up and be counted

Attitudes to sexual orientation in the workplace are changing, but there's still more to do. By **Amy McLellan**

For a measure of how corporate attitudes to sexual orientation have changed in recent years, one need only look at the history of the Stonewall Index of the top 100 employers in the country for lesbian, gay and bisexual people. When the first index was compiled by the campaigning charity in 2005, six organisations in the top 100 requested anonymity. Today, just six years on and a place in the Stonewall 100 is coveted by big employers, a sign of their openness and inclusivity, with the kitemark proudly displayed on corporate literature.

The 2011 Index, with the Home Office beating 378 other organisations across 25 different industries to take top spot, came hot on the heels of the Equality Act, which came into effect in October 2010. This legislation, which consolidates the 2003 Employment Equality (Sexual Orientation) Regulations, provides legal protection for the UK's 3.7 million estimated lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender (LGBT) employees from discrimination and harassment in the workplace.

So far, so good. Or is it? Campaigners say that many gay people are still suffering routine harassment, hostility and discrimination in their workplace. "Just because this sort of discrimination is no longer legal doesn't mean it no longer happens," says a spokesperson for the London Lesbian and Gay Switchboard (LLGS), a charity helpline that regularly receives calls from gay people harassed at work.

There's the factory worker facing "daily low-level nastiness" (snide remarks, items taken from his work station and social exclusion), the medical practitioner ostracised by her local community or the professional manager excluded from a new role once the existence of his civil partner was revealed.

"It happens at all levels, in private sector and public sector organisations, and can be very stressful, demoralising and isolating," says the LLGS spokesperson. "People can be scared to report it, then try to soldier on, but sometimes they reach a stage of quiet despair and that's when they call us."

Peter Purton, policy officer for LGBT at the Trades Union Congress (TUC), says it's important not to suffer in silence. "Quite often it doesn't take a lot to challenge a hostile culture," he says, pointing out that employers have a legal duty to act once a problem is reported. "Sometimes it's just one person who's the problem, with the other workers going along with it because they feel unable to challenge this behaviour. Once they see management taking action, they feel able to challenge it and help develop a more positive attitude."

Yet making sure that employees, gay and straight, feel empowered to speak up against homophobic behaviour goes much deeper than ticking all the right boxes in a Human Resources exercise.

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"The simple function of having an inclusive equality policy will not change the culture," says Peter Purton. "Whether it's noisy harassment or less overt unchallenged remarks and social exclusion, it's very easy for a hostile culture to continue because sexual orientation is invisible."

Good employers, however, make it easy for their people to speak out by putting inclusivity at the very heart of



Improvements in corporate attitudes to homophobia could help shift wider cultural thinking
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everything they do. They make their values clear to people from the outset and make sure those values are apparent in the business' day-to-day workings.

"It's not just about implementing a policy that sits on a shelf," stresses Lucy Malarkey, head of neighbourhoods at Sunderland-based housing group Gen too, which came 11th in this year's Stonewall Index. Inclusion and diversity are part of a mandatory training programme for all staff, from board member to new trainee, says Malarkey. "We make it very clear what our position is, what we expect and different ways to challenge homophobia. We know this can be difficult but it should not be confrontational. But you must not stand by and stoke the banter."

She highlights one case where a new employee displayed "challenging views" during their induction, which were duly challenged by the leader. "That person said they felt this wasn't somewhere they could work. I felt that was quite a victory for us," says Malarkey. "This organisation is all about inclusivity and if that's not for you then you are not joining the right place."

Cameron Cartmell is a partner at accountancy firm Ernst & Young, which came third in the 2011 Stonewall Index. He was surprised when he joined five years ago to find that LGBT issues were openly talked about, with a well-established LGBT network and diversity firmly part of the induction process.

"It took me by surprise as I hadn't been openly gay at my previous employer because it wasn't something I felt was relevant in the workplace," recalls Cartmell, who was later asked to become co-chair of the firm's LGBT network, the award-winning EYGLES network. Cartmell was surprised how important the network was in terms of raising awareness, mentoring employees, connecting in different ways with clients and, most importantly, providing senior role models who are openly gay and successful within the firm.

"Asking a partner to lead the LGBT network gave it real credibility," says Cartmell. "My role moved from being leader of the LGBT network to being somebody who was seen in the firm as a leader and was also perfectly comfortable being gay, bringing their partner

to work events and being themselves. It's so important for more junior people that they can feel more comfortable, can express themselves and be open with others. Once you have the confidence you are valued for who you are at work, you are happier, more committed to the firm and will perform to your highest level."

Although it's very hard to track, organisations in the Stonewall 100 report anecdotally that a reputation for diversity and inclusion has positive commercial benefits, whether it's productivity, creativity or attracting talent. "I believe it has had a real impact on recruitment," says Ernst & Young's Cartmell who operates in the fiercely competitive world of the Big Four accountancy firms. "It's raised our profile and people understand who we are, what we do and what the firm values."

