

Coming Out at Work: Assessing the Relevant Risks and Benefits

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The decision to disclose one's minority sexual orientation at work is often complex. Because of recent changes in Canada's legislation regarding same sex marriages, it is important now more than ever to address the process of coming out in the workplace. The purpose of this paper is to address the large gap in the literature available to facilitate such a difficult decision. As well, the paper highlights the important areas to consider before coming out, such as current research findings, theoretical models, and legal aspects. Lastly, a practical component is included to assist individuals during this process.

INTRODUCTION

Most individuals spend the majority of their day at work. Therefore, it is vital for people to feel satisfied and comfortable in that environment. For those who identify as gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgendered (GLBT), satisfaction with work could likely be related to their sexuality. In fact, Boatwright et al., (1996) found that the career development process of GLBT individuals is greatly influenced by their sexual orientation. However, coming out in the workforce is often a difficult decision, and additional sources of support through this challenging time would be beneficial. Although many individuals seek out counsellors to assist them through this process, it appears that issues pertaining to sexual orientation are often poorly addressed in counselling environments (Pearson, 2003; Cooley, 1998; Price & Telljohan, 1991). Therefore, it appears there is a valid need to provide an alternative resource of support for the GLBT population. It is crucial for individuals to become well informed regarding the decision of whether or not

to come out at work and to acquire ample external support during this process. In order to achieve this, the authors present a discussion of the relevant research, the legal aspects to consider, and a practical overview of ways to either disclose or conceal sexual orientation.

Choosing whether to come out is a very personal decision, and must be done only when the individual is ready, and if the circumstances are right. However, it has been shown that gaining external support for such an important decision is beneficial. For example, Bringaze and White (2001) report that seeking counselling and the use of self-help resources were helpful for a large number of lesbian women. Therefore, this article aims to provide additional support and practical resources for not only those who are seeking answers at this time, but also for those who have friends and family members who are deciding to come out, and for those who are assisting GLBT clients or employees. It has been found that if individuals decide to disclose their sexual orientation at work, preparation and practice are valuable tools for making this transition more manageable (Newman, Dannenfelser, & Benishek, 2002)

RELEVANT RESEARCH

Theory of Work Environment

When approaching a sensitive topic such as coming out, it is important to first look at the theory that is relevant to work environments. The Person-Environment-Correspondence theory states that job satisfaction relates to finding an amenable work environment (Zunker, 2002). Zunker (2002) suggests that, "individuals bring their requirements to a work environment, and the work environment makes its requirements of the individual. To survive, the individual and the work environment must achieve some degree of congruence (correspondence)" (p. 30). This notion is significant when discussing being out in the workforce, as the degree of discrimination against, or acceptance of, homosexuality is important. Not only should individuals be clear on their identity and self-concept, but they must also be able to work in an environment that embraces individual identities. If, for instance, an individual finds that their workplace is not accepting of minority sexual orientations, then they may choose to keep their sexual identity hidden. However,

it should be considered whether their workplace will allow them to keep their personal life separate. For example, many workplaces encourage workers to socialize outside of work at family-oriented picnics or holiday parties. Thus, workers may experience pressure to bring a date or get to know others more on a personal level. As well, individuals need to consider how prepared they are to compartmentalize their lives, such as not discussing private life at work, not bringing a partner to staff events, and keeping work life and social life completely separate.

Identity Formation Theory

Another important area for individuals to consider when speculating about coming out is identity development: their current stage of life, and how they currently relate to their external world. Frequently, those who are more likely to come out are further along in their identity development (Floyd, Stein, Harter, Allison, & Nye, 1999). Although many models exist with regard to gay and lesbian identity development, Cass's (1979) Gay and Lesbian Identity Development Model is most instructive for this study because it is considered one of the most widely researched identity development models that includes both gay men and lesbian women (Mobley & Slaney, 1996). As noted from Figure 1, there are six stages in Cass's model that range from Identity Confusion to Identity Synthesis. Individuals often move through the stages as they mature and learn more about themselves. It is important for individuals who are considering coming out to situate themselves within the model, which can help them explore their external support and preparedness to disclose.

FIGURE 1 – Cass's Gay and Lesbian Identity Development Model (Cass, 1979)

- Stage 1: Identity Confusion – “Am I gay?” Involves initial awareness that one's feelings and behaviours are related to homosexuality; individuals begins to wonder about their sexuality.
- Stage 2: Identity Comparison – “I may be gay”. Involves feelings of being alienated from expectations for the future that are linked to a heterosexual identity but

- have not been replaced yet by homosexual identity; a sense of not belonging to society, family, and friends.
- Stage 3: Identity Tolerance – “I am probably gay”. The individual counters social isolation with social contact with other homosexuals; the individual tolerates gay identity, finds acceptance within gay community, and feels alienation from heterosexual world.
- Stage 4: Identity Acceptance – “I am gay”. The individual accepts a gay identity, prefers gay social contexts, develops friendships within gay community, and begins to deal with the incongruence of acceptance in some places and not in others.
- Stage 5: Identity Pride – “I am GAY and proud!” Involves immersion in gay culture, a strong sense of pride in being gay, the individual accepts and prefers homosexual identity, and is less concerned with heterosexual perceptions. Disclosure is often a part of one's strategy for coping.
- Stage 6: Identity Synthesis – “I am a person who is gay”. The individual integrates their homosexual identity with all other aspects of self; sees self as a person not just as a 'gay' person.

