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Voice Mail

The Invisible Diversity

The following messages are in response to "Tell Us What You Think" (November 1992), in which we asked about the climate for gays and lesbians in your organization.

November's TUWYT is right on target in asking some important questions about the workplace climate for gays and lesbians.

Gays and lesbians are often the "invisible diversity." Despite statistics that indicate that one in 10 Americans are gay, many people assume there are no homosexuals in their organizations. I'm sure I'm not the only gay professional who has come out to a colleague only to hear, "I had no idea; you don't look gay!" The tone is complimentary; the assumption is that all homosexuals share some readily observable, identifying characteristic.

I'd like to share some results of an informal study I conducted last year on gay and lesbian workers in the Boston area. Most of the gay and lesbian professionals I surveyed feel that the possible consequences of coming out outweigh the advantages, even in workplaces with progressive diversity programs and spousal-equivalent benefits. They fear that coming out might result in strained relationships with co-workers, less professional credibility, negative gossip, and the loss of jobs and promotions.

Most of the respondents said they feel protected by organizational policies and human-rights legislation against overt discrimination. But most also have experienced subtle forms of discrimination, which are difficult to identify and harder to prove.

Even gays and lesbians who have come out at work still feel pressure

to use discretion while talking about their personal lives. For many, displaying a partner's photo on one's desk would be out of the question.

Most of the respondents said they hope for a time when sexual orientation is a non-issue, like eye color or shoe size. Some feel we're moving closer to that, but many expressed sadness at an apparent lack of tolerance among co-workers. Because of certain comments and conversations they've heard in their workplaces, they feel discouraged from being more open.

Some people may say gays are just being paranoid and that the workplaces of the nineties accept all types of diversity. But most of the gays and lesbians I talked with told a different story. As in the case of any nonmainstream cultural group—and we are a culture with our own language, arts, and distinct subcultures—assimilation takes a toll. From nine to five, many of us have to downplay or conceal an essential and meaningful part of our identities. Consequently, other people see only the assimilated qualities, not the aspect that distinguishes us.

Slowly, the invisible diversity is being recognized. Last year, *Fortune* dispelled many gay stereotypes in its article, "Gay in Corporate America" (December 16, 1991.) Some employers are making inclusive policy decisions and providing a broader range of diversity training that includes sexual orientation. Some offer gay networks; many offer AIDS-awareness training. But there's still a long way to go in incorporating positive images of gays into the picture of workplace diversity.

The dialogues that emerge from every instance of gay visibility can teach HRD practitioners a lot about maximizing the human potential of

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Voice Mail

every worker. Those same dialogues can show what is lost if we don't.

Congratulations on addressing a sensitive issue.

— **Stacia E. Cooper**

*Cambridge Savings Bank
Cambridge, Massachusetts*

I think the topic of whether gays should feel comfortable displaying desktop photos of their partners is totally inappropriate for ASTD. It makes as much sense as displaying photos of people who have committed incest or who are pedophiles. If ASTD has any articles on homosexuality, I'll discontinue my subscription.

I think gays should go back in the closet. They're forcing their lifestyle on society.

— *Name and affiliation withheld*

You bet increasing gay visibility is a workplace issue! As a research consultant on human resources for a wide variety of companies, I'm getting more inquiries than ever.

What startles me is how little information employers have about gay/lesbian issues. Lack of knowledge is dangerous and can be a basis for prejudice. Many businesses in North America do have gay anti-discrimination policies, which are enforced by the courts. Organizations that don't have such policies are legally vulnerable.

A little investment in compliance can prevent lawsuits. Being open-minded about human relations can do even more, in terms of improved productivity, employee loyalty, and teamwork. Gay/lesbian issues have become a litmus test for diversity: Does an organization truly respect diversity? Or is it stuck in the same mindset that limits women, people with disabilities, and other minorities?

— **Linda Konstan**

Find/SVP

New York, New York

It was disappointing to see the TUWYT topic for November. It's bad enough that one can't read a magazine or watch television or see a movie without sex being flaunted irresponsibly.

The gay issue isn't like a racial or class issue, even though the gay movement tries to make us believe

there are parallels.

I've worked with men who have announced they're gay; they seem to want to brag about it. Being gay is deviant behavior and unnatural. It's a sorry state that gays have pressed their demands on society, businesses, and the government—all of which pay a tremendous price socially and economically.

