

Introduction to LGBTQ+

Awareness: Sexual Orientation

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It's time to work on YOU. So sit back and listen to practical, actionable advice to accelerate your progress.

In this track, we'll:

- Define some important terms relating to sexual orientation
- Explore the experiences of lesbian, gay, and bisexual people in employment, and
- Provide some practical information on how to make your workplace safer, more accessible, and more inclusive for LGB colleagues

LGBTQ+ stands for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer or questioning. The '+' is an inclusive symbol for people who don't fit into traditional categories of gender or sexuality. This track will focus on sexual orientation and provide practical advice on fostering a safe and inclusive workplace culture for people of all sexual orientations.

[Stonewall defines](#) sexual orientation as "a person's sexual attraction to other people, or lack thereof". A person's gender identity is entirely distinct from their sexual orientation. Knowing somebody's gender does not mean you know anything about their sexual orientation. We will use the initialism LGB within this track, standing for lesbian, gay, and bisexual. Bisexual, lesbian, gay, and straight all fall under sexual orientation. There are many more terms to explore, but this is a brief introduction.

Let's start by taking a look at some of the experiences LGB people face at work. In their article for [HBR](#), Katina Sawyer, Christian N. Thoroughgood, and Jamie Ladge explore *How Companies Make It Harder for Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Employees to Achieve Work-Life Balance*. They found that "in contrast to their heterosexual colleagues who felt more able to freely mix their work and family lives when convenient, [LGB people] felt forced to separate work and family to avoid the risk of sanction". Their research found that LGB colleagues couldn't always be confident how others would react to them discussing their partner and family.

There is always risk attached to an LGB individual being open about their sexual orientation. Some participants spoke of knowing that their manager had a narrow view of “family” when colleagues were asked to share photographs for a project. Others spoke of needing to be vigilant as they figured out who in the office would be uncomfortable if they discussed their partner. According to [Stonewall](#), more than a third of LGBT staff have hidden that they are LGBT at work for fear of discrimination. In the UK, [The Equality Act 2010 legally protects people from discrimination in the workplace and in wider society](#). It is against the law to discriminate against anyone on the basis of gender reassignment, sex, or sexual orientation. It’s always important to note that societal and cultural ideas don’t necessarily correspond to legal changes. It’s valuable to do your own research into LGBTQ+ history, including the far-reaching effects of Section 28, in order to gain some context of the experiences of people in the workplace today.

[McKinsey research](#) found that three in 10 LGBTQ+ men and three in 20 LGBTQ+ women believe their sexual orientation will negatively affect their career advancement. [Stonewall’s](#) definition of homophobia is “the fear or dislike of someone, based on prejudice or negative attitudes, beliefs or views about lesbian, gay or bi people. Homophobic bullying may be targeted at people who are, or who are perceived to be, lesbian, gay or bi”.

Homophobia can sometimes be subtle and difficult to detect, so it’s important to be vigilant. Luciana Paulise, for [Forbes](#), explored the sense of “onlyness” LGB people face. It can feel isolating, exhausting, and demotivating to be the only person in a team with your particular characteristics and lived experience. Having to explain concepts or call out prejudicial beliefs can be a tiring task, especially if colleagues are resistant to hearing anything that challenges their worldview. Your LGB colleagues may hear derogatory comments or misinformed assumptions on a daily basis, but it could be draining or risky for them to highlight homophobic incidents on such a frequent basis. Being an ally means supporting your LGB colleagues and challenging discrimination as a straight person. Ally-ship isn’t always about big gestures or actions, it is about using the power you have to create positive change for the people you are allied with.

If you constantly felt unsafe at work or were unable to freely speak about your loved ones, imagine the impact this may have on you. You might feel on edge, distracted, or generally less happy with your work. You might feel stressed if you couldn’t speak openly about yourself or your experiences or use the names of the people who are most important to you. You might have to turn down invitations to social events. It would feel almost impossible to relax. Keep this in mind when thinking about the experiences of your LGB colleagues. These feelings don’t seem conducive to productivity, job satisfaction, and positive mental wellbeing.

So, what can you personally do as an ally to encourage a more inclusive workplace culture?

