

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

Attitudes towards the LGBTQ+ community are becoming more positive, but heterosexual and cisgendered identities are still considered the default in the workplace. Paris Will explores how heterosexist and cisgendered privileges still pervade work environments today and how they affect employment outcomes for LGBTQ+ individuals. She outlines several steps to promote workplace equality.

Privilege in the Workplace series - [The Inclusion Initiative](#) - #TIThursday

There is 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 US history in terms of the amount of anti-LGBTQ+ legislation that has been passed. This includes sports bans, bathroom bans, religious refusal, and bans on certain medical procedures ([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 currently 114 countries do not legally protect people from employment discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation ([Mendos, Aranda, & Brown, 2020](#)). This piece will explore how heterosexist and cisgendered privileges still pervade the workplace today and how they affect employment outcomes for LGBTQ+ individuals, outlining several steps we can take to promote LGBTQ+ equality in the workplace.

There are two types of privilege which directly negatively impact LGBTQ+ people in the workplace: heteronormativity and cisnormativity. These norms assume that heterosexual and cisgendered identities are the default ([Palo & Jha, 2020](#); [Bradford & Syed, 2019](#)). Due to these normative assumptions, people in the workplace are presumed to be heterosexual and cisgendered as a form of standardisation and unless explicitly stated or found to be otherwise. These assumptions show up as workplace norms; think of formal gendered dress codes, binary gender distinctions, and policies which are 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% ([Badgett, Carpenter, & Sansone, 2021](#)), amounting to hundreds of millions of people worldwide. Thus, there is a substantial number of LGBTQ+ individuals in the workplace, and they must break through barriers stemming from prescribed norms solely due to their identity.

These afforded privileges do not only benefit heterosexual and cisgendered people, but they also underlie LGBTQ+ discrimination in the workplace. This discrimination can be covert, in the form of microaggressions which LGBTQ+ individuals may experience when subtle comments or actions are made which cause distress ([Vaccaro & Koob, 2019](#)). A more explicit form of discrimination may come in the form of bullying. Indeed, research has shown that in the workplace, lesbian, gay, and bisexual individuals 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](#)).

The perceptions of the LGBTQ+ discrimination that one faces in the workplace has been examined for its 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 make them less happy, committed, and productive? It is possible that another factor explains 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 supports this, as the level of perceived discrimination against LGBTQ+ individuals was 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 disclosed their identity 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 well-being at work.

Individuals who have not disclosed their identity at work may experience greater levels of stress ([Meinhold & Frohn, 2016](#)) as well as psychological health problems ([Lloren & Parini, 2016](#)). As [Martinez et al. \(2017\)](#) explains, this may be related to authenticity. LGBTQ+ individuals feel they cannot be themselves at work, and hiding their identity is stressful, in that 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 have not disclosed, topics such as a partner or family may need to be avoided. This is not only stressful but potentially damaging for their workplace relationships.

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 in different work situations, particularly in roles that require international travel or client acceptance. There is worldwide variation as to whether LGBTQ+ individuals are accepted, with 71 countries currently criminalising having an LGBTQ+ identity ([Human Dignity Trust, 2021](#)). 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 on career growth opportunities in order to keep themselves safe. Disclosure might also be monitored by the individual in client situations where there is fear of jeopardising relationships, especially in cases where the views of the client are discriminatory or unknown.

Thus, LGBTQ+ individuals may face a catch-22 situation in a heterosexist and cisgendered workplace: disclose their identity and face discrimination or hide their identity and face poor wellbeing at work. Due to these identified effects, it is not surprising that LGBTQ+ individuals are underrepresented 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+ having more limited job opportunities as they try to avoid heterosexist and cisgendered work environments. This leaves the workplace missing out on key talent due to the impacts of heterosexual and cisgender privilege, and more crucially it leaves LGBTQ+ individuals in an inequitable working situation.

Eliminating heteronormativity and cisnormativity privilege

There are several steps we can take to limit heterosexist and cisgender 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. LGBTQ+ focused educational interventions have shown to increase heterosexual privilege awareness compared to control interventions ([Case & Stewart, 2010](#); [Case, Hensley, & Anderson, 2014](#)). However, because prejudice towards LGBTQ+ was not found to be significantly lowered ([Case & Stewart, 2010](#)), there are limits in the role of awareness interventions in garnering actual change. Awareness can be spread by starting the conversation around heterosexual and cisgendered privilege in the workplace, and would be most effective if the message comes from upper management ([Neill, 2018](#)). 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 which are explicitly supportive of LGBTQ+ workers can make individuals feel less isolated and have higher well-being ([Loren & Parini, 2016](#)).

In making workplace policies which are supportive to the LGBTQ+ community, there are many factors which should be considered in this. Organisations should explicitly specify that discrimination towards LGBTQ+ is not tolerated, as well as having a strong reporting system in place and disciplinary measures to enact if discrimination occurs. 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 is primarily 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 reduce heterosexual and cisgendered privilege, additional steps are needed to change the workplace culture. For example, [Loren and Parini](#) (2016) found that workplace policies in support of LGBTQ+ individuals did not lower offensive language used in the office. As such, workplace policies alone are not enough to cause a culture change.

Culture change through language

A large component of a workplace culture is the language that is used ([Park, 2020](#)). This offers a relatively manageable way to shift towards a more LGBTQ+ friendly environment; through how we speak. This includes using people's preferred pronouns and ensuring that 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 the words that may be perceived as offensive. Additionally, language interventions should not be a one-time action, policies should be continually monitored and updated as language changes over time. Adopting more respectful language towards LGBTQ+ people is itself a culture change and should make a difference in providing a safer working environment.

Measurement

In order to understand which interventions should be implemented for LGBTQ+ equity, data is needed to monitor progress. 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 allowed 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 and 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 in the workplace, we can paint a clearer picture of the injustices faced and work towards inclusion for all people in the workplace.



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