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TRANSGENDER WORKERS

Workplace silence, today?

Transgender employees' voice and well-being



Booth and Beauregard's research on inclusive workplaces for transgender workers finds:

- The transgender population in the workplace is small but should be included in companies' human resource management.
- Transgender workers face different challenges and obstacles than their gay and lesbian colleagues and shouldn't automatically be subsumed into that somewhat larger employee segment.
- Responsible inclusive-workplace employers should enact policies and practices to "provide protective, helpful policies and voice mechanisms to their trans employees."

Awareness of transgender rights has been growing in recent years, with issues such as bathroom access hotly contested in the United States and the right to legal gender recognition by self-declaration without the requirement to provide medical evidence debated in the United Kingdom. The term transgender, or trans, describes individuals whose gender identity does not correspond to the sex they were assigned at birth; the trans community includes those who undergo medical gender reassignment, those who transition socially but not surgically from one gender to another, and others who reject the gender binary and express a continuum of gender identities regardless of social expectations. The Gender Identity Research and Education Society (GIRES) estimates that about 1 percent of the British population is gender nonconforming to some degree, and research from the Williams Law Institute at UCLA estimates that 0.3 percent of the United States population identifies as trans.

In 2018, we published research with colleagues that examined the websites of the 100 largest companies with the greatest market capitalization listed on the London Stock Exchange (the FTSE 100) for content directly addressing trans employee issues. We considered only web content that spoke specifically to trans concerns, and not statements grouping trans employees with their gay, lesbian, and bisexual colleagues, as is often the case. Our interest was in employers aiming for a genuine consideration of trans individuals applying for jobs or working within their firms. We found that only 17 percent of FTSE 100 firms referred directly to trans individuals on their websites.

If so few "blue chip" companies are addressing trans people and their needs in corporate diversity, branding, and values statements, what does this communicate to the trans community and other stakeholders? Furthermore, if a minority of FTSE



100 companies are speaking to trans concerns, what is the situation like for trans individuals at less prestigious firms that do not share the high visibility of FTSE 100 companies? We suggest that the invisibility of trans individuals in top-tier firms' web content might signal an inattention to trans voices in the workplace.

With the growth of the gay, lesbian, and bisexual movement over previous decades, people often assume that all gender identity and sexual minorities have enjoyed similar advancement. This is not the case, however. Cisgender individuals (those who identify with the gender corresponding to the sex they were assigned at birth) frequently confuse sexual orientation and gender identity. With some trans individuals in the entertainment business featured prominently in the popular media, such as actress Laverne Cox, model Isis King, and former Olympian Caitlyn Jenner, cisgender people may perceive that the trans community enjoys greater acceptance in general society than they actually do.

During the writing of this feature, one of the authors was seated next to a male-to-female transgender individual on the London Underground public transport system. When the trans individual left the train, another passenger immediately elbowed their companion and said loudly, "That's a man." Given the exceptionally high documented rates of verbal and physical abuse faced by trans individuals worldwide, this is a very mild example of the unease experienced by many cisgender

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people in the presence of those who do not conform neatly to binary gender categories. However, it emphasizes the awareness-raising and educational work that still remains to be done before the trans community can be treated with the dignity and respect afforded to their cisgender peers.

The trans voice in today's workplace may be uncommon not only because of the generally low prevalence of transgender individuals but also due to the strong likelihood of trans people being unemployed, underemployed, or self-employed compared to the cisgender

population. These workplace outcomes can be attributed to a number of factors, but chief among these are prejudice and discrimination toward the trans community and the lasting impact they have on trans individuals' confidence and career aspirations. The Eurobarometer Survey tells us that although Northern and Western European workers report being more comfortable with having LGBT colleagues than Eastern or Southern Europeans, workers in all countries across Europe report more discomfort with having a transgender colleague than a LGB colleague.

In addition, different subgroups of transgender individuals can have different workplace experiences. There is considerable variation in gender identity within the trans community; individuals may identify as male-to-female (MtF), female-to-male (FtM), or nonbinary/genderqueer. As Judith Pringle noted in 2008, businesses are structured along binary gender categories,

and individuals who do not conform to these expectations are often met with discomfort or antagonism. Transgender employees who resist binary gender classifications (for example, genderfluid, genderqueer individuals) may therefore face particular difficulties in gaining acceptance at work. Research by Brewster and colleagues suggests that workplace stress originates largely from hostile co-workers, gendered spaces, and lack of employee protection policies, pointing to the need for HRM to attend to the needs of transgender subgroups and their well-being.

