

Removing barriers to employment for LGBTIQA+ people: Understanding the role of employment services



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LGBTIQ+¹ people face many barriers to full inclusion in the workforce. A range of initiatives have been developed to remove these barriers; however, they largely focus on removing barriers *within* workplaces rather than *to* employment. Employment services can make a difference by facilitating and promoting inclusion within job seeking, recruitment, and hiring processes.

This paper presents the findings of a literature review into best practice initiatives for employment services that serve LGBTIQ+ people. It emphasises the needs and experiences of trans and gender diverse people as they experience additional and unique challenges in gaining employment. The paper aims to support employment agencies to work with LGBTIQ+ people in inclusive and respectful ways to support their entry into the workforce.

¹ We recognise that the initialism LGBTIQ+ does not capture the diversity of identities, sexualities, relationships, bodies, and experiences within our communities. However, we also recognise the value of the term when exploring collective experiences of stigma, discrimination, and marginalisation, and when advocating for more inclusive services. We use the LGBTIQ+ initialism in this document to refer to people with diverse gender identities, sexualities, bodies, and experiences, including but not limited to people who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans/transgender, queer, agender, non-binary, gender fluid, asexual, and pansexual, and people with an intersex variation.

Barriers to employment for LGBTIQ+ people

HIRING, JOB SEEKING, AND RECRUITMENT

LGBTIQ+ people experience barriers from the earliest stages of their attempts to find employment. Explicit and implicit processes of exclusion often begin at the recruitment and job seeking stages. The 2019 Australian Workplace Equality Index (AWEI) Employee Survey¹ found that 66% of trans and gender diverse people have fears about discrimination during recruitment processes. These fears are not unfounded; research shows that employers are more likely to prefer and offer interviews to candidates who they perceive as cisgender and heterosexual, even if those candidates are less qualified for the position.²

Because of this discrimination, trans and gender diverse people frequently do not disclose their history and identities during recruitment (81% according to the AWEI survey), often because they feel they will be disadvantaged in the selection process. The AWEI survey also found that for 47% of trans and gender diverse employees, a fear of having their identities being disclosed before they are ready was a barrier to employment. Respondents reported concerns around the need to supply identification documentation (24%) and undergo reference checks (26%) and background checks (11%). This is because employment checks and history can mean they are “outed” before they feel ready or safe to disclose their information.³ The hiring process can also be difficult for people with intersex variations if paperwork collects data on sex as opposed to gender. It is best practice to collect data on gender rather than on sex.⁴

These factors combine to contribute to LGBTIQ+ people being excluded from workplaces because of discriminatory hiring practices. Overt forms of discrimination mean that 9.9% of LGBTIQ+ participants in the recent Australian *Private Lives 3* study reported having been refused employment or promotion in the last 12 months on the basis of discrimination against their sexual or gender identity.⁵ However, population-level data demonstrate that the exclusion of LGBTIQ+ people from employment is more widespread than this figure suggests, since the percentage of unemployed LGBTIQ+ people was more than double the national rate of 5.3% at the time of data collection. Such a disparity in employment rates indicates the existence of pervasive and less obvious forms of discrimination across Australia. The *Private Lives 3* study reported that 16.1% of LGBTIQ+ participants were unemployed or unable to work, and a further 4.1% were under-employed. Trans women, trans men, and non-binary participants were more likely to report being unemployed or unable to work than cisgender men and women who took part in the study.⁶ This is a global trend; evidence from other nations shows that LGBTIQ+ people are more likely to be unemployed than heterosexual and cisnormative people and receive lower wages when they are employed.⁷

Trans and gender diverse people in particular face larger gaps in employment and wages. The gap identified by studies cannot be explained by a lack of qualifications, skills or education as trans and gender diverse people are an exceptionally well-educated group compared to the general population. Despite this fact, they are less likely to be employed.⁸ An Australian 2015 study of trans men reported a 15% unemployment rate, around three times the general unemployment rate for the Australian population.⁹ Those who were unemployed were more likely to report higher levels of psychological distress, showing a strong correlation between employment and positive health and wellbeing outcomes.¹⁰

