

Engineering an inclusive workplace: supporting and celebrating diversity



Frazer-Nash Consultancy's Keir Gravil and Anthony Kwong talk to colleague, Ian Tarplee, about their experiences of being 'out' at work, and suggest steps that organisations can take to promote LGBTQ+ inclusivity and to celebrate diversity.

We spend around 90,000 hours of our life at work. Our colleagues share our celebrations of success and our stresses when things aren't going so well. They learn our likes and dislikes – from strong tea and custard creams, to cold calling and wasps. When so much of our life is spent at work, it's fundamental for our wellbeing that we feel accepted, that we're able as far as possible to be ourselves. But being able to be open about your sexuality and gender identity at work can still be difficult for many people. As gay men in engineering, my colleagues Keir Gravil and Anthony Kwong shared some of their experiences with me, and suggested ways in which workplaces can foster inclusivity.

It's not only LGBTQ+ staff who benefit from an inclusive culture, says Keir, your organisation can too. Not being able to be open about your sexuality decreases the amount of energy you're able to put into your work: "You're so focused on saying the right thing, acting the right way, not letting people know – it takes up half your energy." This can affect the value you bring to your organisation. "You're trying to hide a part of yourself, and that's draining, so your company isn't benefitting from your whole attention," Keir adds, "all that energy, it could be put to a more productive use, solving your company's or your clients' challenges."

Being able to be yourself can also improve your mental health, Keir comments, reducing your stress levels. Anthony agrees, describing how not being able to share a key part of his life with his colleagues was difficult: "One of the things I really struggled with was that I couldn't share my family – my life story – with my colleagues. As a line manager, I would take out my team for a group meal, but when they talked about their partners or children I had nothing to give back. That made me feel inadequate."

Keir and Anthony have found being open about their sexuality easy at Frazer-Nash, where we work, but Anthony describes how his original decision to come out stemmed from an inappropriate joke: "I've been out to everyone for seven years. However, the first time I told someone was thirteen years ago. Someone in a group discussion made a gay joke – not realising I was gay – and I felt really uncomfortable. I told my line manager, but didn't want him to discuss it with that person directly as I wasn't confident enough to tell others. Instead, I asked my manager to look out for me, help me manage it if things like that happened in the future. In hindsight, it was an innocent joke, yet the consequence was unfair and unnecessary to both me and my line manager."

Being confident enough to be open about their sexuality is something that both Keir and Anthony have developed over time. Keir says: "As a young, gay engineer in the work place I had no frame of reference, so I decided to 'play it safe' and keep it to myself. Now, if people make assumptions, or ask me if I have a girlfriend, I feel confident about correcting them." But, in some workplaces, he wasn't able to do this: "I used to work at sea, back in 2006-2007, that was the most difficult time for me. You're with the same people for several months and, at the time, it was a very stereotypically male environment. I had a boyfriend and wanted to phone him, so I had to do it

secretly. Even the email system we had at the time, emails went into a buffer and once a day the captain would press the button to send them. I had to hope that he couldn't read my emails."

For Keir, this experience was compounded by not feeling he had any support to turn to: "There was no recourse for back-up – you're in the middle of the sea, with the same people. If it goes wrong you've got to deal with that for months."

Anthony's early career experience was similar: "When I first started work, I had no role models, I didn't know anyone in the company who was open about their sexuality. So, not telling anyone I was gay seemed to be the safest option." Now, he says, he will often drop it into everyday conversation: "If I'm having a chat with a client, I might casually say 'my partner' and refer to him as 'him'. I'm always interested in seeing what people's reactions are – normally it's very positive. For me, the best reaction is if they don't react, if they carry on as normal. That tells me that it's not a big deal for them – I don't see it as a big deal myself."

In fact, Anthony is now able to act a role model to others. In 2019, he was awarded 'Professional Engineer of the Year – South Australia' by Engineers Australia. In his acceptance speech, he said: 'I cannot stress enough how much this means to me as a gay Chinese engineer, in the 100th anniversary of Engineers Australia, and a year that we embrace diversity and inclusion.' He comments: "I'd be honoured if my speech inspired even one engineer to feel more confident about being their authentic self at work."

Keir concludes: "We all want to enjoy our work, and to be able to be ourselves. By taking steps to foster a culture of acceptance – and indeed, celebration – of diversity, you show your people they are valued. And what you give out, you get back: your commitment to including everyone will pay dividends, because they will commit to you."

Keir and Anthony's ten steps towards inclusivity

Creating an inclusive workplace doesn't happen overnight. It should be an ongoing process, with your goals and achievements regularly reviewed. Keir and Anthony share ten of the steps organisations could take, towards diversity and inclusion.

- **Have a clear, diversity and inclusion policy statement.** Share it both inside and outside the company, and make it a key part of the information you give to new joiners. This provides confidence to both existing and potential LGBTQ+ staff that you support them.
- **Set up diversity panels, with a wide range of representatives.** This gives you a broad range of perspectives, but recognises that one person may not know everything about all types of diversity.

- **Find out more about the many organisations that provide advice, guidance and support to help you increase LGBTQ+ inclusion.** InterEngineering, in the UK, and InterEngineer in Australia, both have a specific engineering focus, while the UK's Royal Academy of Engineering offers a diversity progression framework; and the Diversity Council Australia delivers workshops.
- **Consider potential risks to your people.** If your organisation works in countries where homosexuality is criminalised, ensure your people have the option to avoid working on these projects. This needs to be mindful of their choice to be open, or not, about their sexuality at work.
- **Increase awareness and empathy, by telling your people's stories.** Perhaps have visits from people from external organisations, who can talk about their experiences.
- **Proactively promote what you're doing to increase diversity and inclusion.** Embrace your LGBTQ+ affiliations and 'tell the world' you're supportive.
- **Establish role models within the organisation.** This gives people confidence that it is not only ok to be themselves, but that you value differences in perspective.
- **Demonstrate your acceptance in additional ways.** Perhaps feature an LGBTQ+ charity as your 'charity of the month', or support your employees' fundraising for LGBTQ+ related charities.
- **Use gender neutral terms in official communications.** Many people may not identify with traditional gender identities; recognising this in your communications can help put people at ease.
- **Take steps to avoid unconscious bias in your recruitment processes.** Widen your recruitment processes to attract a more diverse workforce. For graduate recruitment, this might include presenting to specific interest groups within universities.

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