

Introduction to Pronoun Awareness

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This track will cover Personal Gender Pronouns (PGPs). We'll look at what they are, give a brief overview of some important definitions, and then look at ways of sharing your pronouns and working to create a more inclusive work environment.

A pronoun is a word that is used instead of a noun. I, she, he, they, it, and we, for example. Instead of using somebody's name repeatedly in a sentence, you would ordinarily use a pronoun. [The Law Society](#) outlines that "gender pronouns (such as 'he/him/his' or 'she/her/hers') are the way that we constantly refer to one another's gender identity". Everybody has pronouns and uses pronouns to speak about other people. For example, if you've heard a new colleague is joining the company but aren't sure of their name or pronouns, you might say, "I wonder which office **they** are going to work in". If you were speaking about your friend, Kate, you probably wouldn't say, "I've invited Kate over for dinner, but I'm not sure what time Kate will get here as Kate has to work late". Instead, if her pronouns are she/her, you might say, "I've invited **her** over for dinner, but I'm not sure what time **she**'ll get here as **she** has to work late". Personal gender pronouns are the pronouns that align with a person's identity and, therefore, the pronouns others use when referring to that person. For example, Kate's pronouns are she, her, and hers, so you'd say, "Kate is excited for her birthday at the weekend".

We'll return to pronouns and how we use them in a minute.

To help us contextualise this, let's take a step back and first look at some important definitions relating to gender.

The following can all be found in Stonewall's [glossary](#). "Trans is an umbrella term to describe people whose gender is not the same as, or does not sit comfortably with, the sex they were assigned at birth". Cis, cisgender, or non-trans means "someone whose gender identity is the same as the sex they were assigned at birth". The gender

binary is the concept of there being two distinct genders, male and female, as defined by rigid cultural and social expectations. Many people exist outside of that binary. Non-binary is “an umbrella term for people whose gender identity doesn’t sit comfortably with ‘man’ or ‘woman’. Non-binary identities are varied and can include people who identify with some aspects of binary identities, while others reject them entirely”. [Gender non-conforming](#) means not conforming “to socially accepted or stereotypical gender norms”. Transgender people may identify as the binary gender they have transitioned to, or they may identify outside of the binary. According to [HBR](#), “more than 12% of U.S. millennials identify as transgender or gender non-conforming, and a majority believe that gender is a spectrum rather than a man/woman binary”.

[Stonewall](#) outlines that “the most common gender-neutral pronoun is the singular ‘they’”. Many non-binary people use they/them pronouns, but it’s vital not to assume someone’s pronouns. Some people may use multiple sets of pronouns - he/him and they/them, for example. This particular combination of pronouns would be conveyed as he/they or they/he. This means the person is comfortable with any of those pronouns. The order of the pronouns (for example, he followed by they) could indicate preference but not necessarily. It’s OK to ask someone how they would like you to use the pronouns. If somebody is comfortable with different pronouns being used within the same conversation, you could say, for example, “Sophia said she’s not in the office today; they’ve got a meeting in Manchester”.

The key is not to assume somebody’s pronouns. There is no way of determining which pronouns somebody uses without them voluntarily communicating theirs. A common misconception is that only Trans or non-binary people share their pronouns, whereas in reality, it is something that everyone can do to be more inclusive. The idea behind sharing pronouns in social media bios or email signatures is that it normalises their usage. The same can be said for introducing yourself to someone new by sharing your name and pronouns. It could feel intimidating to someone who is trans to have to announce their pronouns and correct others if they are the only person expected to speak about them in a work setting. [The Law Society](#) highlights:

Although you may feel it personally unnecessary to do so, and it may even make you feel a little uncomfortable at first, sharing your pronouns helps raise awareness and acceptance of different, including non-binary, gender identities.

If you have seen that your colleague uses “she/her” pronouns from the recent email she sent you, it means she doesn’t have to initiate a conversation on it. You may also see somebody’s pronouns have changed in their email signature, which again makes it easy to refer to them accurately to others without having to check with them first. It means you can be confident in knowing you haven’t misgendered someone because they have made clear in written communications what their pronouns are. It would clarify, for example, that Alex’s pronouns are “he/him”, Dan’s are “they/them” and Chris’ are “she/they”. To [misgender](#) someone is to “identify the gender of a person incorrectly by using an incorrect label or pronoun”. If you want to check someone’s pronouns, a simple “what are your pronouns?” or “can I just check your pronouns before I introduce you?” works well. Some trans or non-binary people may use different pronouns at work

and outside of work so be aware that their preferences may change based on safety or perception.