WORKPLACE DISCRIMINATION

Discriminatory workplace cultures, practices, and policies can also present barriers to employment. Research shows that some LGBTIQ+ people may avoid or delay seeking employment due to fear, anxiety or past experiences of workplace discrimination, including feeling unsafe at work.¹¹

An alarming proportion of LGBTIQ+ people have experienced or witnessed workplace discrimination, which can have a negative impact on a person's mental and physical health and wellbeing.¹² In fact, workplace discrimination is one of the most significant issues facing the LGBTIQ+ community.¹³ According to data from Diversity Council Australia (DCA) in 2019, 44% of LGBTIQ+ workers had personally experienced harassment or discrimination in the last 12 months, compared to 25% of non-LGBTIQ+ workers.¹⁴ 37% of LGBTIQ+ workers (compared to 21% of non-LGBTIQ+ workers) felt excluded at work, and 47% had experienced people making incorrect assumptions about their abilities because of their identities (compared to 31% of non-LGBTIQ+ people). Trans and gender diverse people and people with intersex variations often find that workplaces make them feel like they are not accepted. The *Private Lives 3* study found that roughly half of survey participants (50% of trans women, 50% of people with an intersex variation, 49% of trans men, and 43% of non-binary people) felt they were accepted "always" or "a lot" in their workplaces.¹⁵ Another Australian study, *Writing Themselves In 4*, found that a third of all the participants in their survey for LGBTIQ+ young people had felt unsafe or uncomfortable in their workplace in the past 12 months as a consequence of discrimination against their gender or sexuality.¹⁶

LGBTIQ+ people are more likely to join organisations with a proven track record of being LGBTIQ+ inclusive, showing that inclusive workplace environments where employees can be themselves remove barriers to employment.¹⁷ LGBTIQ+ people routinely feel that they must hide their identities at work or while looking for work to avoid discrimination, but this can be detrimental to a person's wellbeing and productivity.¹⁸ DCA reported that 35% of LGBTIQ+ people felt they had to hide or change who they are at work in order to fit in (compared to 18% of non-LGBTIQ+ people). Aside from having negative effects on wellbeing, this impinges on the rights of LGBTIQ+ people to live freely and authentically. Research has found that

younger lesbian, gay, and bisexual people are less likely to be “out” – that is, open about their sexuality – at work. Only 44% of those aged 18-24 were out, compared to 89% of those 55 and older.¹⁹ Women-identifying people are even less likely to be out. Conversely, pressure to be out at work before a person is ready also creates barriers to safe and fulfilling employment and good health and wellbeing.²⁰

Trans and gender diverse people and people with intersex variations are less likely to be open about their gender or intersex status in a professional environment than lesbian, gay, and bisexual people are about their sexuality. While 63% of lesbian, gay, and bisexual people are out at work, only 29% of trans and gender diverse people are out to their colleagues. For people with intersex variations, only 41% have shared their intersex status in their workplace.²¹ In one study, 28% of trans and gender diverse people said that outing themselves to people they would prefer not to is a barrier to employment, while 47% cited a general fear of outing as a barrier.²² People who plan to transition or are transitioning can encounter additional barriers to employment. The process of transitioning requires a great deal of financial, physical, psychological, and other resources, and workplaces are not always adequately prepared to accommodate it.²³

Employees or prospective employees who do not fit into normative gender categories face misunderstanding, confusion, and anxiety from workplaces, particularly if those workplaces do not have frameworks for respecting and including them. For example, 45% of trans and gender diverse respondents in the AWEI survey identified non-inclusive dress codes as a barrier to employment.²⁴ Dress codes are a source of anxiety for trans and gender diverse people who are working in or entering a workplace, particularly when they are dictated by gender norms and binaries. Non-inclusive dress codes make it difficult for trans and gender diverse people to dress in ways that are comfortable and gender-affirming, and they do not offer enough options for people who are gender non-conforming, non-binary, or agender, including people with intersex variations who reject binary sex or gender norms.