We propose five explanations for why trans voice is rarely heard in the workplace.

1. Trans employees may not engage in direct voice mechanisms in order to protect themselves from adverse circumstances. Trans employees may want to avoid awkward exchanges with colleagues who might ask “Who/what are you?” as well as other negative experiences such as discrimination, termination, and overt aggression from co-workers, customers, and other related stakeholders, including the press and the community.

Research by Dietert and Dentice relates how trans employees have been told by cisgender colleagues that they have never seen a “thing like me before”; Barclay and Scott’s interviews with trans workers reveal that co-workers have called them an “embarrassment to the organization.” This is psychologically harmful: such treatment belittles trans

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employees, equating them with something grotesque or monstrous, something less than human.

Other examples in the literature demonstrate how cisgender employees engage in malicious gossip about their trans co-workers (Sangganjanavanich 2009), ask awkward questions related to their confusion between gender identity and sexual orientation (Brewster et al. 2014), question trans colleagues’ legal status (Dispenza et al. 2012), and express the view that trans employees should permanently leave the workplace (Falconi 2014).

In addition to these blatant examples of mistreatment, researchers have also investigated more subtle forms of exclusion that can be just as hurtful, such as cisgender employees not sitting next to trans co-workers at lunch (Falconi 2014) and organizing social gatherings to which trans colleagues are pointedly not invited (Brewster et al. 2014). Even in workplace climates that foster acceptance, trans employees can still experience challenges to establishing collegial relationships with cisgender co-workers.

For example, Bonilla-Silva’s work shows how trans individuals are accused of “playing the transgender card” to receive favorable treatment from HR departments, and research from both Barclay and Scott and Falconi provides evidence that cisgender individuals often distance themselves from trans co-workers from fear of inadvertently saying the wrong thing and consequently being accused of discrimination and ultimately being disciplined. Treatment such as this makes one feel alone, with no social support network. Such isolation and lack of support can lead to psychosomatic consequences for trans employees that exacerbate pre-existing health conditions and run the risk of evolving into chronic conditions or learned helplessness. Research tells us that many trans employees do not complain about or report mistreatment, either from fear of retaliation or due to the belief that they will simply be told that they are neurotic or just imagining things (Barclay and Scott 2006).

2. Trans voice may go unheard because trans individuals are often subsumed within the larger LGBT category. The “T” has historically been incorporated with “LGB” as the transgender rights movement has found protection and friendship with the LGB alliance, especially during previous decades when the larger movement required a critical mass of people to protect all individuals who

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fall under the LGBT umbrella. However, forcing the issue of gender identity recognition and acceptance to align itself with sexual orientation rights may have suppressed trans voice by blurring two separate and quite different matters. Moreover, the population of LGB people is roughly three times the size of the trans community, and this undoubtedly plays a part in explaining why organizations place greater emphasis on supporting LGB employees and their communities.