Another way to normalise the sharing of pronouns is to start meetings by asking members to introduce themselves and share what pronouns they use. This could be a simple addition of “Hi everyone. I’m Parminder, I work in accounts. I use she/her pronouns”. Colleagues could include pronouns in their name shown on screen if the platform allows, for example, Parminder (she/her). It is worth noting that someone may choose not to share their pronouns if they are not at that moment sure which pronouns they are most comfortable with. Some people may also feel comfortable with any pronouns but again, that’s not something to be assumed.

We all have pronouns. As Paige Cohen highlights in their article for [HBR](#), “most people only tend to ask visibly transgender or gender-nonconforming people” their pronouns, but cisgender and gender-conforming people have pronouns too. If everybody becomes comfortable and confident sharing their own pronouns, it avoids putting a spotlight on a specific individual. It means that everyone can be correctly referred to within a safe and inclusive environment without anyone being singled out for their perceived gender identity. It normalises getting other people’s pronouns correct and not harmfully speculating about another person’s gender. It potentially also indicates the broader safety of a workplace for trans employees. Jamie Wareham’s article for [Forbes](#) outlines how “when cisgender people [share their pronouns] as well, it normalises discussions about gender – a conversation that benefits everyone”. Lily Zheng, author of *Gender Ambiguity in the Workplace* and writer for [HBR](#), advises sharing your pronouns in a manner that is “clear, straightforward, and casual — in the same way you’d share what region or city you live in”. If you know someone’s pronouns, it can take the pressure off them to have to correct colleagues if you indicate their pronouns as part of any introduction to others. For example, “this is Alex, she’ll be managing the new project”.

If somebody hasn’t told you their pronouns, using the pronoun ‘they’ demonstrates that you haven’t assumed somebody’s gender. If you do know somebody’s pronouns (because they’ve told you), then accurately use their pronouns. When somebody tells you their pronouns, there is no reason for discussion or debate. It is not your place to choose somebody else’s pronouns. In the same way you’d strive to get somebody’s name correct (and pronounce it properly), make a concerted effort to get someone’s pronouns right. If you mistakenly use the wrong pronouns, [Paige Cohen](#) advises you “give a simple apology, and immediately make the correction by restating the sentence where you misgendered the individual”. It’s important not to try and justify your mistake or accuse the person you’ve misgendered of being at fault. Apologise, correct yourself, and continue your point, then make a concerted effort to remember their correct pronouns for next time. Occasional mistakes are absolutely fine, but it’s the way you deal with them that speaks volumes.

The fostering of a truly inclusive workplace by normalising the discussion of pronouns and gender is outlined by LGBT+ Inclusion Consultant [Gina Battye](#). They say:

It creates a safe space so everyone can bring their whole self to work, no longer needing to censor or hide parts of themselves. This leads to greater productivity, creativity and connection with colleagues and your organisational purpose.

Respecting somebody's pronouns is not just about courtesy. Of course, it's good manners to use someone's correct pronouns, but doing so also demonstrates a core appreciation of everybody's right to live a safe and fulfilling life.

There is a fundamental value to considering somebody's identity and recognising who they are. A safe and inclusive workplace goes way beyond a superficial "tolerance" of difference and diversity. Crucial research from The Trevor Project, via [Forbes](#), found "that for transgender people who live their lives with people who use their correct pronouns, it halves the chance they'll try to take their life".

On that note, it's evidently incredibly valuable to get more confident speaking about pronouns at work. So when you're next in a meeting (in person or online), make a concerted effort to share your pronouns if you feel able to. Maybe start by changing your screen name or LinkedIn bio to include them. Or, if there's someone you're introducing to a colleague this week and you know their pronouns, make it comfortable for them by sharing their name and their pronouns. So, you could say, "Hi Dan. I'd like you to meet Sam. She works with me on marketing strategy". That way, Dan knows Sam uses she/her pronouns and doesn't need to ask.

Key Points

- Personal gender pronouns are the pronouns that align with a person's identity
- Make sure not to assume someone's pronouns. Listen to what they tell you or include in their written communications and bios
- Everybody has pronouns, regardless of their gender identity
- If you mistakenly use the wrong pronouns, apologise for the error and correct your sentence accordingly
- If somebody hasn't told you their pronouns, using the pronoun 'they' demonstrates that you haven't assumed somebody's gender identity
- Colleagues making a concerted effort to discuss and respect pronouns can indicate a more inclusive and safe workplace culture for people of all genders