If a workplace does not support its trans and gender diverse employees and employees with an intersex variation, it can disrupt their career paths, lead to unstable employment, and affect their ability to find a job. Organisations without training or knowledge or that lack a diversity and inclusion strategy may even eliminate potential candidates in the hiring process as a way of “opting-out” of needing to develop inclusive practices and policies.

Increasing LGBTIQ+ workforce participation and inclusion

THE BUSINESS CASE FOR LGBTIQ+ INCLUSION

While there are strong ethical, political, and human rights-based imperatives for workplaces to adopt diversity and inclusion measures, the business case for diversity and inclusion is also strong. Businesses that do better on measures of diversity and inclusion consistently outperform their competition. Firms are more competitive, productive, profitable, and have a higher overall value when they adopt LGBTIQ+-supportive policies.²⁵ Businesses with inclusive policies also enjoy an improved public image and can attract customers with strong values around social responsibility and inclusivity. Conversely, consumers are less likely to buy from businesses with negative views of LGBTIQ+ people.²⁶

Diverse and inclusive workplaces are better able to engage and retain employees. When workplaces are safe and inclusive environments where employees can be open about their identities, their employees are more productive, more inclined to stay, more engaged, more likely to network, and more inclined to speak positively about the organisation.²⁷ Trans and gender diverse employees in particular can feel more inclined to leave organisations that are not inclusive.²⁸ By contrast, workplaces that are inclusive and supportive of trans and gender diverse employees show higher rates of job satisfaction and work performance.²⁹ The benefits to workers themselves are clear: they are able to be safe and comfortable at work, in an environment where they are empowered to perform their jobs to their full capacity. Crucially, workplaces can attract employees from a wider pool of talent if they can make themselves desirable to LGBTIQ+ jobseekers. This means that employment services and recruitment agencies can better serve their business clients if they are LGBTIQ+ inclusive. They will also be better able to meet the needs of LGBTIQ+ people, who are underserved by this sector. LGBTIQ+ people are more likely to return to, recommend, and feel positively about organisations that are inclusive of, and communicate their support for, the LGBTIQ+ community, including employment services and recruitment organisations.³⁰

THE ROLE OF EMPLOYMENT AND RECRUITMENT AGENCIES

Employment services and recruitment agencies can contribute to increasing workforce inclusiveness and removing barriers to LGBTIQ+ employment. Their very existence enables LGBTIQ+ people to seek workplace support or information where previously they may have had nowhere to go.

Tailored services have an important role to play in removing barriers to employment that are specific to LGBTIQ+ people. Employment services need to be aware of best-practice principles guided by the lived experience of LGBTIQ+ people entering the workforce. Research shows that there is a gap between how inclusive workplaces and organisations are perceived to be by non-LGBTIQ+ people and how inclusive they really are in practice.³¹ While further research is needed to explore possible gaps in services and unmet needs, there are some key actions that services can take now to increase inclusivity and remove barriers to employment for LGBTIQ+ people.

REMOVING BARRIERS TO EMPLOYMENT FOR LGBTIQA+ PEOPLE

Targeted LGBTIQA+ and mainstream employment and recruitment services can work to remove barriers to employment for LGBTIQA+ people by:

- 1 Providing targeted services for LGBTIQA+ people that are inclusive and informed by the lived experience and diverse needs of LGBTIQA+ people.** It is crucial that these services are informed by an understanding of the different experiences and needs of people with diverse sexualities, people who are trans and gender diverse, people who are gender non-conforming, non-binary, or agender, and people with intersex variations.
- 2 Providing targeted services to trans and gender diverse people to address their specific barriers to employment.**
- 3 Demonstrating leadership by recruiting LGBTIQA+ people within their own organisations and agencies.**
- 4 Promoting employment services to LGBTIQA+ people to increase the visibility of existing support and information.**
- 5 Promoting employers with strong diversity and inclusion policies and practices.** This can help reduce the uncertainty experienced by LGBTIQA+ people during the recruitment process. It will also reduce the likelihood of a jobseeker experiencing discrimination in the recruitment process, leading to a greater likelihood of employment.
- 6 Supporting LGBTIQA+ people to build confidence and improve job seeking skills.** Writing CVs, interviewing, and discussing work history can be fraught for LGBTIQA+ people, and because of discrimination, they may not know if or how to disclose their identities in their paperwork.³² Providing help with developing and polishing CVs, applications, and cover letters and offering coaching to improve interview skills can build confidence in jobseekers and enables them to be competitive in the job market. Additional coaching, advice, and support for LGBTIQA+ people to think about their options for disclosing aspects of their identities during the recruitment process or later in their roles is also helpful.