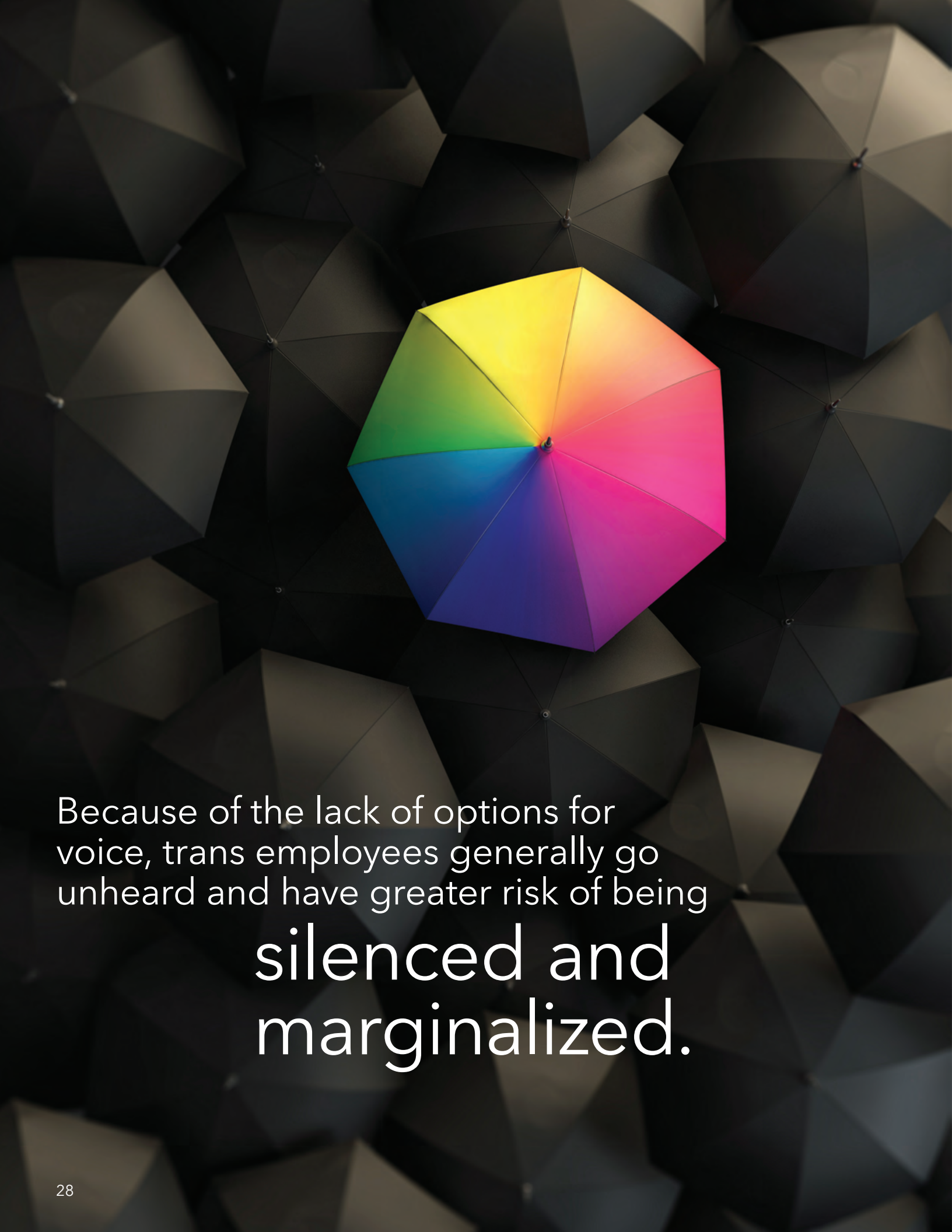
3. The absence of trans voice is related to the preference of some trans individuals to “pass” as their affirmed gender in the workplace. These individuals do not identify with their previous gender assignment and thus “go stealth” to avoid being associated with a gender category they perceive as no longer relevant to them. Some trans employees interviewed by Budge and colleagues have suggested that going stealth fulfils a childhood dream of being who they really are, while others in Kade’s 2016 research stated that they do not feel the need to be open about their transgender status, as it is not their most defining attribute or it is a private matter. This motivation to conceal one’s trans identity appears to originate from individual choice rather than pressure to conform to workplace norms and may therefore have different health and well-being outcomes for trans employees. Despite this, going stealth does not guarantee protection. Work by Bockting and colleagues demonstrates how some trans employees still experience discrimination if they do not successfully pass in their gender presentation. For example, U.K. research by Whittle and colleagues reveals that 73 percent of 872 transgender persons report being harassed in public spaces, and 10 percent confirm that they have been victims of threatening behavior by others.

4. Multiple trans voices arise from the diversity within this particular group. As related earlier, the

transgender community includes individuals spanning the gender identity spectrum. Gender identity is therefore not identical across transgender individuals and represents unique and different challenges for each of the subgroups within the larger community. Different identities and challenges potentially require different voices, and coordinating these voices to ensure a cohesive message is a difficult prospect. Having multiple voices in one relatively small group may create more noise and confusion rather than clarity, contributing to difficulties in being heard. Further, it may be difficult for cisgender individuals to listen to and understand trans voice because of their own confusion with or biases toward nonbinary individuals who express a continuum of gender identities rather than presenting as overtly male or female.

