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LGBT+ Discrimination in the Workplace

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LGBT Discrimination in the Workforce

Rachel Winters

You likely know someone—or multiple people—who are part of the LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender) community; over 3.5% of the United States' population identifies as such.¹ However, despite general societal acceptance, discrimination against the LGBT community remains prevalent in the workplace, which leads to negative effects for the employees and the business. But, if company managers can recognize this discrimination and work to combat it through inclusion policies and other solutions, the workplace will change for the better.

Unfair Treatment

I'm sure most of you have experienced some form of unfair treatment in the workplace: perhaps you didn't get a pay raise or promotion you thought you deserved, or a coworker treated you unkindly over an honest mistake. However, prejudice against the LGBT community is more than unfair treatment—it's discrimination, based on one's sexual orientation or gender identity. While members of the LGBT community surely experience the same workplace woes as you do, they are also forced to deal with harassment and blatant discrimination. According to one study, "38% of [lesbian, gay, and bisexual] employees reported being harassed at work, and 27% experienced employment discrimination."² An even more troubling statistic is that "78% of transgender employees reported being harassed or mistreated at work, and 47% reported being discriminated against in terms of firing, promotion, or job retention."³

From a purely moral standpoint, such treatment is detestable. Every human deserves fair treatment, regardless of their race, gender, religion, sexual orientation, or gender identity.

Negative Effects

Discrimination against the LGBT community appears in many ways, including in "demeaning attitudes toward gender and sexual minorities, derogatory comments and jokes, as well as verbal and physical abuse."⁴ Such harassment has understandably led to LGBT employees feeling "victimized," in addition to enduring "higher rates of depression and anxiety and increased psychological distress."⁵ It's not surprising that sustained harassment has led to a sharp detriment in the mental health of LGBT employees.

Beyond the negative health-based effects for the LGBT employees, this form of discrimination is also bad for the business itself. When faced with discrimination, LGBT employees "[take] a greater number of sick days from work, [have] lower job satisfaction, and [have] a stronger intention to leave their position with a given employer."³ Such discrimination-based turnover is costly and damages the business's reputation.

Although there is a disappointing lack of national law banning discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity, many companies are adopting anti-discrimination policies into their codes of conduct. It is heartening to note that "93% of Fortune 500 companies include sexual orientation and 75% include gender identity in their nondiscrimination policies."³ The Corporate Equality Index (CEI) from the Human Rights Campaign, which measures how well different minorities are treated at their workplaces, is a good basis for any company to measure

themselves by.³ The Coca-Cola Company, for example, has received a 100% score on the CEI every year since 2006.² This perfect score is due to their strict anti-discrimination and anti-harassment policies.²

When large companies such as Coca-Cola make an effort to be inclusive to all their employees, they become an example to others. Their amazingly positive CEI score should be the goal of all other companies—not only for the score but also for the purpose of providing a safe workplace for every employee.

Benefits of Anti-Discrimination Policies

Companies that implement anti-discrimination policies lose nothing but the harassment that shouldn't exist, and the companies gain a plethora of benefits including better reputations and positive company values such as integrity and respect. Furthermore, there is copious evidence that “[workplaces with] diversity policies are likely to be more innovative and perform better than those without such policies.”⁴ Encouraging and protecting diversity encourages innovation by bringing new opinions and ideas to the table. Another benefit is more job satisfaction among LGBT employees, leading to more productivity and job retention.⁴

In addition, LGBT-supportive policies reduce discrimination, improve health outcomes, increase job satisfaction, and improve job commitment (see figure 1).¹ There is also a strong correlation between LGBT-supportive policies and employees' willingness to be open about their LGBT identities.³ When employees feel that they can be open about themselves, it changes the work atmosphere for the better. It facilitates more collaboration, longer employee retention, stronger interpersonal relationships, and better output. People enjoy coming to work every day when they feel safe. LGBT-supportive policies benefit everyone—proving that *anti-discrimination policies are an investment, not a hassle*.

How to Help

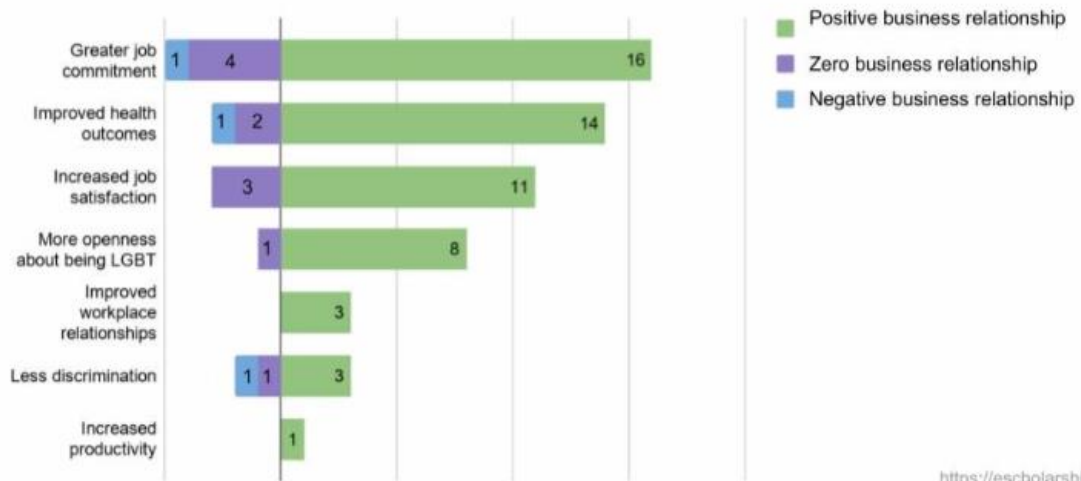
Although the CEI is a good measure of a company's policy, it doesn't always capture the full extent of the company's culture. LGBT discrimination can still exist even in a company whose mission statement promotes diversity and inclusion. Once an anti-discrimination policy has been established, the best course of action is for non-LGBT and LGBT employees to form positive, friendly relationships with one another. In general, discrimination stems from a lack of understanding and acceptance. But once employees are protected by policy and able to be open with others, discrimination and exclusion will likely decrease. This all begins with the establishment and enforcement of anti-discriminatory policies to protect LGBT employees. Such policies foster a productive and inclusive company culture.

Conclusion

Workplace discrimination against LGBT employees harms both the employees and the company, so implementing LGBT-supportive policies is crucial. This is no question of the morality of the LGBT community—rather, it is a question of protecting workers, respecting their rights, and promoting a tolerant workplace that gives back to its employees and, by doing so, itself.

Figure 1

The Effects of LGBT Inclusion Policies in the Workplace



<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/3vt6t9zx>

Endnotes

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3. Elizabeth Grace Holman, Jessica N. Fish, Ramona Faith Oswald, and Abbie Goldberg, “Reconsidering the LGBT Climate Inventory: Understanding Support and Hostility for LGBTQ Employees in the Workplace,” SAGE Journals. Accessed November 6, 2019. <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/1069072718788324>.
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