SUPPORTING EMPLOYERS TO REMOVE BARRIERS IN THEIR RECRUITMENT AND HIRING PROCESSES

Employment services can reduce barriers to employment for LGBTIQ+ people by supporting workplaces to improve the inclusiveness of their recruitment and hiring practices. This enables workplaces to meet organisational goals and become more attractive to jobseekers. Employment services can support employers to do this by:

- 1 Connecting workplaces with LGBTIQ+ candidates through tailored services.** While organisations may wish to hire more diverse staff or be more inclusive in their hiring practices, they may not be able to achieve this through conventional recruitment methods. Having a connection to the LGBTIQ+ community through tailored services can provide this access.
- 2 Establishing, supporting, and connecting LGBTIQ+ employee networks.** Connecting LGBTIQ+ professionals, both within the workforce and those looking to enter it, can be a driver for change. It provides networking opportunities as well as opportunities for group action and feedback to workplaces about what LGBTIQ+ people need. Networking can lead to employment opportunities for LGBTIQ+ people and helps connect workplaces to the LGBTIQ+ community.³³
- 3 Identifying and addressing barriers in the recruitment and hiring process.** Employment services can support organisations and businesses to strengthen the inclusivity of their recruitment, hiring, and onboarding processes. This can include increasing their understanding of the barriers experienced by LGBTIQ+ people in the recruitment process and working with them to develop policies and procedures to remove these barriers.
- 4 Promoting diversity and inclusion within workplaces and organisations.** Employment services can support organisations to increase the inclusivity of organisations through the provision of training and education as well as technical support to develop inclusive policies, procedures, and LGBTIQ+ inclusion initiatives.

5 Ensuring trans and gender diverse people can safely affirm their gender in their workplace. Employment services can support organisations to develop policies and procedures that support trans and gender diverse people to affirm their gender. This may include creating policies and procedures for trans and gender diverse staff to update their gender in organisational documents, establishing a code of conduct that explicitly supports trans and gender diverse people, and providing paid leave for gender-affirming care.

6 Encouraging meaningful inclusion of people with an intersex variation. People with an intersex variation are often overlooked in diversity and inclusion initiatives. 47% of people with an intersex variation who participated in the AWEI survey did not believe that LGBTIQ+ initiatives in their workplace benefit intersex employees.³⁴ Employment services can support organisations to develop tailored approaches to improve inclusion of people with intersex variations, such as advice and training on adopting inclusive language and policies that recognise bodily diversity as distinct from sexuality and gender identity.

LGBTIQA+ targeted and inclusive employment services

There are several employment services, organisations and initiatives in place across Australia that are designed to support LGBTIQA+ inclusion in the workforce. Some examples include:



LGBTI JOBS

LGBTI Jobs offers services to LGBTI jobseekers and employers. For jobseekers, it helps to connect them with rigorously pre-screened workplaces to ensure they can easily find inclusive workplaces. It also offers a platform where they can advertise their profile and CV and receive job alerts. For employers, it offers inclusivity and compliance assessments and a suite of training courses designed to support workplaces to increase their inclusiveness.

TRANS EMPLOYMENT PROGRAM

The Trans Employment Program promotes recruitment of trans people in the workforce. It provides services to trans people who are seeking jobs, including assistance to polish resumes and connect to organisations. It also provides consulting services to organisations to increase awareness of strategies to promote diversity and inclusion. Through this service, it assists organisations to help employees transition in the workplace and work on recruitment strategies, policies, and processes for trans people. It offers organisations the opportunity to be listed on its site as trans-friendly employers, connecting jobseekers to inclusive workplaces. It also lists jobseekers on its website, helping make trans people seeking employment visible to inclusive workplaces.

