



# LGBTQ+ Workplace Inclusion and the Great Resignation

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I was flying high after my first in-person keynote since the Covid-19 pandemic began. Finally, I got to put on some real pants, make some new slides, and talk to a live audience. I speak to audiences all over the world about lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ+) issues, mostly related to improving our health and wellness. I have been doing this work for most of my career. When the latest research comes out showing how more and more younger Americans are publicly identifying as members of the LGBTQ+ community<sup>1</sup> or how many people want to see corporations show support of LGBTQ+ issues,<sup>2</sup> I feel proud to be part of creating that opportunity and acceptance millions are feeling today. So, when the other keynote speaker pulled me aside to give me some “advice” after my talk, I wasn’t prepared for homophobia.

The straight woman tried to caveat her feedback with comments about how much she personally agreed with what I said but wanted to help me “tone down” my message. She said the executive sitting next to her from a Fortune 500 company wasn’t appreciating my keynote (or so she interpreted by her body language) and “she’s exactly the kind of Executive you want to win over.” This is how DEI efforts are talked about all the time. The message from entrenched leaders usually sounds like we should slow down, quiet down. Always trying to balance their support with how they think change happens – or at least how they’ve been doing it. The real job in their mind is for me to win over the naysayers.

I’m not usually in rooms with CEOs. I think about how to make change from the middle. I teach other kinds of leaders the content and help them strategize about how to integrate it into their efforts already underway. I enjoy supporting those workers with less perceived organizational power become their own one-person movement for change inside of their workplaces. Most of the time, I am engaging workers who are themselves members of the LGBTQ+ community and their own professional development becomes the secret sauce to the company making real change.

## Workplace Inclusion is Economic Justice

Workplace inclusion is key to economic security for LGBTQ+ people who need and deserve well-paying, safe, and fulfilling jobs. Without a job in America, most of us don’t have health insurance, housing, or the safety net to stand-up to our homophobic families. I believe good jobs are the best way for LGBTQ+ people to literally stay alive. I help companies make their workplaces more LGBTQ+ inclusive and encourage them to invite LGBTQ+ employees to bring our unique experiences, skills, and voices to work.

But what if those jobs hurt our spirit as much as the homophobic family we had to leave? What if work feels just like being back at a school where we were bullied for being different? It’s easier to walk away from a job than from family, school, or the only home you have ever known. Survival is our middle name. Every single member of the LGBTQ+ community lives with their own personal traumas big and small. Our collective trauma as a community looms large in our

minds. We pass down both the horror stories and the winning strategies for staying alive. It’s exhausting but necessary.

Unlike other minority groups, our trauma most often comes first from our own parents and families. Now imagine the issues we experience in the outside world – violence, discrimination, and bias – but with no safety at home to heal or get advice. Workplaces can be great sites of opportunity for LGBTQ+ people to demonstrate their talent and build networks. But they can also be places of further isolation and stigma – yet another example of how we don’t fit in anywhere.

This is what most LGBTQ+ people thought about when they took advantage of The Great Resignation.

## The Great Resignation

The headlines have been fast and furious about Millennials and Gen Z quitting in droves over the past few years. There’s always a tinge of jealousy or frustration from Gen Xers like me who perhaps feel triggered by the freedom to up and leave a job without another one in place. How many of us timed our resignations in the past with how much paid vacation we could leave with and when our next job’s paycheck would begin? I still remember how expensive COBRA was in the days when health insurance didn’t start for six months at a new job. Leaving a job wasn’t an easy step in building a career when we worried about pre-existing conditions and new health insurance coverage.

I smiled at the woman while she lectured me for 30 minutes about how to change my message for Fortune 500 companies. I was paid to be at the conference as a keynote speaker and hadn’t cashed my check yet. Flipping a table over and marching out in a huff didn’t feel like an option. And that is exactly how all your LGBTQ+ employees feel.

We sit there, day in and day out, smiling through the painful moments – big and small. We twist ourselves into pretzels so you won’t notice our differences. We bite our tongues. We change the pronouns of our partners. We wear ill-fitting gendered clothes. We speak differently when you are around. We lie about what we did over the weekend. We pretend. We withdraw. We hide. We cover.<sup>3</sup>

For many LGBTQ+ people, work is one awkward encounter after another with the occasional painful lecture about how we should think, talk, or act if we want to be heard. Well-meaning advice from those who claim to be allies. The isolation is unbearable. Who can we turn to? And then there is the blatant bias, from transphobic policies that make it impossible to express our gender authentically to corporate support for blatantly anti LGBTQ+ politicians and policies that are hurtful to us and our families. It’s easy to get the message that we don’t belong here.

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We are the experts in our own experience and experts in what we need to be successful. But because of hostile and unsafe workplaces, we hold back. It's not just a feeling we have day in and day out, it's actual job security.

## Federal Protections

“On June 15, 2020, the Supreme Court of the United States issued its landmark decision in the case *Bostock v. Clayton County*, which held that the prohibition against sex discrimination in Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 (Title VII) includes employment discrimination against an individual on the basis of sexual orientation or transgender status”.<sup>4</sup>

You read that correctly. 2020.

Most of you reading this probably already included sexual orientation and gender identity in your corporate nondiscrimination policy. Many states and cities passed similar protections over the years. But as LGBTQ+ people, we are keenly aware that we lacked federal protections. So, while we kept track of the patchwork of states, cities, and corporate policies to offer some legal protections – we were never truly safe at work. Imagine the psychic toll that takes on your employees.

## Key Takeaways for LGBTQ+ Inclusion

You are probably wondering if the woman who sat me down for a lecture was right. Is my message too advanced for where most companies are at with LGBTQ+ Inclusion? Should we be slowing down? From where I sit, you are already way behind. LGBTQ+ issues and people are everywhere. Your newsfeed, your dining room tables, your families, your churches. It costs you nothing to begin to include the realities of LGBTQ+ lives into your workplaces, products, and programs. The cost is nothing, but the impact is real.

