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Abstract

To understand and address the unique challenges faced by lesbian, gay, bisexual, and gender diverse seniors requires an awareness of what drives workplace diversity initiatives, and cultural competence on the multiple differences represented by the limiting acronym, LGBT.

Keywords

LGBT elders · Workplace · Public policy · Law

This brief chapter on the issues facing lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT)¹ seniors in the workplace is a reflection based upon my 40-year career working as an educator on LGBT concerns. I'm not an academician, and so this chapter is somewhat different from other chapters in this book.

When approaching this topic, you work with the assumption that there is a war for talent in the

workplace that somewhat evens the playing field. In theory, companies cannot afford to lose the best and brightest workers because their workplace is unwelcoming. To attract and retain highly qualified people and to maintain a competitive edge, most companies seek to create conditions in which the diversity of their workforce is celebrated and fully tapped. That should mean that older lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people are seen as having the potential to be among the company's best and brightest employees, thus increasing the odds of profitability.

That said, the working conditions for LGBT employees of all ages can vary in the same company, depending upon the mentality of middle management. When the middle manager, influenced by any number of variables such as religious beliefs, familiarity with gay and transgender people, race, and gender, among other factors, does not ascribe to his or her company's

¹While I will occasionally use the acronym LGBT in writing and speaking, I believe it is preferable to write and say the words lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender. These four words represent four distinct communities, each with its own concerns. The LGBT acronym enables people not to say the words, diminishes the difference in issues, and is often confusing to the reader or listener. "Is it a sandwich?"

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values, the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender worker is vulnerable to increased risk of harassment.

When considering harassment, or other hostile working conditions, the reader needs to allow for the possibility of the worst behavior in the workplace, such as physical and emotional abuse, but he or she is encouraged to focus more on problems created by unconscious incompetence. Excluding examples of termination, hiring discrimination, and overt hostility, the majority of LGBT people in the workplace complain about feeling isolated because of their sexual orientation or gender identity or expression. Fear of isolation is what keeps many LGBT people in the closet. The isolation is created by the lack of social interactions with colleagues, especially conversations having to do with personal life.

One of the challenges in creating a clear picture of workplace issues for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender seniors is that the culture is changing so quickly that the picture will never be complete or reliable. For instance, marriage equality is now the law of the land, some politicians insist they will continue to resist it. Though progress is being made in state-by-state passage of non-discrimination ordinances, there are now efforts to pass statewide legislation that grants religious liberty to employees to discriminate on the basis of their personal beliefs. Eventually, the Federal Employment Non-Discrimination Act (ENDA) will be passed, but probably not for many years. The current fear of gender diversity on the part of many members of Congress keeps the legislation locked up. That will change, or the legislation will change, and it will be passed, but it will still not cover housing and public accommodation, which might have an impact on a discussion of LGBT workplace issues. If a gay senior faces discrimination in housing, is it possible for him or her to live near the workplace?

We are aware of the quickly changing culture, which in the Western world is becoming more comfortable with the full range of sexual orientation and gender expression, and we are aware of the increase in protective legislation. But, understanding the challenges faced by senior

lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender workers means being aware of the rapidly paced changes in language and attitudes in LGBT communities. When I first began working on this issue, the focus was on gay people. It then became about lesbian and gay people. Bisexuality was soon added to the topic. Then, transgender issues became part of the discussion. Not long ago, the organization that was originally called the National Gay Task Force changed its name to include letters in the acronym to accommodate the issues of people who identify as queer, questioning, intersex, and asexual. Further, the new preferred term for transgender people is gender diverse, and the new preferred term for transitioning (the process of physically becoming one's true self) is realignment. Although I have been familiar with these issues for decades, I need to constantly update my educational resources on the topic because of these changes in language and attitudes.

What began as a workplace concern in the United States, with me introducing the topic as a business issue in 1985, is now being discussed throughout the world because of the multi-national identity of most major corporations. Creating an office culture that is welcoming to LGBTQIA people is not just important in New York, but also in Mumbai. Wall Street banks brought me to India, Japan, Hong Kong, and Singapore to train their employees on gay and transgender issues. That work has rapidly expanded throughout those countries and many others. Understanding LGBT senior workplace issues requires familiarity with the cultures of those individual countries, especially as they relate to age, sexual orientation, and gender expression diversity.

Gay and transgender discrimination has become an issue of importance to the United Nations. The Roman Catholic Church is said to be softening its approach because of the statement by Pope Francis, "Who am I to judge?" Gay issues are now part of the discussion on where the Olympics will be held. Economic sanctions are being imposed on countries that discriminate against gay people. The words "lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender" were all

used by President Obama in his State of the Union address in 2015.

