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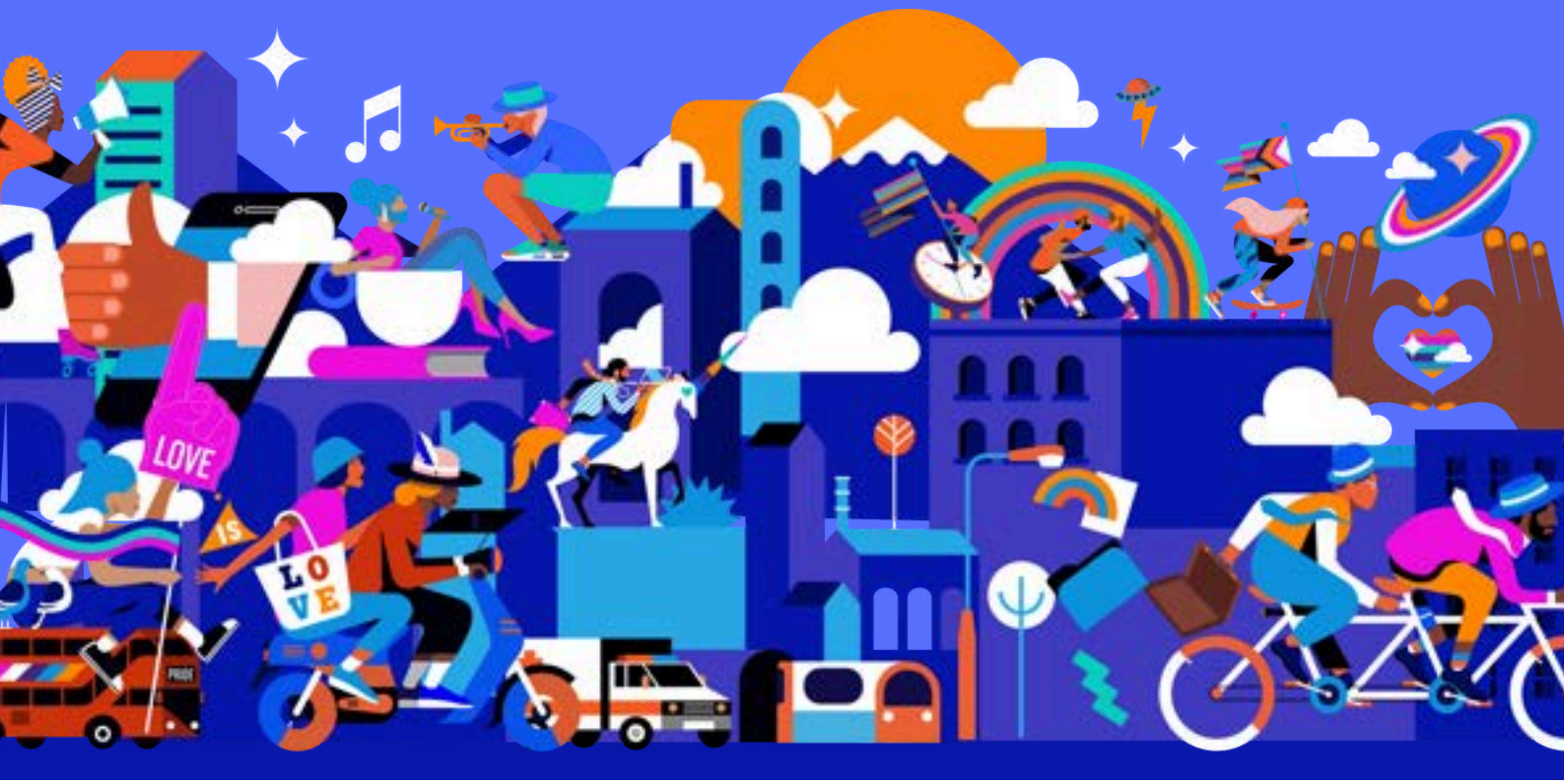
mygwork