“I don't know where to begin.” This is the number one comment I hear from leaders in every industry. Here's where you can begin:

### 1. Your worldview is not universal

You have a problem in your workplace, and you are part of the problem. You walk around assuming everyone is straight and cis-gender and that everyone sees the world the way you see it. This isn't just about adding some check boxes or learning some new language to expand your world. This is about truly appreciating that the people around you are living very different lives than you live, and they may find your assumptions about them and their lives to be truly harmful. I want you to want to understand what life is like for your queer and transgender employees. I want you to know what it is like to be the parent of a kid who is queer or transgender. I want you to want to make it easier for them to be themselves at work.

Workplace takeaway: Reflect on gender in your own life. How have gender stereotypes and roles affected your professional life? How does the gender expression of others factor into your impressions or judgement of them? Rather than just focusing on the differences of transgender and nonbinary people, it's helpful to think about how and why gender is used to set rules and expectations for everyone.

### 2. Language = Power

Before you roll your eyes at the acronym LGBTQ+ or stumble over your words saying it incorrectly and filling in with a “whatever it is these days” remember that behind every single one of those letters are real people. People who fought hard to say that word to themselves, to their families, to their friends and in saying those words out loud perhaps lost everything. Kicked out of their homes. Cut off financially while in college. Sent off to quack therapists who tried to change them. It wasn't too long ago – in my lifetime – that saying those words out loud to your family could get you locked away in a psychiatric hospital or jail.

Language evolves and adapts to meet the needs of the moment and the people who use it. We as humans are changed when we learn new words and ways to describe ourselves and our feelings. The words I use to describe myself include “lesbian” and “queer.” Depending on my environment or who I am speaking to, I may use one or the other.

Workplace takeaway: Get comfortable saying the words – lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer. Practice saying the acronym with confidence. We will notice and your effort will go far.

### 3. Learn LGBTQ+ History

Many of us know that the Stonewall Riots happened on the Lower East Side of Manhattan in 1969 when the police (again) raided the gay bar called The Stonewall Inn. The patrons – made up of a diverse mix of drag queens, transgender people, lesbians, sex workers, and gay men – fought back. They were joined by hundreds over many nights of fighting with the police. The anniversary of those riots at the end of June is when we celebrate Pride.

But there is so much more to know about our history and most of us were not taught anything in school. It is understandable that you have no idea how we got here. It was designed that way. If we aren't taught what came before this moment, then you think it just started. It didn't! We have always been here. In every country, culture, religion, decade, and century.

Workplace takeaway: Your LGBTQ+ employees carry with them their own histories and those of their ancestors. Some of it is joyful and some is painful.

### 4. Generational Differences

A thread throughout every talk I've ever given on LGBTQ+ Inclusion is about the deep differences among LGBTQ+ people. There are many many common experiences we share but just as many differences. For some LGBTQ+ people who are younger, there is an excitement to share their identities more openly and expectantly with others. I have valued the way young people in the workplace have pushed against some of the ways professionalism has been used to diminish our differences. But many older LGBTQ+ people have spent years building walls around our personal lives and professional lives. We aren't the same person at work as we are at home. This boundary helped to keep us safe.

Workplace takeaway: LGBTQ+ people of varying ages might have wildly different expectations and comfort levels with talking about their personal lives or LGBTQ+ identities in the workplace.

### 5. If you aren't including us in your forms and questionnaires, you are willfully ignoring us.

You already know that data is key to making informed and evidence-based changes to your workplace. If you can't measure it, you

**Table I.** Example of SOGI Data Collection in the Workplace.

### SOGI Data Collection

What best describes your current gender identity? (pick 1)

Woman

Man

Nonbinary

If not listed above, please specify

Prefer not to answer

Do you identify as transgender? (pick 1)

No, I do not identify as transgender

Yes, I do identify as transgender

I am not sure if I am transgender

I do not know what this question is asking

Prefer not to answer

Which of the following best describes your sexual orientation? (pick 1)

Straight/Heterosexual

Bisexual

Gay or Lesbian

Queer

If not listed above, please specify

Prefer not to answer

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Additional questions for legal reporting requirements and/or insurance purposes

What is the sex marker on record with the United States Social Security Administration? (pick 1)

Female (F)

Male (M)

What sex marker would you like listed on your insurance card? (pick 1)

Female (F)

Male (M)

Prefer not to answer

can't manage it. So be sure that you are offering your employees, customers, and community the ability to tell you who they are. We call this SOGI Data Collection. SOGI stands for "sexual orientation and gender identity" and while some of the questions are more obvious in healthcare settings, the basic tenants are true for every industry and sector – we count what matters and what matters is counted. Take the time to investigate every department and area of your workplace for where they create and use surveys, forms, databases, and questionnaires and get them updated. Included here is a chart with the basic questions and how to ask them better.<sup>5</sup> You will notice the key here is that we lead with our values by asking gender identity and sexual orientation and then denoting where we may need to know how the Federal government needs that information captured. While the sex and gender categories haven't been updated yet at a federal level (as of the writing of this article<sup>6</sup>) we are well on the way with many states adopting the gender question here and many surveys at a federal level allowing people to share their sexual orientation.

**Workplace takeaway:** As with any data collection of a personal or confidential nature, we want to share why we are asking and who has access to this data. We only ask what we truly need to know, and we are clear what we will do with it once we've asked. So, for instance, you may want to tell your employees that diversity matters at all levels of your organization, and you are working to ensure better representation on committees and training opportunities (Table 1).

### Notes

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