

How to create LGBTQ+ inclusion in the workplace: recognising the role of privilege

Heterosexist and cis-gendered privileges pervade the workplace, which affects employment outcomes for LGBTQ+ individuals. Paris Will reviews the literature and writes about specific steps that can create better opportunities and a more equitable working environment for all.

For Pride month this year we can reflect on a paradox that is prevalent in our society today; although attitudes towards the LGBTQ+ community continue to become more positive as a whole ([Charlesworth & Banaji, 2019](#)), laws are still being passed which deny their basic human rights. In fact, 2021 has recently become the worst year in U.S. history in terms of the amount of anti-LGBTQ+ legislation that has been passed; this includes sports bans, bathroom bans, religious refusal, and medical procedure bans ([Ronan, 2021](#)). As such, despite it appearing that the LGBTQ+ community is becoming more accepted, there is still work to do on reaching full equality. The workplace is no exception, with a recent report showing that there are currently 114 countries in the world that do not legally protect from employment discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation ([Mendos et al., 2020](#)). This piece will explore how heterosexist and cis-gendered privileges still pervade the workplace today, how it impacts employment outcomes for LGBTQ+ individuals, and outline several steps we can take to promote equality for LGBTQ+ in the workplace.

There are two types of privilege that directly impact LGBTQ+ people in the workplace: heteronormativity and cisnormativity. These norms assume that heterosexuality and cis-gendered identities are the default ([Palo & Jha, 2020](#); [Bradford & Syed, 2019](#)). Due to these views, people in the workplace are presumed to be heterosexual and cis-gendered as a form of standardisation, unless explicitly stated or found out to be otherwise. These assumptions show up as workplace norms; think of formal gendered dress codes, binary gender distinctions, and policies based on nuclear families. In reality, a large number of the population identifies as LGBTQ+, with global estimates putting this figure at roughly 2.5%¹ ([Badgett, Carpenter, & Sansone, 2021](#)), amounting to hundreds of millions of people worldwide. (This estimation comes from the average of 14 high income countries who measure LGBTQ+ population characteristics and may not be representative of the global population.) Thus, there is a substantial number of LGBTQ+ individuals in the workplace, and they must break through barriers and prescribed norms in the workplace solely due to their identity.

These afforded privileges do not only benefit heterosexual and cis-gendered people, but they also underlie LGBTQ+ discrimination in the workplace. This discrimination can be covert, in the form of micro aggressions which LGBTQ+ individuals may experience when subtle actions or comments are made which cause oppression ([Vaccaro & Koob, 2019](#)). A more explicit form of discrimination may come in the form of bullying. Indeed, research has shown that in the workplace LGBs face 2-3 times more bullying than heterosexuals ([Hoel, Lewis, & Elinarsdottir, 2017](#)) and 50% of transgender employees report being harassed at some point in the workplace ([Grant et al., 2011](#)). These experiences alone are terrible to go through. However, what makes matters worse is that they spur additional negative outcomes.

The perceptions of LGBTQ+ discrimination one faces in the workplace have been examined for their relationship with other workplace factors. [Ragins & Cornwall \(2001\)](#) identified several significant outcomes that occurred with high levels of perceived discrimination for LGBTQ+. The ones of substantial effect size include lower levels of organisational commitment, career commitment, organisational self-esteem, job satisfaction, and opportunities for promotion. Perceptions of discrimination can also lead to productivity losses, with 25% of LGBTQ+ individuals reporting distraction at work due to an unwelcoming environment ([Lim, Jones, & Paguirigan \(2019\)](#)).

How does discrimination in the workplace give LGBTQ+ individuals fewer opportunities, and makes them less happy, committed, productive? It is possible that there is another variable mediating the relationships between perceived discrimination and negative workplace outcomes: disclosure of LGBTQ+ status in the workplace.

LGBTQ+ disclosure in the workplace

In the workplace, a heteronormative and cisnormative climate may influence whether LGBTQ+ individuals feel comfortable in sharing information about their sexual orientation and gender identity. If they perceive that they will be discriminated against, they may choose to hide a part of themselves in attempt to avoid bullying and microaggressions. Research backs this up, with the level of perceived discrimination against LGBTQ+ individuals found to be significantly and moderately related to disclosure of their sexual orientation ([Ragins & Cornwell, 2001](#)). In fact, it is very common for LGBTQ+ individuals to hide their identity at work, with estimates that 59% of working LGBTQ+ individuals have never come out in the workplace ([Gocmen & Yilmaz, 2017](#)). Although this lack of disclosure is meant to protect them from bullying and other career-limiting effects they may experience, it can come at the cost of their workplace well-being.

Individuals who are not out at work may experience greater levels of stress ([Meinhold & Frohn, 2016](#)) as well as psychological health problems ([Lloren & Parini, 2016](#)). As [Martinez et al. \(2017\)](#) explain, this may be related to authenticity. LGBTQ+ individuals feel they cannot be themselves at work, and hiding their identity is a stressful situation where they must carefully consider which parts of their personal life they can share without being outed. Think about a common situation where you are talking to your coworkers about your weekend plans. For LGBTQ+ individuals who are not out in the workplace, topics such as a partner or family may need to be avoided. This is not only stressful but potentially damaging for their workplace relationships, an area that has yet to be studied.

