

The content of this research brief is a summary of the main subjects discussed by a dozen LGBTQ people invited to participate in a reflective workshop organized by the UNIE-LGBTQ Research Partnership in June 2017 with the aim of documenting experiential knowledge on the workplace. These individuals spoke about the realities they and others in their social circles have faced. The collected information will be used in producing research material and data analyses, as well as literature reviews*.

LGBTQ PEOPLE AT WORK

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When it comes to the social inclusion/exclusion of LGBTQ people in the job market, professional integration is undoubtedly the most important issue to highlight. To be active in the workforce, you, of course, need to be hired by someone somewhere, unless you're self-employed, and even then, there could be some challenges in terms of integration. Because of their sexual orientation/gender identity and expression, however, whether real or presumed, lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans or queer (LGBTQ) job candidates are sometimes not even considered, even if they have all the required qualifications.

According to the Charter of Human Rights and Freedoms, discrimination based on sexual orientation or gender identity and expression is prohibited in Quebec. All it takes, however, is an LGBTQ-phobic employer or an employer who wants to avoid homophobic, lesbophobic, biphobic or transphobic reactions in their workplace for it to happen surreptitiously, either in silence or behind the scenes. If a cisgender (that is, a person who identifies as the gender they were assigned at birth) heterosexual candidate is equally, or even less skilled, an employer may prefer to hire them. "In my workplace," explained one participant, "they talk about zero tolerance, but they simply don't hire LGBTQ people. If they do hire an LGBTQ person, it's because they didn't notice their sexual orientation or gender identity. The employee will then be hassled and reprimanded without anyone knowing why. That's how it is sometimes in the private sector".

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*These reflective workshops were carried out according to a model developed by the team Vieillissement, exclusions sociales et solidarité (VIES, FRQSC) which highlighted 7 principal dimensions of inclusion/exclusion: 1) symbolic, 2) identity, 3) socio-political, 4) institutional, 5) economic, 6) relational (significant social ties) and 7) territorial. The participants at this workshop were invited to give their opinions on these 7 dimensions.

To be or not to be out at work

Once hired, the question of whether to come out at work quickly becomes an issue for LGBTQ people as they are asked the typical questions from co-workers about their family and loved ones. Then comes THE question that so many people ask when meeting superiors and team mates, "Do they seem open to diversity?" Most of the time, coming out at work has to be done repeatedly, such as with new employees, other co-workers and collaborators. The risk of being stigmatized, discriminated against, bullied or simply left out weighs heavily when deciding whether to come out. Coming out is a continuous process and simply leaving the room when you want is not an option. A co-worker may make derogatory comments, display aggressive or disparaging behaviour, or you may not know how to react to "jokes" made in poor taste. The only way to exclude such things from our lives would be to change jobs.

According to participants, the LGBTQ-phobia is experienced more in silence, rejection and isolation than in physically violent acts, but is no less a cause for concern. In the education sector, LGBTQ-phobia comes more often from the adults than from the youth. "In schools, there are two types of gay people," commented a participant, "those who are not out with the students and those who are out and militant. Militant educators are at risk of being accused of promoting homosexuality by badly informed co-workers or directors, as if it were possible to convert people to homosexuality..." The fear of being suspected of pedophilia because you are LGBT or Q is also a source of stress. This is an enduring prejudice, a sword of Damocles hanging over the heads of gender and sexual minorities who work with minors.

Lesbian and bisexual women who come out of the closet, for their part, are at risk of harassment, particularly in traditionally male spaces. Co-workers may take on the challenge of "bringing them back to the right path," heavily pressuring them to live out certain sexual fantasies of a lesbian character with them, or denigrate them in other ways because of their sexual orientation, because they are lesbophobic or biphobic, whether or not they admit it. Some people in positions of authority hide their sexual orientation or gender identity because they are afraid it could damage their career. Unfortunately, "they send the message that, in order to break through the glass ceiling, you have to stay in the closet. This raises questions about the basis on which the authority of these people rests in these environments. In some large businesses or institutions, it's difficult to advance to a position of authority if you are out. In these companies, there is a great deal of imitation. In companies where advancement is truly determined by competence, it's probably less difficult to get one of those positions." In the same vein, "the credibility of LGBTQ people occupying important positions is sometimes undermined. For example, co-workers may assume that a particular person was promoted because

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of a possible homosexual attraction." LGBTQ people, therefore, are in the same position as some heterosexual women who have to work harder than men to prove their abilities in order to be recognized.

One final observation regarding the workplace is situations of self-exclusion. For example, an LGBTQ person may decide not to go to lunch with their co-workers because they don't want to find themselves in an awkward situation. "People don't realize how heterosexist they are. Ask a straight person to go 24 hours without mentioning their sexual orientation!" said a participant. Paradoxically, an LGBTQ person who talks openly about their romantic life may be criticized for displaying their sexual orientation too much, even if they aren't discussing it more than a heterosexual person talks about their own without anyone noticing or criticizing them. Heterosexual people can easily discuss their partners, their children, their weekends or their dates, among other things which many LGBTQ people would not dare to for a wide variety of reasons (e.g. fear of inappropriate comments or disapproving looks or of making others uncomfortable or embarrassed). The presumption of heterosexuality can lead to exclusion. When this happens, the lives and unique realities of others are not taken into account. Their differences are

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invisibilized by the prevailing heterosexism. In the opinion of some participants, this is very present in the health and social services sectors. Sometimes, however, all it takes is for this reality to be explained to people for them to modify their approaches or behaviours. This would therefore be an essential area to consider when working to promote awareness in order to foster the inclusion of LGBTQ people in the workplace.