Another component of the discussion is the very important shift in approaching the transgender topic. The number of people in a society who identify as transsexual or as transgender is very small, but the number of people who are discriminated against because of the diversity of their gender expression is huge. Heterosexual men who are considered effeminate and heterosexual women who are considered masculine can experience more discrimination on the job than a masculine gay man or a feminine lesbian. What is considered acceptable behavior or expression for males and females varies widely from culture to culture. Hand holding by heterosexual men is common in India but not in Great Britain.

One more consideration when analyzing workplace concerns for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people is the differences between the individuals. Some LGBT people are highly qualified and are likely to be accommodated easily. People who bring in money are highly valued despite their age. If the senior gay person in question is black, Latino, female, foreign, Muslim, economically challenged, or has a disability, he or she will generally fair less well than a gay white Christian male, at least in the United States. If the transgender person in question is transsexual, and passes easily because he or she fits neatly in the male or female box and is physically attractive, he or she will fare much better than the person, who after realignment, does not look attractive or is easily identifiable as a man or woman. Cross-dressing men have a much more difficult time than cross-dressing women, partly because of sexism, and partly because they sometimes do not pass easily as a female. If the person's appearance is considered by others as "peculiar," it is more likely that he or she will suffer discrimination in the workplace.

Realtors tell us that the primary factor in selling a house is location, location, location. My message to companies is that the only reliable way to create a workplace that feels safe to lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people of all ages is education, education, education. Most people want to be supportive but do not know how.

They do not start conversations with gay or transgender people because they fear making a mistake, and so they keep quiet. The silence is interpreted as hostility or at least disapproval. Education through diversity training creates more competent and confident allies and lowers the chances of unwelcoming behaviors. In addition to continuing education, a company that wants to diminish the chances of discriminating against LGBT seniors needs to nurture an LGBT employee resource group that will help the company stay ahead of the game, in properly adjusting to the changes in the culture, the rules, and the issues.

The following essay is an updated newspaper column/Internet blog that I wrote, which was reprinted by groups working with lesbian, bisexual, and transgender seniors.

Essay on LGBT Seniors—No Money, No Work, and You're Old

The dream is recurring. I'm in a panic because I don't have a job, and I question if I've ever worked. I'm sure that I'm too old to find meaningful employment, but I need money. I eventually become conscious that I'm dreaming, and I remind myself that I've had a personally rewarding career and that I don't need to work.

Perhaps the dream is prompted by my struggle with the idea of retirement, or having been fired for being gay at age 26, or almost always working for myself, or maybe it is because it took many years before my father and mother accepted that educating others on lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) issues was a real job. It is a bad dream that takes me a while to shake.

Yet, for many people my age and younger, there is no waking from the bad dream, and there is no shaking off the emotional toll it takes. Being unemployed and needing money are the most pressing issues of their lives. They fear running out of money before they die and ending up being dependent on others to survive.

The people who live these nightmares most often are older workers who, regardless of their

sexual orientation or gender identity, have watched the depletion of their savings and the diminished value of their skills. They have either lost, or fear they soon will lose, their jobs because of profit loss, automation, or their inability to keep pace with information technology.

If these unemployed older people are lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender, their situation may feel more precarious. In addition to feeling less needed, they may also feel less wanted. If they are closeted, they may be seen as lacking the fortitude to face the challenges of the ever-changing workplace. Closeted LGBT people, I suspect, are rarely unknown and often disparaged as unable to lead. If they are out of the closet, they may fear that being out will be a factor in their not being kept or re-hired. Despite how many corporate promises are made about not discriminating on the basis of sexual orientation or gender identity, many people feel that the promise only counts in the war for talent when the gay or transgender employee is seen as exceptional in what he or she does. Additionally, most states allow for such workplace discrimination.

Until the ENDA passes Congress and is signed into law by the President, LGBT people can be discriminated against in employment in several states. Even if ENDA passes, gay and gender diverse-people can be denied housing and public accommodation. Attempts to pass laws that guarantee religious liberty make employment rights for LGBT people even more tenuous.

Discrimination against gay, lesbian, bisexual, and gender diverse people in the workplace ranges from physical violence to silence. Depending upon the location of the workplace, and the age, race, gender, religious affiliation, and education of fellow employees and managers, the workplace harassment can be unrelenting and unchecked, or more a matter of subtle social isolation because of cultural incompetence. Without protective legislation, LGBT people, including seniors, suffer higher rates of unemployment and income inequality.

