

FOSTERING PRODUCTIVE, INCLUSIVE WORKPLACES

While employers might have gender and other diversity policies in place, most still have a long way to go in ensuring that LGBT workers feel comfortable at work, says Diversity Council Australia CEO Nareen Young.

"Most organisations now do refer in their policies to same-sex partners; most organisations that DCA works with will always invite 'partners' rather than husbands or wives to events. They won't assume anything about anybody's life," she told *HR Daily*.

"But there is still an element of the workplace in Australia where people think that it is their right to express their views at work, which just isn't the case.

"When we go to work we're being paid and we're in our public life. We can express our views in the comfort of our home, but there are still people who think it is their right to express their views about other people's lives. And more education needs to occur."

Young sees the current landscape with LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender) employees as "a bit like where we were on gender, five years or even longer ago".

She points out that: "There isn't a large employer in the country, or even a medium-size one, that doesn't have an EEO policy or indeed, increasingly, a diversity policy."

The important part, however, is to "turn good policies into practice".

"It's about ensuring the workplace is as comfortable with all members of our Australian community as each member of our Australian community."

Closet culture bad for business

Young says LGBT employees in Australia are likely to suffer similar experiences at work to those highlighted in a recent US study, which found around half are not comfortable disclosing their sexual orientation at work.

The Center for Work-Life Policy study, featured in the *Harvard Business Review* earlier this year, says this has negative consequences for the individuals *and* their employers.

Those who are "out" flourish at work, the research found, while those who are in the closet "languish or leave":

- LGBT employees who are not out reported significantly greater feelings of being stalled in their careers, and greater dissatisfaction with their rates of promotion and advancement;
- LGBT employees who are not out are 40 per cent less likely to say they trust their employer; and
- Employees who remain closeted and isolated are 73 per cent more likely to leave their companies within the next three years.

Closeted workers suffer anxiety about how their colleagues and managers might judge them, the researchers found, and expend enormous effort concealing their orientation, leaving them less energy for actual work.

And when employees feel forced to lie about their identity and relationships they typically don't

engage in banter about their weekend activities, and miss out on forging important workplace bonds.

According to the study, 42 per cent of closeted employees feel isolated at work, versus only 25 per cent of openly LGBT workers. This helps to explain why more than half (52%) of closeted workers, compared to 36 per cent of "out" employees, believe their careers have stalled.

"No-one should have to hide who they really are at work for fear of being judged, harassed or excluded. In this day and age, there's no excuse for homophobic behaviour," Young says.

Respect intersectionality

When planning diversity initiatives and policies it is important that employers understand the "intersectionality" of diverse groups, Young points out.

"All women aren't straight. So in terms of gender, it's important for employers to understand that lesbians are among that group of women that they are trying to target for promotion, and that the intersectionality aspect really has to be worked on now."

Diversity Council Australia has partnered with ACON and Stonewall UK to launch "Pride in Diversity" - a not-for-profit workplace program aimed to assist employers with the inclusion of LGBT workers. For information about its services, [click here](#).