Gay and lesbian issues: managing workplace challenges

Although employers are often well informed and proactive where gay and lesbian issues are concerned, challenges can still make the workplace uncomfortable for some homosexual employees. This is particularly so in certain sectors of the working world.



Keep in mind that companies and organizations can be as different as people are. Different cultures and environments may dictate the type of challenges you face and the way you should respond to them. Consider this as you put some of the following strategies into action:

Coming out at work

When people go to work each day, they don't leave their personal lives completely behind. Weekend and evening activities and families are discussed, and most of us end up knowing at least a little about their colleagues' lives outside of the office.

This can be awkward for gay and lesbian employees who haven't "come out." The burden of keeping silent about relationship partners or personal activities can be a heavy load and can leave gay and lesbian employees feeling left out of office friendships. This leads many to consider coming out to their colleagues at work.

Here are some valuable tips from those who have successfully "come out" at work:

- **Reflect on the culture in your organization.** Is it open, flexible and pro-active, or conservative? This may impact how, or even whether, you want to "come out."
- **Don't do anything on impulse.** Plan a coming out strategy that will work for you and for your workplace.
- **Aim to come out when there is no added stress** such as layoffs or strikes.
- **Consider testing the waters.** Is there a trusted person in the workplace whom you could confide in about your sexual orientation and your intention to "come out?"
- **You don't have to announce the news to the entire workforce.** Choose the people you will tell first and consider where and when you will deliver the news.
- **Do you have support?** Coming out may pose emotional challenges and you may need the advice and support of others in the gay and lesbian community. Remember the power of laughter. A sense of humour can help diffuse even the most awkward moments.

Introducing your partner to the workplace

Even after coming out, you may still feel uncomfortable about involving your partner in workplace events. Here are some things to consider:

- Will you and your partner feel more or less comfortable after introducing him or her to colleagues?
- If there is an upcoming event, is it the appropriate place to introduce your partner?
- If you do decide to take your partner to an office event, you may both feel more comfortable if you let a few people know your plans in advance.

- Many gays and lesbians find it effective to initially introduce their partner in a casual, natural manner. Begin mentioning your partner in general conversation or arranging for him or her to pick you up for lunch.

- If you are close to a few colleagues, after-work socializing might make the introduction more comfortable, such as meeting for a drink after work, for example.

Looking for a new Job

If you are already open about your sexual orientation but are wondering how to handle the matter during the job search, here are some tips:

- Although sexual orientation has no bearing on your skills or suitability for a job, you ideally want to work in an environment where you can feel comfortable being who you are. Try to research or assess this without making sexual orientation an issue in the interview.

- You can include appropriate, related activities in your resume. For example, volunteer work at a gay pride event would be included under “community service” or ”volunteer experience” and would be a gentle way to be open on the subject.

- Assess each job interview and interviewer individually; what is right for one will not necessarily be right for another.

- Try asking a general question such as, *"What is your policy regarding same-sex partner benefits?"*

Being open about who you are with your colleagues can make both your work life and your personal life less stressful and more rewarding. With some caution and planning, fears about how others in your workplace will react to your sexual orientation can be managed, and everyone can reach a more comfortable level of understanding.