LGBTQ+ Role Model Stories 2024



10 years of accelerating LGBTQ+ inclusion at work **#WorkingWithPride**

Dear myGwork Community,

As we celebrate myGwork's 10th anniversary, we are delighted to share this year's compilation of inspiring interviews – featured not only on myGwork but also in renowned LGBTQ+ publications such as *Attitude* and *Diva magazines*, reaching **millions of readers worldwide.**

Over the past decade, we have proudly showcased the remarkable stories of **thousands of LGBTQ+ professionals and allies** who are the driving force behind our vibrant, diverse, and dynamic network.

This year alone, we had the privilege of interviewing **over 250 extraordinary LGBTQ+ individuals and allies** from all corners of the community and across countless industries. This book highlights just a fraction of these inspiring voices – stories of resilience, authenticity, and achievement that continue to uplift and empower us all.

Looking ahead to 2025, we are excited to build on this momentum by amplifying even more voices from across the global LGBTQ+ business community. Together, we can advance our mission to create inclusive workplaces worldwide, driving change, championing inclusion, and promoting workplace equality for all.

On behalf of the entire myGwork team, we extend our heartfelt thanks for your unwavering support and for being an integral part of our #WorkingWithPride mission. Here's to many more years of shared progress, pride, and inspiration.

Adrien & Pierre Gaubert

Co-founders of myGwork

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AJ Fernandez Rivera
She/Her
Managing Director

Writers Profile

Accenture exec on driving inclusivity: ‘Inclusion and diversity power innovation’

AJ Fernandez Rivera, managing director, technology and operations lead at Accenture, has left an indelible mark on the company as a leader, advocate and catalyst for positive change.

AJ has over 25 years of experience in delivery and sales roles across continents. She’s helped grow Accenture’s Technology business across Fortune 500 clients, like Marriott, Bank of America, AMEX, Canada Mortgage Housing Corporation and more. AJ’s commitment to prioritising diversity and inclusion, both within the company and society at large, has been unwavering.

AJ’s journey towards embracing authenticity and advocating for inclusion began at a young age. Growing up in a safe and supportive home in the Philippines, AJ witnessed firsthand the impact of acceptance and belonging. This foundation of love and compassion was extended to AJ’s friends, particularly queer individuals, who found refuge in her family’s home.

“My home was a safe place,” she explained. “And safe not just for me, but when I made friends with other queer kids, I’d bring them home with me. Mom welcomed them – every single one of them.”

However, despite this open-minded environment, adolescence still brought about an internal struggle – one many LGBTQ+ teenagers are all too familiar with. AJ found herself struggling to reconcile the openness and support she has at home, versus the intimidation and bullying at school which forced her to live a double life.

AJ’s life took a transformative turn when she joined the professional world at Accenture. Despite past difficulties faced as a trans woman in the corporate world, AJ found the courage to share her true self with colleagues and clients when she moved to the company’s Toronto office. The overwhelming support and acceptance received provided AJ with a newfound sense of authenticity and freedom, inspiring her more than ever to pursue her passion for inclusivity.

Mentorship has also played a crucial role in AJ’s personal and professional development. Her grandmother and mother instilled strength and confidence in her, while mentors within Accenture provided invaluable guidance throughout her career. These mentors, including strong female leaders within the firm, encouraged a safe space for meaningful discussions and empowered AJ to believe in herself.

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“I am both honoured and lucky to have found mentors in my personal and my professional life,” remarked AJ. “My biggest mentors personally are my grandmother and my mother. They are the strongest women I know and inspire me to live gracefully, to always look at things positively and to not become a ‘person that is numbed by the negativity’ but rather a ‘person that is always striving to find light and positivity in every situation.’ I credit all that character to the women I idolise in my family.”

AJ’s commitment to giving back is evident in her championing of Accenture’s partnership with Pasarelle Numerique’s CSR (Corporate Social Responsibility) initiative. This initiative aims to provide IT education and job opportunities to historically marginalised youth in Cambodia, the Philippines and Vietnam.