Doing your own research and finding out more about LGBTQ+ history can be a great starting point for becoming more informed about broader issues. It is valuable to learn

more about the details and foundations of the discrimination that LGBT+ people continue to face. Current homophobic values are situated within a context that goes back decades. Dr Kyle Elliott, in an article for [Forbes](#), advises you

Familiarize yourself with key LGBTQ+ events, such as the 1969 Stonewall Riots, the first Pride march and the World Health Organization's recent declassification of same-sex attraction as a mental illness. Further, follow and engage with the plethora of LGBTQ+ thought leaders and LGBTQ+ content creators who share how to be a better LGBTQ+ ally

On this note, there is no definitive LGB voice, and the LGBTQ+ community is infinitely diverse. It is unfair to expect one person to be involuntarily nominated as a spokesperson. It's important to remember that an out colleague is not responsible for educating you on the vast array of information connected to being LGB. Like with any element of anyone's identity, be sensitive to a person's cues and willingness to talk about themselves. Analyse your motivations for asking questions and respect everybody's right to privacy. As [Kyle Elliott](#) phrases it, "remain open to continually learning what it means to be an ally to LGBTQ+ people in the workplace."

Could your company be more vocal about LGBTQ+ experiences and demonstrate its active support for LGB colleagues? Could you start by critically assessing how safe and inclusive your workplace really is? [Luciana Paulise](#) promotes "considering diversity throughout the entire employee experience, from hiring to developing and departing". Mandatory training is really valuable, but make sure you're not only talking about diversity and inclusion in a fleeting and superficial way. An LGBTQ+ employee-resource group (ERG) could be a great springboard for both allies and LGBTQ+ colleagues to share experiences, stories, and guidance. Remember that the organisation of, and participation in, ERGs should be a recognised part of a team member's role. It is important they do not feel obligated to give their free time to create or run these programs.

Grant Freeland, for [Forbes](#), focuses on the importance of leadership in cultural change. They acknowledge that whilst formal structures need to be more inclusive. So do day-to-day practices, and, "as with all culture change, actions speak louder than words". For example, are leaders adhering to a zero-tolerance policy for homophobic language and behaviours in the workplace? Is there a well-publicised mentorship programme for LGB recruits? Are there disciplinary procedures in place for those who refuse to follow the zero-tolerance policy against homophobia? How are employees able to flag or report abuse?

The term [heteronormativity](#) is a useful term to know, and this essentially sums up the assumption that everyone is straight. Are you and your colleagues ensuring they're using gender-neutral language, such as partner, and comfortable talking about adoption leave, pay, and rights? Might you, by default, assume that the married men you work with are married to women and misgender somebody's partner? Individuals may reinforce damaging stereotypes by saying things such as, "but Alex doesn't look like a lesbian". Might you have disparagingly described something or someone as

“gay”? Again, think about how it feels for your identity to be frequently undermined, questioned, mocked, belittled, or used as an insult. And think about how you, as an ally, can challenge the words used by others.

So, we’ve looked at the ways you can contribute to a safer and more inclusive workplace environment. This week why don’t you put 30 minutes aside to do your own research on a part of LGBTQ+ history that interests you, say the Stonewall Riots. And try using the term partner to signal that you haven’t assumed the gender of someone’s significant other.

Key points

- [Stonewall](#)’s definition of sexual orientation is “a person’s sexual attraction to other people, or lack thereof”
- There is always risk attached to an LGB individual being open about their sexual orientation at work
- According to [Stonewall](#), more than a third of LGBT staff have hidden that they are LGBT at work for fear of discrimination
- [Stonewall](#)’s definition of homophobia is “the fear or dislike of someone, based on prejudice or negative attitudes, beliefs or views about lesbian, gay or bi people”. Homophobia can sometimes be subtle and difficult to detect, so it’s important to be vigilant
- In the UK, [The Equality Act 2010 legally protects people from discrimination in the workplace and in wider society](#). It is against the law to discriminate against anyone on the basis of gender reassignment, sex, or sexual orientation
- It can feel isolating, exhausting, and demotivating to be the only LGBTQ+ person in a workplace setting
- Being an ally means supporting your LGB colleagues and challenging discrimination as a straight person
- Doing your own research and finding out more about LGBTQ+ history can be a great starting point for becoming more informed about broader issues
- Leadership is crucial to cultural change
- Heteronormativity is the assumption that everybody is straight
- Think carefully about the words you are using and how they could be damaging