Research Findings Related to Coming Out

When discussing the advantages and disadvantages of coming out, many will state common benefits and concerns, such as not having to hide versus increased discrimination, allowing people to feel known personally versus the possible loss of relationships with coworkers, and the ability to focus more on the job and less on concealing a personal identity versus threatened job security. In order to consider all the outcomes of coming out it is important to review the current literature. Although the research on coming out at work is sparse, it is still valuable to examine the general coming out literature to better understand the common themes and patterns.

The usual response when parents learn that their child is gay is an initial period of instability and difficulty, followed by

a steady increase in acceptance (LaSala, 2000; Cramer & Roach, 1988). Often because trust and honesty is solidified in this disclosure, relationships can improve beyond what they previously were (Robinson, Walters, & Skeen, 1989). However, even though it has been found that responses often become more accepting over time, individuals still tend to be fearful and apprehensive prior to disclosure because they often fear intense negative reactions. In fact, Miller and Boon (2000) found that individuals' predictions of how others will react when they learn of their sexual orientation are often much worse than the actual responses.

With regard to coming out at work, there are only a few studies that have examined this process. Ellis and Riggle (1995) found that there was a strong relationship between openness of sexual orientation and GLBT individuals' satisfaction with co-workers. Moreover, Friskopp and Silverstein (1995) examined gay men and lesbian women in various professional fields and found that the benefits of coming out at work outweighed the benefits of not coming out. For example, the participants who had come out scored higher on a number of variables including social well-being and psychological adjustment.

After reading the above-mentioned findings, it appears that coming out leads to more solid relationships and a greater sense of well-being. However, other aspects need to be considered when preparing to disclose. For example, a study that examined the salaries of those who had come out compared with those who had not come out found that those who had not disclosed their sexual orientation reported greater satisfaction with their pay and tended to make more money (Ellis & Riggle, 1995). As well, coming out in employment environments such as lower level jobs, nonprofessional settings, or highly conservative workplaces often resulted in more problems than for those people who came out in other work settings (Vargo, 1998). Lastly, openness about one's sexual orientation and being gender atypical have both been found to correlate significantly with increased levels of victimization (D'Augelli, Pilkington, & Hershberger, 2002).

It appears that the current body of research in the area of disclosing one's sexual orientation has illuminated benefits of both coming out and remaining "closeted". Thus, it is at the

discretion of individuals to gauge how these research findings may affect them, how their workplace would likely respond, and what the current levels of discrimination are at their place of employment.

Levels of Discrimination

In order to make a decision about coming out at work, a realistic awareness of the level of discrimination in the work setting is vital. See Table 1 below for an outline of the various types of discrimination, which may help guide a person's decision. For example, if one's workplace resembles the description of covert discrimination, then it may be more beneficial for that person not to disclose their sexual orientation. However, if one's workplace matches that of affirmation, then it is likely that disclosing one's sexual orientation will be a positive experience. The importance of assessing the levels of heterosexism at work relates to the above-mentioned theory of person-work-correspondence. Not only is it important to assess how the individual's personality fits with the workplace, but also how well the workplace environment fits with the individual.

TABLE 1 - Levels of Discrimination (Alderson, 2002)

<i>Overt Discrimination</i>	Formal and informal discrimination occurs based on sexual orientation.
<i>Covert Discrimination</i>	There is informal discrimination. Hiring and advancement favors heterosexuality.
<i>Tolerance</i>	The workplace has a formal antidiscrimination policy, but is lacking any other support for GLBT individuals.
<i>Affirmation</i>	There is a formal antidiscrimination policy, and equal treatment given to all employees. GLBT individuals are valued for the diversity they bring to workplace.

PRACTICAL RESOURCES

The Decision Process

After weighing the advantages and disadvantages of coming out in the workplace, individuals may have a better idea of what is right for them at this time. Deciding to come out in the workplace is a process that will be unique for each person and there is no one answer or solution.

For workers who have been out in all other areas of their lives until now, to suddenly find themselves in a workplace environment where they feel they have to pretend they are someone they are not may be very disturbing and upsetting for them. They suddenly have to become secretive about their lives and find themselves making up excuses about why they are not bringing a date to a work function. It may also be very stressful wondering if a coworker is going to meet someone in the community that knows that they are out. Other workers may not be at an identity stage where they are ready to come out at all, but would like to know that their place of employment would be supportive of them should they choose to at some point in the future. Some workers may decide to hide their sexuality at work, as they do not want to jeopardize possible promotions or rate of pay. Workers may simply find that their workplace is not a safe place to be out and decide not to come out because of the risk of harassment or discrimination.