The company’s commitment to diversity and inclusion mirrors AJ’s own values. The company actively fosters an inclusive environment where all employees can thrive. With specialised learning programmes, mentoring initiatives and mental health resources, AJ explained how Accenture supports its workforce in every aspect of their lives.

“Accenture is actively working to create an environment where everyone – regardless of their background and identity – feels they belong and can be their best professionally and personally. The foundational belief in Accenture is that inclusion and diversity power innovation.”

Accenture has a “thriving” Pride employee network with more than 90 chapters around the world, and more than 119,000 LGBTIQ+ Allies across all the countries where Accenture operates. And by “thriving” AJ means that the network is a dedicated and visible community, where people connect, share, advocate and learn from one another. Additionally, equal access to medical plans for LGBTIQ+ people and their partners is offered to 100%* of employees, and coverage for transgender-inclusive health care is accessible to 95%* of employees (*where legally possible and such healthcare is available).

No matter how progressive a company is, many people still feel the need to hide their identity in public. Having gone through this struggle herself, AJ is fully aware of the emotional and professional repercussions of not being able to live your truth. She shared heartfelt advice for those struggling to come to terms with their authentic selves and live openly.

“For those that are still in the closet, I hear you, I feel you, and I understand you,” she began. “I have been there myself. Every coming out story is different, and you are the best person to know when and how you should do it, especially in the workplace.

“It takes a lot of consideration both personally and professionally. Don’t take it lightly, have the courage to do the hard work, and be kind to yourself.”

Throughout her 25-year career at Accenture, AJ has found fulfilment in the company’s supportive culture and core progressive values. Despite limited LGBTQ+ role models in the IT industry during the early stages of AJ’s career, she still drew inspiration from the courage and resilience of LGBTQ+ individuals in her hometown and has, in turn, become an LGBTQ+ role model for future professionals in the industry.

Reflecting on her journey, AJ shared a final message. “The road to acceptance and the journey to become a cohesive, respectful and kind society is very long. However long it is, it is still the right road to take. As we continue to strive towards a just society, I have two suggestions. First, we often take matters too seriously and use our head only and don’t listen to what our heart is saying. I suggest we extend our compassion, and we might just see each other’s humanity. Secondly, it’s a very long road ahead — Do not lose hope, nor be sad. Let’s enjoy the journey and make it a fun one!”

By Zoë Schulz

Profile

Article

CGI

Mark Aston

He/Him

Senior Vice President

Writers Profile

CGI executive Mark Aston: ‘Creativity comes from diversity’

myGwork sat down to chat with Mark Aston, senior vice president for UK North, Utilities, Communications, and Australia at CGI about coming out, the growth of diversity and inclusion in business, and the importance of ensuring that staff feel supported at work.

Mark’s story begins in South Essex in the 1970s, at a time when he says there were three options upon reaching maturity. “No one went to university. You either went to work for a bank in the city, you went to hit things with a hammer in the refinery up the road, or you went to work in a shop.” Mark opted briefly for the bank route. “It was a short-lived career.” He took any opportunities he was given and found himself working at CGI – a company he has been with for the last 31 years.

Growing up in the 70s, Mark says, complicated his route to coming out. “You would never have considered yourself gay, because there were zero positive stereotypes. Gay at the time was just equated with Aids – even sex education at the time just boiled down to talking about it as though nothing else was going on. I didn’t know any better.” He went down what was viewed as the expected path at the time – get married and have kids. It wasn’t until later in his life, just 13 years ago, that he took the decision to come out and live as his authentic self.

Coming out can be a difficult experience for LGBTQ+ people, particularly as we begin to worry and imagine the worst possible outcomes. Mark was no different in these concerns: “I work in a job where you’re planning for things all the time, and usually planning for the worst in case it happens. My brain is wired in a way that when it came to planning coming out, all I could think of was the worst possible scenarios.”