Transgender people are particularly affected by a lack of protections. Ninety percent of this group reports discrimination in the workplace. These individuals are twice as likely as the

general population to be unemployed and four times as likely to live at the poverty level.

According to the State of Georgia Department of Labor (2012), 4.7 % of the workforce is 65 years of age or older. Pew Research (Drake 2013) speculates that by 2022, 31.9 % of people 65–74 will still be working. In the private sector, 6.48 per cent of those people will be LGBT seniors, according to the Williams Institute on Sexual Orientation Law and Public Policy (2011) of 65 in order to make ends meet. A significant percentage of those people are LGBT. Questions that need to be asked are, will these LGBT seniors have legal protections against discrimination on the job, and what unique challenges do they face because of their sexual orientation or gender diversity?

Many older people would like to retire, but what if their nest egg has been depleted because the value of their house has depreciated, they have had unexpected health care costs, or their pension was cut—they have no alternative but to find work. But what work? How does the 55-year-old gay man find work after his money-making “companion” dies and leaves the bulk of his assets to his children and grandchildren? The single lesbian near retirement is not seen as being as needy of steady income as the man who has dependents. If she is let go in downsizing, how does she find work to make up the lost income? And, what happens to an older person who is transsexual? Where does the average, senior, transgender person find work unless he or she is extraordinary at what he or she does?

The old career development resource book, *What Color is Your Parachute* (Bolles 2015), and every similar book published since, tells us that our best chance of finding a job is knowing someone who can help. Job hunters are encouraged to make lists of the people they know who might be able and willing to pull strings or make introductions. What good connections do older LGBT people have? What if they have pulled back from straight family and friends because they wanted to be out and proud? Are their gay or straight friends comfortable putting their reputations on the line by making a call or giving them a letter of recommendation? Will the names of younger lesbian,

gay, bisexual, and transgender employees be on the list of possible connections? Do younger LGBT employees relate to, or even like, their older counterparts? Are corporate LGBT Employee Resource Groups (ERGs), headed by younger workers, aware of the struggles of Baby Boom gay and transgender employees, and do they see such issues as worthy of their attention, and of inclusion in their limited budget?

In the corporate world, finding allies who understand and support the specific issues of older LGBT persons is critical to having their needs championed. While older workers, in general, can feel alienated by the attitudes of younger workers, it can be particularly disenfranchising for a senior gay worker. To hear gay worker to hear the offensive word “queer” used as a proud self-description by younger LGBT employees, and to see that there is no awareness on the part of youth of the many sacrifices that have been made to create such a welcoming work environment for them, can prompt senior workers to pull away from ERGs. Younger workers can be seen as ungrateful upstarts who are competing for the jobs needed to secure the older worker’s sustainability. Older employees can be seen as stubborn and out of touch with cultural advances and as obstacles to promotions.

If older LGBT workers hope to secure the support of younger LGBT workers, attention must be given to changing attitudes. Older transgender workers are sometimes seen by many younger transgender job seekers, not as pioneers, but as sad vestiges of the time when people felt forced to pick one gender over the other. Today’s youth are far more fluid in their queer identity and feel less the need for full transition surgery. Closeted older, lesbian, gay, and bisexual workers can be seen by some younger LGB employees as roadblocks to the success of equal treatment in the workplace, especially in regional offices and foreign countries. Focusing attention on the issues facing LGBT seniors requires corporate ERGs to ask seniors questions about the challenges they face and about how best to be allies.

Outside the workplace, unemployed gay and transgender seniors, like their heterosexual peers, can find support in their search for work from AARP, the American Association of Retired People. AARP has a 17 % success rate in finding work for its members. But unemployed older LGBT people can also get training and guidance from SAGE, Services and Advocacy for LGBT Elders, a national organization with regional affiliates. They have a 25 % success rate in helping senior clients find employment.

That still leaves 75 % of the LGBT seniors who have sought help from SAGE, and the many more who have not heard of, or tried to get such help, living daily in the nightmare that only occasionally visits me in my dreams. If young lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender activists are looking for the next cause to take on after marriage equality, the bread and butter issues of LGBT seniors is an issue needing immediate attention.

Learning Exercises

1. What factors go into helping LGBT seniors remain in the workforce? Who is likely to do so and why?
2. What factors prevent LGBT seniors from entering the workforce? How can these be surmounted?
3. What factors do you take in consideration in addressing the needs of the older LGBT employee or those seeking employment?

Experiential Exercises

1. Describe your experience working with an older lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender employee. Was there a particular situation that occurred within the workplace setting that you remember? If yes, why?
2. If you know a senior who is working and LGBT, ask him or her to describe a situation

in his or her work where he or she was treated well and where he or she was treated poorly.

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