In the same vein, many people recommend using a neutral vocabulary at work or anywhere else (e.g. "do you have someone in your life?" rather than "do you have a boyfriend or a girlfriend?"). Small words or concrete gestures to openness like this one can make all the difference in the lives of LGBTQ employees. Just open the door and encourage them to come in and stay. In short, it's all in the way they're welcomed. In this way, more private people or those who are afraid of negative judgment will be able to feel comfortable enough to come out in their workplaces and to speak freely, like "everyone else."

On the subject of trans people, it should be stated how essential it is to spread awareness of and educate people on the importance of not "misgendering" others (using the wrong pronoun, for example, the pronoun "he" when referring to a trans woman) and calling people by the pronoun they have chosen. Otherwise, they will very likely exclude themselves and feel deeply injured by these micro-aggressions. Not to mention that having your gender identity or expression respected is a fundamental right.

Finally, openness to diversity in the workplace can also be demonstrated by placing material in strategic places in organizations and in offices, such as posters, pins or rainbow coloured stickers, as well as by offering training on the realities of LGBTQ people and creating invitations, for example, to activities that mention that "*all families are welcome.*" Other ways to make openness visible is by providing access to mixed bathrooms and offering the possibility of wearing non-gendered clothing, options that take into account the diversity of genders and foster inclusion of trans and non-binary people (people who do not feel they are one particular gender or who contest the fact that gender can be simplified to two mutually exclusive categories, masculine and feminine).

Openness to diversity: real or only on paper?

According to the experiences recounted by the participants, openness to diversity varies considerably from one workplace to another. The factors affecting this climate of openness should be explored further. Official speeches and campaigns in many organizations often convey a positive message towards minorities (e.g. LGBTQ people, people of colour or disabled people), but when the time comes to take concrete action, for example, in a clear situation of LGBTQ-phobia, there is often a discrepancy between the discourse and the reality. It's important for staff to have access to resources enabling them to support gender and sexual minorities who feel discriminated against because of their sexual orientation or gender identity, whether it's a co-worker, student, parent, client or partner. *"Having access to resources is much more important than giving speeches about being open."* It should be noted, however, that the movement towards openness and support of LGBTQ people *"must take place from the top down in order to be truly effective (managers, ministers, etc.)"* and must be continuously put into action by managers. Remember as well that the people most active in the fight against LGBTQ-phobia are not always members of gender or sexual minorities. Allies are often less hesitant to apply pressure in order to advance the LGBTQ cause because they are not afraid of the repercussions. Their support is invaluable. Unions, for example, are historic allies in advancing the rights of gender and sexual minorities, both legally and socially, and as explicit supporters of their LGBTQ+ members in their workplaces.

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Finally, it would be relevant to make employers aware of all the advantages that come with being open to diversity and defending LGBTQ rights. It's more profitable for them from all points of view, even financially. If they have the choice, LGBTQ people will seek to encourage businesses open to diversity. At the same time, an organization can lose a great deal of money because of discrimination/bullying (e.g. staff turnover, absences for illnesses such as depression and anxiety, complaints of harassment or discrimination). Not to mention that happy employees perform much better.

Possible solutions for fostering inclusion in the workplace

- Create an **inclusive climate**, for example: an "other" box could be added to administrative forms that ask for an employee's gender - too often, the options available for people are still only man or woman - or a "parent" box to forms asking a person's parental status, rather than only mother or father; the employer must also recognize and use the chosen name of their employees (the name by which they would like to be called in day-to-day situations); display material with rainbow colours to demonstrate the organization's openness to diversity; provide access to toilets or non-gendered clothing; make employees aware of words and gestures that can demonstrate an openness to diversity.
- Encourage unions to **affirm** LGBTQ employees' **humans rights** in the workplace and to **ensure their defence**, in accordance with the Charter of Human Rights, union Duty of Fair Representation provided under the Labour Code, and the collective agreement. Unions also have the duty of reminding employers of their obligations to ensure a healthy work environment, free of harrassment, under the Labour Standards Act, and to proscribe all forms of discrimination under the Charter of Human Rights.
- Set up **LGBTQ groups** in workplaces and **internal anti-discriminatory policies** that employees can see and recognize.
- **Raise awareness** among decision makers and human resources employees of the rights of gender and sexual minorities, as well as the advantages associated with creating an inclusive workplace and publicly promoting their openness to diversity, internally (in offices and businesses) and externally (e.g. near the front door or on the organization's website).
- Ensure that inappropriate behaviour in the workplace is **clearly disapproved** and that this position is **known by all of the staff**.
- **Education**. Provide sexual education courses that are not based on binarity (only relationships between men and women), that include concepts of identity and gender expression, that talk about attraction and name the existing diversity of sexual orientations. This education should begin in elementary school because it's at these ages that many children become aware of their difference. Teachers and managers should also receive training, even if it's only a three-hour course on the basic knowledge necessary for creating a more inclusive climate and defending the rights of LGBTQ people. Some participants also believed that these courses should be mandatory as they will have to work with LGBTQ youth or employees.

Thanks

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For more information on the Understanding Inclusion and Exclusion of LGBTQ People (UNIE-LGBTQ) Project of the Chaire de recherche sur l'homophobie at the Université du Québec à Montréal (UQAM):

savie-lgbtq.uqam.ca

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