When it finally happened, he couldn’t have been more surprised by the support he received. “My dad was a proper East Londoner, and he became my greatest supporter.” At work, Mark’s boss was constantly checking in on him, taking time to understand the complexities and supporting him through it. “It was a weight lifted – after being with the company for so long I was worried about that change from ‘Straight Mark’ to ‘Gay Mark,’ how people would behave, perceive me, my career, and so on. In reality, it’s never been an issue.”

Mark now is the sponsor of the LGBTQ+ network at CGI in the UK and Australia, where the mission is to ensure everyone can bring their whole selves to work. CGI’s approach is coordination between employees and leadership: if there is enough interest in a network, management will provide the resources and structure to establish it and support it to thrive in the business. Each network is then sponsored by someone from the executive team, who is a safe harbour for that network – fighting for the changes they want to implement, accessing further resources, and so on. “We’re actively involved in going through policies, evolving them over time, and using the community response to assess whether our policies are unconditionally inclusive.”

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LGBTQ+ representation in business has evolved in recent years, and throughout his career Mark has seen this grow from being “an issue that was never discussed, to an issue that was discussed, to being an issue that doesn’t need to be discussed.” It’s a far cry from the school playground, Mark remembers, where homophobic slurs were rife. “It’s just so different now.”

CGI’s LGBTQ+ network has made itself heard on several issues, including, for example, upgrading the language in maternity and paternity policies. “Some of these things can feel like a minefield, particularly for people who are very passionate and determined not to show bias. You can end up tripping over your own tongue sometimes, so we want to create the right frameworks that we can put in place. For example, we’ve built in consultation with the network a ‘transition at work’ policy, that being just one of the lots of parts that we have as a network.”

The network decides among itself how to proceed on matters – what policies to push for, how these policies are shaped, all the way down to which Prides they want to march it. In addition to policy, the network organises socials for staff to join and unwind, as well as connecting with other networks in the business around the world to develop partnerships and discuss the way forward for LGBTQ+ staff at CGI.

“There was a lack of role models in my formative years, and being able to see that your sexuality or gender isn’t an impediment to your professional life or success is great,” Mark explains. “It’s useful for people to see people like themselves who have been able to advance their own careers, as well as that there are people at senior levels who they can talk to. It’s about unconditional inclusivity.”

Unconditionally inclusive is very much embedded in the company’s culture. With over 90,000 employees around the world at CGI, what they’re doing every day is trying to find solutions to problems, which requires creativity.
“I think creativity comes from diversity. You need people with different perspectives looking at problems to find good solutions to them. Our job is to nurture the differences that create these viewpoints. We’ve got to create safe spaces for people that think differently, have different needs, where people feel they can contribute effectively.”

By Dylan Mann-Hazell

Profile

Article

Sabah Choudrey
They/Them
Educator/Writer/Speaker

Writers Profile

The Importance of Supporting Trans People of Color

To mark WorkPride and Pride Month, Sabah Choudrey, Founder of Trans Pride Brighton and myGwork member, talks about the importance of supporting trans people of color, as well as why they wrote a book on the very topic.

Hi Sabah, can you tell us a bit about yourself?

I'm Sabah, my pronouns are they/he. I'm a trans, queer Muslim living in Hounslow, West London. I have a decade of experience in trans youth work, LGBTQ+/POC/faith community work, a background in Psychotherapy, and a passion for writing and cats. When it comes to my identity, many parts are not fixed and I've come to love that about myself; my gender is fluid, my sexuality is fluid, my faith is fluid. My understanding of myself is continually evolving and my position in the world is constantly changing.

Can you share your career journey to date?