RAINBOW WISE EMPLOYMENT PROGRAM

The Rainbow WISE Employment Program is part of WISE Employment, a not-for-profit employment services provider that helps jobseekers secure work at inclusive organisations that value diversity. The program is an LGBTIQA+ peer-led service operating in Sydney with a focus on serving LGBTIQA+ people with a disability, injury or illness. It pairs LGBTIQA+ jobseekers with an LGBTIQA+ personal case manager to build community connections and strengthen the jobseeker's ability to find work in inclusive workplaces. The program has established an LGBTIQA+ support network group to foster community connections. Rainbow WISE also educates workplaces about how to be more inclusive and supportive of LGBTIQA+ employees. It offers ongoing support to both jobseekers and workplaces for six months after the jobseeker has secured a role.

A GENDER AGENDA

As a key part of its range of support services working with trans and gender diverse people and people with an intersex variation, A Gender Agenda (AGA) offers training and resources on inclusion of trans and gender diverse in workplaces. As a peer-led service, all of AGA's offerings are informed by the experiences of trans and gender diverse people. Its training course "Supporting Trans and Gender Diverse People at Work" develops employers' understandings of how to provide safe and affirming workplaces for trans and gender diverse employees and helps them to support trans employees who are transitioning or affirming their gender at work. It has developed a toolkit in conjunction with the ACT Human Rights Commission, *Supporting gender transition in the workplace*, to further assist employers in the ACT with a written guide on how to support employees who are transitioning. It also offers a resource, *Trans and gender diverse employees in the workplace: Guidelines for ACT employers*, which steps employers through their legal obligations with respect to the inclusion of trans and gender diverse people in the workplace.

OUT FOR AUSTRALIA

Out For Australia is a not-for-profit organisation that provides mentoring and networking opportunities for LGBTIQ+ jobseekers. It engages with employers to develop diversity and inclusion initiatives. Founded as Out For Sydney in 2013, it grew to become Out For Australia in 2015. It now serves NSW, Victoria, Queensland, WA, and the ACT.

Out For Australia pairs mentees and mentors to help young LGBTIQ+ people access support, build skills, make contacts, and receive advice as they enter the workforce. Mentees are matched or match themselves with a mentor based on profession, career path, or industry interests and the goals identified on their application form.

LGBTI INCLUSIVE EMPLOYERS

LGBTI Inclusive Employers is run by ACON's Pride in Work initiative. It is an online platform connecting LGBTIQ+ jobseekers with workplaces that are committed to LGBTIQ+ inclusion. It increases awareness of LGBTIQ+ inclusive workplaces, particularly Pride in Diversity or Pride in Sport partners. It also showcases employers that have achieved a specific standard within the AWEI.

WORKING OUT

Working OUT serves LGBTIQ+ people with a disability or mental health condition. It is a free service run by Expression Employment, a service that supports jobseekers with a disability or injury to find ongoing employment in Melbourne. Experienced in LGBTIQ+ community work, the program's employment consultants offer jobseekers advice and assistance along their entire pathway to finding employment. This spans from skills training, resume building, and the job search itself to advice on their career path and how to settle into a new workplace. Advice is also available for people who are employed but want help dealing with issues at work, such as coming out, facing discrimination, or retaining employment.

DIVERSITY AUSTRALIA

Diversity Australia describes itself as the leading provider of executive search and recruitment services in Australia, with an emphasis on transparent, accountable, and inclusive recruitment practices. It assists companies to achieve Diversity and Inclusion Global Accreditation, which enables them to demonstrate their commitment to inclusive practices and raise their visibility to LGBTIQ+ candidates. Diversity Australia's professional services specialise in cultural change and the promotion of diverse and inclusive workplaces, including through producing resources that help employers prevent discrimination against people because of their sexual orientation, gender identity, or intersex status.

Endnotes

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