5. There may be limited options for transgender employees to exercise voice because of their personal employment situation. The unemployment rate for transgender individuals in the U.K. has been estimated at approximately three times the national unemployment rate (Rundall 2010). Transgender workers tend to earn incomes at lower wage levels and experience more part time and/or low-skilled work, where voice options may not be as plentiful as voice options for skilled and/or white-collar positions in larger organizations with formal HR departments and/or unionized presence.

Our conclusion is that because of the lack of options for voice, trans employees generally go unheard and have greater risk of being silenced and marginalized. Equally, those who are silenced and marginalized are unlikely to risk speaking up and making themselves heard. Thus, this vicious cycle detrimentally reinforces itself, providing insight into the disproportionately high rates of depression and anxiety experienced by the trans community. With minimal trans voice available, employers remain in the dark, either not knowing trans employees exist or

A vibrant rainbow umbrella stands out in the center of a dense field of dark, monochromatic umbrellas. The rainbow umbrella is positioned in the middle of the frame, with its colors transitioning from yellow at the top to red, orange, pink, purple, blue, and green. The surrounding umbrellas are dark, almost black, and their repetitive pattern creates a strong sense of contrast and isolation for the central, colorful one.

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not knowing what to do and how to help. The low base rate of transgender individuals in the general population, combined with the inclination of many trans employees to remain silent for self-protection or to live more fully in their affirmed gender, cultivates a cisnormative workplace environment — one in which it is assumed that all workers are cisgender. Cisnormative contexts contribute to the lack of understanding found in most organizations with regard to the presence of and issues associated with trans employees. The end result is that most employers are not as forward thinking and proactive as they could or should be in terms of providing protective, helpful policies and voice mechanisms to their trans employees.

What can employers and other stakeholders do to better the situation? Governments obviously can pass legislation that is intended to protect employees from discrimination and unfair dismissal and make the workplace a more just environment. The presence of legislation does not necessarily translate to improved treatment of transgender employees, however; without monitoring practices in place, enforcement of protective legislation can be minimal. Employers should therefore strive to be proactive rather than reactive in implementing direct voice mechanisms for trans employees. Policy needs to be in place even before the employer engages in the selection process and hires a transgender recruit, regardless of whether the employer has knowledge of the recruit's identity. The employer's first step is to make sure that the work climate is inviting for and accepting of all employees, which includes offering basic amenities such as toilet facilities that signal respect for the full spectrum of gender identity. Induction, internal and external documentation and communication, and training can be used to educate and socialize organization members and other stakeholders to value diversity and engage in appropriate interpersonal interaction. If employer branding reflects their true values, then employers should be advertising to, selecting, training, engaging, and retaining employees who share the organization's values on transgender inclusion.

With transparency and open policies, organizations have the opportunity to create environments where everyone feels capable of participating, contributing, and voicing their opinions, no matter what gender identity they express in the workplace. Managers are crucial to delivering this message to their teams and ensuring inclusive practices are adopted and effectively function. Hence, it is important for managers to fully understand their direct reports and regularly train them on how to manage diversity effectively, removing any potential toxic influences and making certain that all have the chance to perform and develop to their potential. When few transgender employees are working for a specific employer and have limited willingness to disclose, it may be difficult for an individual employer to set up a transgender employee network. However, multiple employers could join forces and create an employer consortium, which would enable a critical mass of

trans employees to gather across organizations and establish a meaningful network. For employers to convey that they actively and genuinely invest in their values, they need to provide sufficient resources to render these efforts successful.

Indirect voice, such as employee–management co-determination and union representation, must make sure that they use inclusive language in all communications and make transgender employees and their issues more visible and part of the conditions of work discussed, so that these vulnerable workers feel protected as a represented employee. Labor unions also have potential to offer grievance tools to trans employees to handle incidents in which they have problems with their employer or an employer representative. Unions, employers, and government agencies can work in unison to educate the public about transgender individuals and their issues to foster an improved and more accepting, inclusive society. ■

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