Finding a Supportive Company

Before beginning a job search, individuals may want to think about what companies in their field value diversity and would be supportive. Things to consider include what the company advertises; does the employer advertise that they are an equal opportunity employer either in a job advertisement or on their website?; and where does this company advertise and what community events does the company support? If the company advertises in GLBT magazines or newspapers, they are most likely supportive of the community. Other ideas include: checking out the local pride parade website and finding out which companies have supplied floats or funding, anonymously phoning the Human Resources (HR) department in the company and asking them about their policies regarding equality and discrimination and whether or not they have

specific training in place for this and whether it is mandatory. Asking what would be their course of action should discrimination occur in the workplace may be helpful, as well as asking around about the company within the GLBT community. Someone may know that company's stance on equality and discrimination or have had a personal experience with employees at that particular company.

When to Come Out

Once the decision to come out in the workplace is made, the next logical step is to decide when will be the best time to come out. Options include: coming out during the application process in the resume, once accepted for an interview, at a job offer, or once a comfort level has been achieved in the workplace and with colleagues.

For those who decide to come out on the resume, they should be aware that recent research has demonstrated that despite equality legislation, discrimination against lesbian and gay people still occurs during the hiring process (as cited in Griffith & Hebl, 2002). Individuals may be able to allude to their sexual orientation on a resume by including volunteer work or affiliation with a known GLBT group or organization. For some workers, this may be an important step because they would want to know that they are accepted before they get to an interview. For other people, it may be more important to come out during the interview process. If the decision is to wait until the interview process, the issue arises regarding removing affiliation with a GLBT organization from the resume. This may be a difficult decision especially if relevant skills have been acquired from experiences with the organization. Another option is to simply describe the organization as an "antidiscriminatory organization" or to use an acronym. Individuals need to be prepared, however, to answer questions regarding what that acronym stands for during an interview. Using a functional resume format may also be helpful as skills are highlighted rather than specific places the skills may have been learned, although some companies may prefer a chronological resume.

Coming out during the interview may feel awkward to some people, as sexual orientation is not a typical topic of job interviews. One way to approach this is to inquire about same

sex partner benefits or to ask about the company's policies on equality with GLBT individuals. Waiting until the job offer may mean having a conversation with the potential manager or HR person to disclose identity as a GLBT individual, and asking if this is going to pose any problems with coworkers or if there have been any problems within the company in the past.

Another option is for the individual to wait until a comfort level has been achieved in the work environment and has had a chance to get to know people well enough to predict how they would react. A coworker may be openly out and discussions may be allowed to take place regarding their experience within the company. If the decision is to come out at this point it may be helpful to choose a coworker who would be supportive to talk to first. This person might be a manager, a person in HR, a union representative or simply a friendly coworker. A helpful activity involves writing down the names of five coworkers and thinking about how they would react to a coming out disclosure.

How to Come Out

Before deciding to come out, it is important to have a supportive network in place. This may mean connecting with other members of the GLBT community, having some supportive friends, or even seeking counselling for added support during this time. Research conducted by Schneider (1986) demonstrated that lesbian women were more likely to come out at work if they were rated higher on sociability, which included close supportive friendships in the workplace. These people can be used as sounding boards to practice role-playing about what could be said during the coming out process, to help think of possible reactions or scenarios, and to help come up with plans of action. Once the decision to come out at work has been made, it may be helpful to know what laws are in place to offer protection from discrimination and where to access services, should discrimination become a problem.

Legal Considerations

The Ontario Human Rights Code is "a law that provides for equal rights and opportunities and recognizes the dignity and worth of every person in Ontario" (Ontario Human Rights Code, www.ohrc.on.ca). The code defines the terms discrimination and harassment, with sexual orientation being

included in both. For example, if an employee is fired or denied promotions based on his or her sexual orientation, then under the provincial code, this is defined as discrimination and thus against the law. Discrimination can occur in overt and covert forms, both equally unlawful, and the code provides examples of both. The Ontario Human Rights Code also provides extensive information of where and how to file a claim. With regards to federal policies, the Government of Canada has a well-defined policy on "anti-discriminatory clauses and practices", which includes sexual orientation, and can be accessed at:

http://www.hrsdc.gc.ca/en/lp/spila/wlb/caowc/10chapter_5.shtml

Due to the recent legislation changes in Canada with regard to same sex marriages, many alterations in workplace benefits have occurred. For example, the definition of dependants has been expanded to include those in same sex marriages and those who cohabit with someone of the same-sex for a year or longer (UWO, Human Resources Department). It is important to be aware of company policies and benefits in relation to these legal changes. Information can often be obtained through company human resources department, and from employee benefit packages.

Conclusion

With the legalization of same-sex marriage in Canada, the authors speculate that research and literature on the coming out process at work will likely develop even further. Thus, the goal of this article was to support the research expansion of this significant topic, while also providing individuals with a comprehensive framework for barriers and benefits to coming out in the workplace. For those who are considering disclosing their sexual orientation at their place of employment, it is important to consider all of the elements that may be involved and result from such a decision. Aspects such as relevant research findings, levels of workplace discrimination, applicable legal aspects, and practical resources of how to come out are all worth taking into account. This significant and personal decision warrants ample deliberation and preparation. Such forethought will likely provide greater

resiliency to cope with any setbacks that may arise during this difficult, but often rewarding, time.

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