I'm described as a reluctant activist on most things trans, brown and hairy. I founded Trans Pride Brighton in 2013 and made The Rainbow List in 2015, celebrating 101 of the most influential LGBT people in Britain. I have built a presence across UK and Europe, speaking at TEDx Brixton, ILGA Europe, IDAHOT Brussels, Malmö Pride about intersectionality, identity and inclusion. I have been a proud trans youth worker for 10 years, previously Senior Youth Work Practitioner at Gendered Intelligence and currently Director of Colours Youth Network supporting LGBTQ+ POC young people in UK and Director for Middlesex Pride. I am a trustee for Inclusive Mosque Initiative. I'm also an experienced Psychotherapist and Artist Wellbeing and Care Practitioner supporting LGBTQ+ theatre, winner of the Gay Times Future Fighters Honour and the National Advisor for LGBT Health Award.

Can you share what led you to found Trans Pride Brighton?

One day in a coffee shop opposite St Peter's Church, I was sitting with a few trans friends and their friends, sipping soya lattes and mint teas. We were tired and we were desperate. Brighton Pride was around the corner and we were running out of energy. We were tired of being constantly excluded and tokenised. We were tired of just being the T in LGBTQ. We were tired of coming last, being an after-thought, being spoken over.

It was 2013 and the idea of a small group of visible trans people walking up North Street with a few banners, grey sky, wind blowing, seagulls teasing was terrifying. But it was absolutely necessary that we redefined and celebrated our pride.

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So then, well we started shouting. We founded Trans Pride Brighton right there and then. It wasn't perfect but it changed everything for me simply because it happened. We actually made it happen. And now, it's approaching it's 11th year, inspiring Trans Pride events and marches across the UK. This is a love story for our trans and non-binary community. Like many others, it begins with heartache, desperation and longing. We all long to be recognized, understood and above all we just want to be together. All those ways in which we hurt and feel alone light a path to find each other and build a safe and proud community. And it goes on and on, this love story never ends.

Can you tell us a bit about your latest book and why you wrote it?

My activism is what I suppose led me to writing this book. I call myself a 'reluctant activist' because I was reluctantly pulled in to create spaces and building community because I needed it. Desperation so often drives the work of LGBTQ+ people of colour. We're desperate for support, safety and validation so we do it ourselves from the ground up. I needed to not be the only trans person of colour (TPOC) in the room so I started explaining what needs to change and how others can help. I don't want TPOC to be constantly asked about what cis or white people can do to help them, we are so often put in the position of educating or explaining – expending our energy to those who aren't always able to reciprocate when we need to put our energy to the various crises and drawbacks our communities face across mental health, welfare, housing, immigration, employment, healthcare and safety. I don't want cis or white people to ask 'what we can do' to us first, but to themselves first.

Can you provide a short synopsis of the book and some key takeaways?

This book goes back to the beginning. It starts where we start, with our history, the forces that have shaped it, and those that continue to do so. It follows 8 sections. In Section 1, I cover identity and intersectionality, terminology, language, the power of language, touching on history and useage. Inclusive practice starts with the individual, diving into shame and privilege because that's where true change starts; with us. In Section 2-4 I explore creating and holding safe(r) spaces and putting this into practice. Section 5-8 takes you through celebrating TPOC communities, and real examples of inclusion and exclusion that we can all learn from.

This book is for anyone for works with people. Whether you are a business, work in social care or education or events, in the charity sector or starting your own community or support group, you will be interacting with people, which means you'll be interacting with us too! TPOC are a part of so many communities, not just LGBTQ, we exist everywhere. Just because we aren't in those spaces, doesn't mean we don't need them. This book is a guide on how you can make sure your services and spaces are safe and accessible for TPOC and why inclusive practice matters. This book is a personal celebration of how incredible our TPOC communities are.

I hope that someone can pick this up and no matter what their background or intentions are that they can take something from this, that we, trans people of colour, are a community and we matter. Our voices are here in words, art, poetry and quotes. You can't ignore us or overlook us – this book exists because we do.

What's your message for Pride Month this year?