T&D does very little positively by presenting this topic. Let's focus on more important issues, not on someone's sexual kinkiness.

— *Name and affiliation withheld*

Thank you for asking about gays in the workplace. I did find it interesting that the TUWYT questions were phrased in the third person. Did you consider whether many of the readers are gay? Just food for thought.

Where I work there are two distinct climates for coming out. In the office ranks, there's little risk associated with being openly gay. Most people are quietly supportive; those who disapprove don't verbalize it. Job performance is far more important than sexual preference. Though I don't have a photo on my desk of my partner of 13 years, I wouldn't be afraid to.

How gayness affects advancement is another matter. It hasn't been tested, but I suspect that any gays in higher positions are closeted.

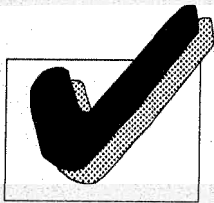
On the production floor, the atmosphere appears to be different than it is in the offices. Generally, the floor workers are male and stereotypically macho. Many might be supportive, but it's likely that a co-worker's announcement that he or she is gay wouldn't be well-received.

Here are examples of the two different attitudes in my workplace: A company publication ran a photo of two male employees at an awards dinner. The companions were pictured together in the same way heterosexual award winners were pictured with their spouses and dates. But on a walk through the plant, I saw a hand-lettered sign that read "Fags made AIDS." When brought to the attention of the EEO office, the sign was removed. But I doubt the attitude was erased.

My feeling is that gays who are

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Voice Mail

out of the closet at work should continue to make sure others get to know them first as people and competent workers. Then quietly let people know they've become friends with a gay person.

— **Niel Christiansen**
Davenport, Iowa

At the large, West-Coast retail organization where I work, sexual orientation isn't an issue. Gays and lesbians are found at all levels of the company, and they make significant contributions.

The company employs a large number of homosexuals and contributes to gay-oriented community programs. Gays feel comfortable coming out at work. A recent organizationwide training program addressed such issues as sexual orientation and AIDS awareness. The training focused on assuaging fears and on showing mutual respect.

Most employees here view sexual preference as a private matter; it's rarely discussed. Gays who are open convey it discreetly. Some sport pink triangles or the rainbow colors of gay pride; others display desktop photos. They may talk about their personal relationships, but gays don't flaunt their sexuality any more than heterosexuals do.

Unfortunately, many gays remain closeted because of society's intolerance. We hope that will change as more organizations institute programs that promote acceptance of gays and lesbians in the workforce and in the community.

— *Name and affiliation withheld*

As an "out" lesbian who works in a state-government job, I appreciate your inquiry about the workplace atmosphere for gays.

I didn't wait to find out how my co-workers might respond. My pictures of my partner were on my desk from day one. I spoke casually about her whenever other people discussed their mates. Partly because of that, I met many other gay and lesbian employees who had assumed it was dangerous to be open. Instead, I found that my co-workers were very accepting and even matter-of-fact. I hope their attitude will make other gays feel safe in an environment they

previously regarded as unsafe.

By the way, some gays and lesbians wear pink triangles to identify themselves, but so do some heterosexuals, to show their support. It's probably not wise to assume people are gay because of certain buttons or pins they wear—any more than it is wise to assume that people who aren't wearing such tokens are heterosexual.

Thanks for asking! Print my name proudly.

— **Gina Matkin**
Nebraska Department of Social Services
Lincoln, Nebraska

I'm active in a gay/lesbian network, which we're in the process of establishing at Eastman Kodak Company. I have a picture of my "significant other" on my desk, but you wouldn't notice it unless you were standing in front of my computer.

Most people here know I'm gay because of my involvement in the network. I do think gays in the workplace is an issue. Many of us listen to co-workers' weekend plans but can't discuss our own. We often have to live a lie or just avoid talking about our real lives.

— **David Kosel**
Eastman Kodak Company
Rochester, New York

Editor's note: See the sidebar, "Diversity Grows More Diverse," (page 31) to find out how the gay/lesbian network at Kodak fits into the company's wide-ranging diversity program.

"Voice Mail" is compiled and edited by **Haidee Allerton**. "Voice Mail" welcomes your views. Send your letters and comments to "Voice Mail," Training & Development, 1640 King Street, Box 1443, Alexandria, VA 22313-2043; fax them to Allerton at 703/683-9203; or call them in on the "Voice Mail" line, 703/683-9590.