Sara Hanson, head of diversity at ITV, which this year became the first broadcaster to make it into the Top 100, debuting at 93, says young people are increasingly savvy when it comes to seeking out organisations with values that match their own. "I've been here

'Good practice around diversity isn't about political correctness'

COMMENT

by **Ben Summerskill**
Chief executive
of Stonewall



In December 2003, *The Daily Mail* ran an alarmist story suggesting that new laws finally protecting gay people from discrimination at work would – almost inevitably – soon result in thousands of avaricious gay employees suing their employers for tens of thousands of pounds. Like so many of the scare stories the *Mail* specialises in – salad causes cancer, playing hopscotch will give children housemaid's knee – it didn't turn out to be true.

Stonewall's experience has consistently been that when Britain's 3.7 million lesbian, gay and bisexual people do face difficulties at work, their principal concern is to have those problems resolved, so they can continue enjoying work they like, rather than turning themselves – as some campaigners sometimes seem to hope – into employment tribunal martyrs.

In order to support gay people after the law was changed, Stonewall started working with employers through a Diversity Champions programme. The programme now engages 620 major employers, with more than five million staff between them, and has become the largest non-governmental intervention of its kind in the world. That there'll soon be more people going to work every day in Britain for a Stonewall Diversity Champion than there are trade unionists says something stark about the way that Britain's attitudes to sexual orientation have changed.

It would have been almost unthinkable 10 years ago that all the armed services, MI5, the public sector, and businesses from Aviva and Barclays to Google and Nationwide would be involved in this sort of work. However, major employers whose ideal recruits were once "monochrome" in all sorts of ways – sexually, ethnically and socially – now recognise that successful staff not only have to work within global workforces but they also operate in global markets where almost every colleague

or client will be different to them.

And Stonewall recently received feedback from university careers staff that it's not just young lesbian and gay people who are now consulting *Starting Out*, Stonewall's recruitment guide, but young heterosexual women too. Many have identified that most employers, 30 years after the Sex Discrimination Act was introduced, have learned to "talk the talk" if asked about gender equality. But an employer taking the – slightly thornier – issue of sexual orientation seriously in 2011 is likely to be authentic in the way it handles things such as gender and ethnicity too.

What's still changing is that the most senior staff in many workplaces are now increasingly prepared to act as "straight allies" in efforts to recruit and retain the best gay personnel. "I realise the power of a senior person being visibly proud to be associated with our lesbian, gay and bisexual staff network," says Glenn Earle, European chief operating officer at Goldman Sachs. "So I really use opportunities to talk about it. I've got it on my MD profile, prominently displayed when I send messages and when I headline events and when I've given presentations." Vice Admiral Charles Montgomery, the Second Sea Lord, agrees: "Acceptance is only possible if it's articulated by those who aren't gay. It's absolutely fundamental that the straight community are those who articulate this message."

Employers like this now understand that good practice around diversity isn't about political correctness or even just about people. Most are acutely aware that workforces that look like the wider public are much more likely to be able to help improve the public, or consumer, services that they deliver.

Five years ago, Staffordshire Constabulary was named by Stonewall in its annual rankings as the most gay-friendly workplace in Britain. In exactly the same year they were identified as an "outstanding" police service by HM Inspectorate of Constabulary. Staffordshire Police now understand that doing the diversity piece well isn't an added "bolt-on" to the rest of their work. It's a key to starting to unlock the world-class services to which every public body aspires.

for 11 years and I've seen a real change from graduates and people applying for apprenticeships. They used to ask how much does it pay but now they ask about our values, the experience of being in the organisation, how do we live and breathe the kitemarks."

While broadcasting may be perceived as a liberal and inclusive industry, ITV is the first such organisation to breach the ranks of the Top 100 – while the police and big banks have long scored highly. This surprised Hanson too. "When we started the Stonewall process three

years ago, we were quite surprised to find we had some work to do," she says. "Because we are so inclusive perhaps, we had taken the eye off the ball in terms of processes, so some basics had to be improved."

This includes monitoring sexual orientation on new staff forms. "It seems so simple but if you don't have that basic data you can't claim to be really inclusive. Otherwise how could we know if we were being fair in terms of promotions, succession planning, recruitment and access to training?" asks Hanson.

WHAT TO DO IF YOU EXPERIENCE HARASSMENT OR DISCRIMINATION

■ Tell someone at work. Approach your manager, someone in HR or your union rep and describe to them what has happened and ask them to take action to help resolve the matter.

■ Try to keep a diary of the incidents: what was

said, what happened, when and where.

■ Know your rights under the 2010 Equalities Act (www.equalities.gov.uk/equality_act_2010.aspx)

■ Charities such as Stonewall (www.stonewall.org.uk) and

the London Lesbian and Gay Switchboard (0300 330 0630; www.llgs.org.uk) can offer support, advice and information.

■ If the situation is not resolved, you can submit a formal grievance to your employer. If you are not

happy with how your grievance is handled, you can submit an appeal.

■ If you are still not satisfied, you can take your employer to an employment tribunal. This can be a long, drawn-out process, so make sure you get legal advice