If there's one message I'd like to share during Pride month it would be to really take the time to understand solidarity and what that looks like within our LGBTQ+ community but also across to other communities, such as POC, faith and disabled communities. Solidarity needs to exist within these communities as well as between them. Think about LGBTQ+ and all the intersections within. Consider class and how it is woven through culture, language, access, dis/ability - do not forget these intersections.

Solidarity is not a yes or a no; it's not a tick box. Solidarity does not stay still, it is a movement and moves itself, it reacts, changes, and connects to whatever a community needs. Solidarity asks, "What can I do?" and does it. Then, asks again.

By Pepi Sappal

Cristelle Foucault
She/Her
Diversity Campaign & Engagement Director

Writers Profile

Christelle Foucault on how Sanofi is helping to create change for the LGBTQIA community

Christelle Foucault, Diversity Campaign and Engagement Director at Sanofi, spoke to myGwork about how her initial career in banking gradually developed into creating change for the LGBTQIA community. She also discussed the company's programme, A Million Conversations, which is dedicated to engaging with marginalised communities to rebuild trust and improve workplace conditions.

Before joining the team at Sanofi, Christelle began her career in banking, with notable positions in France and Asia. Outside her work in finance, she was known for her vocal support and commitment to the LGBTQIA community. Eventually, this led to her being approached by the French Ministry to work in gender equality, diversity and equal opportunities. This marked a significant turning point in her career as she joined as an advisor to the minister. With her expertise and dedication, Christelle thrived in this new environment. In late 2022, the multinational pharmaceutical company Sanofi recognised her unique and passionate profile and recruited her to co-lead their global initiative called A Million Conversations, launched this year at Davos.

In her role as the Diversity Campaign and Engagement Director, Christelle is responsible for representing Sanofi's commitment to diversity and inclusion on top of managing that signature program which aims to improve healthcare systems to make them more inclusive for underrepresented groups (ethnic minorities, people with disabilities, women & the LGBTQIA community). She takes pride in showcasing Sanofi's impressive dedication to inclusivity and emphasises the importance of her role and the opportunity it provides to make a positive impact.

"It feels good to have that kind of role," she said. "To turn to the external world and to represent Sanofi in all the commitment that we have around DE&I which is all really impressive. I'm really proud of working in this role."

Outside the workplace, sport was always a significant part of Christelle's life, nurtured in her childhood in a small village in the Southwest of France. Growing up with limited LGBTQIA representation, it took time for her to accept her identity – the absence of openly LGBTQIA role models meant that Christelle had no interaction with the community until she moved to Paris for her studies and career. It was in the LGBTQIA sports association that she found a sense of belonging and became involved in advocating for the community.

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One of the issues that Sanofi is working on at the moment in France through A Million Conversations focuses on the legislation regarding hormonal therapy and expands its scope to address all issues faced by the LGBTQIA community, women, people with disabilities and people of ethnic minority. These issues range from healthcare training to combating discriminative bias based on identity – the ultimate goal being to eliminate all unequal access and treatment.

“Many issues require attention, including doctor training and combating bias based on sexual orientation, gender identity, as well as ethnicity and disability,” explained Christelle. “It is disheartening that in 2023 people may still face unequal access and treatment due to their identity and appearance.”

Through her work at both the ministry and Sanofi, Christelle has made substantial contributions to the LGBTQ+ community and other marginalised groups. Her commitment and passion for promoting diversity and inclusion are evident in the impactful initiatives she leads. With initiatives like “A Million Conversations”, she continues to challenge the status quo and drive positive change within Sanofi and the broader healthcare industry.

By Dylan Mann-Hazell

Profile

Article

Santander

Laura McLean
She/Her
Talent Manager | Mindset Coach | Facilitator

Writers Profile

Laura McLean on how being a part of the LGBTQIA community has left her with a richer perspective on life

Laura McLean, Strategic Talent Manager at Santander, spoke to myGwork about why intersectionality needs to be the focus of future discussions. She also shared her inspiring journey of coming to terms with her identity, adopting a sense of pride, and how being a part of the LGBTQIA community has left her with a richer perspective on life.