Even if an LGBTQ+ employee feels they are in an accepting and safe work environment where they can disclose their identity, this may need to be continually monitored for roles requiring international travel. There is great variety across countries in whether LGBTQ+ individuals are accepted (see [this map](#) of countries which currently criminalise being LGBTQ+). As [Gedro \(2010\)](#) points out, LGBTQ+ individuals who have the opportunity to do international growth assignments must consider whether it is safe for them to go and whether they must negotiate parts of their identity. This may result in LGBTQ+ individuals being forced to pass up on career growth opportunities in order to keep themselves safe.

Thus, LGBTQ+ individuals may face a catch-22 situation in a heterosexist and cis-gendered workplace; disclose their identity and face discrimination or hide their identity and face poor workplace wellbeing. Due to these identified effects, it is not surprising that LGBTQ+ individuals are under-represented in the workplace. In the STEM fields, it is estimated that LGBTQ+ individuals are under-represented by as much as 17-21% ([Freeman, 2020](#)). It is possible that this is partially due to LGBTQ+s having more limited job opportunities as they try to avoid heterosexist and cis-gendered work environments. This leaves the workplace missing out on key talent due to the impacts of heterosexual and cis-gender privilege, and more crucially it leaves LGBTQ+ individuals in an unequitable working situation.

Eliminating heteronormativity and cisnormativity privilege

There are several steps we can take to limit heterosexist and cis-gender privilege in the workplace, creating better opportunities and a more equitable working environment for LGBTQ+ individuals.

Awareness

Short-term interventions focused on inclusion in the workplace have garnered scepticism over the efficacy of the outcomes. What such interventions have shown to reliably do is increase awareness surrounding an issue. [Case & Stewart, 2010](#) and [Case, Hensley, & Anderson, 2014](#) show that LGBTQ+-focused privilege educational interventions increase heterosexual privilege awareness compared to control interventions. However, because prejudice towards LGBTQ+ was not found to be significantly lowered ([Case & Stewart, 2010](#)), this shows the limits of awareness for garnering actual change for LGBTQ+ people. Awareness can be spread by starting the conversation around heterosexual and cis-gendered privilege in the workplace and would be most effective if the message comes from upper management. This can occur informally or in a workshop setting, as long as the message is received and understood by all employees. Awareness is a good starting point but it will only do so much to combat privilege and so it must be followed with additional measures.

Workplace policies

Past research shows that an organisation's internal policies can influence how LGBTQ+ friendly a work environment is. Even something as basic as allowing same-sex partners to go to company social events is largely associated with lower levels of perceived discrimination ([Ragins & Cornwell, 2001](#)). Workplace policies that are explicitly supportive of LGBTQ+ workers can make LGBTQ+ individuals feel less isolated and have higher well-being ([Loren & Parini, 2016](#)).

What is a supportive LGBTQ+ work policy? There are many factors that should be considered in this, such as specifying non-discrimination towards LGBTQ+ individuals as well as a reporting system and disciplinary measures to be taken to prevent discrimination. Furthermore, organisations can offer LGBTQ+ support groups and training around LGBTQ+ inclusion. Specific policies surrounding families should include same-sex partners and non-nuclear families. It's really about incorporating the experiences of LGBTQ+ into all aspects of an organisation's policies and focusing on prevention of the negative impacts that can occur.

Although an organisation's policies can help to eliminate heterosexual and cis-gendered privilege, additional steps are needed to change the workplace culture; For example, [Loren & Parini \(2016\)](#) found that workplace policies in support of LGBTQ+ individuals did not lower offensive language used in the office. Workplace policies alone are not enough to cause a culture change.

Culture change through language

A large component of workplace culture is the language used ([Park, 2020](#)). This offers a relatively manageable way we can shift towards a more LGBTQ+ friendly environment: through how we speak. This includes using all individuals' preferred pronouns, and ensuring gendered language is not offensive. Encouraging all employees to state their pronouns can make it easier for LGBTQ+ individuals to feel comfortable sharing theirs. Importantly, it is crucial to have LGBTQ+ employees involved in the process of language monitoring and have their input on which words may be perceived as offensive. Additionally, language interventions should not be a one-time occurrence; they should be continually monitored and updated as language changes over time. Adopting more respectful language towards LGBTQ+ is itself a culture change and should make a difference in providing a safer working environment.

Measurement

The efficacy of the outlined interventions is critically dependent on the data used to monitor progress and make changes. This represents a complication as many national surveys currently lack questions relating to LGBTQ+ status ([National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2020](#)). This promotes invisibility of LGBTQ+ and the problems they may face in the workplace. Fears over LGBTQ+-related questions being too sensitive to ask have been an argument used to exclude them all together. However, if data is ensured to be secure and confidential, and participants are always granted the opportunity to opt out of answering, this should address those fears. In addition to gathering data on LGBTQ+ status, tools should be developed to assess the experiences of LGBTQ+ individuals in the workplace. For example, a microaggression scale was just recently developed by [Resnick & Galupo \(2019\)](#) due to limited information about the prevalence of LGBTQ+ microaggressions in the workplace. By gathering more data on the unique experiences of LGBTQ+ individuals at work, we can paint a clearer picture of the injustices faced and work towards inclusion for all people in the workplace.



Notes:

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