Raised in Glasgow in the 1990s, Laura's initial experience of diversity was not as strong as it could've been – especially for someone who had a future striving for inclusivity and equality ahead of her. However, it was this precise lack of experience that inspired her to look further and move to a new city in search of more.

Her life took a remarkable turn when she moved to Milton Keynes, where over the many years she spent there, she honed her adaptability and resilience in a position focused on leadership development and driving transformational change at Santander. Beyond her interest in implementing diverse and inclusive spaces, Laura is driven by a passion for creating an environment of psychological safety and helping others reach their full potential.

"My journey has been quite an adventure. But I am proud of every twist and turn it's taken."

Not only did her experiences in Milton Keynes inspire Laura to find her talent in the professional field – she also learnt to find herself. When going to a friend's Disney princess-themed hen night party (an event that wasn't particularly her scene) she decided to dress up as the villainous Cruella de Vil. Upon arriving, she found that someone else had also dressed up as Cruella, and Laura was immediately drawn to her. After spending the rest of the evening talking to her and getting to know her, Laura soon became aware that the language was becoming more and more flirtatious – and to her surprise, despite feeling very confused, she was ultimately okay with that.

"There was this human in front of me that had the strongest energy and connection I'd ever felt in my life out of nowhere – but she was a woman. And that was hard for me to deal with."

During the early developing stages of this relationship, Laura felt uneasy about how she identified. A mix of a lack of diverse figures growing up, and a lack of LGBTQIA role models, left her confused and unsure about how to label herself. She recounted a time when she sought help at Santander after her boss noticed that she was acting out of the ordinary and asked to speak with her.

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“I couldn’t say the words ‘gay’, ‘lesbian’, ‘bisexual’ – I couldn’t get them out my mouth,” she remembered. “And my boss shuffled his chair around, he took my hand, and he said ‘There’s a label that’s much more important. And that’s happy.’ At that moment, I realised he was right. The only label that is important right now is happy. And something tells me that this human is going to make me happy.”

After a lot of self-reflection and discussion, they finally felt able to begin a relationship – a fulfilling and loving one that Laura is still in now. Just a few months into their time together, they both attended a Pride march in London, representing Santander. Since the start of their relationship, they had already been subjected to strange looks and occasional judgemental comments – but for the first time, surrounded by people who she knew supported her, Laura finally felt she could be her full, authentic self there. So, she kissed her partner, without worry, without fear – and the crowd around her cheered.

“That’s when I knew I was at home in that community,” she reminisced. “I’ve come to see that all those aspects of my identity that I doubted are my strengths. Just by talking to other people within the community and learning that everyone has something amazing to offer, and what I have to offer is amazing in my own way. My personal journey in identifying within the community has given me a richer perspective on life, and a deeper empathy for others.”

This feeling of elation and self-confidence was something Laura felt keen on passing on to as many people as possible. As the Be Yourself ambassador for Santander UK as well as being the LGBTQIA Embrace Employee Resource Group’s external communications lead, Laura speaks openly and honestly about her identity to help normalise and encourage people to feel comfortable in their own skin.

“I am a mixed race, adopted, bisexual, neurodivergent human,” she said. “So, I’ve had my own unique set of challenges and triumphs. Self-discovery, acceptance, understanding, not just of my own identity, but the diverse identities that make up our community.”

Looking to the future of diversity and inclusion in the workplace and beyond, Laura hoped to place a spotlight on intersectionality, and maintaining solidarity within the LGBTQIA community. At a time when basic rights for various communities are at risk, she believes it’s more important than ever for marginalised people to stand together where others seek to tear them down.

“It’s about emphasising the importance of intersectionality within the community,” Laura explained. “We don’t all have the same starting point, and we must recognise that whilst we’re not in the same boat, we are in the same storm. We even see discrimination within the community, the trans community are being attacked right now, and they need us over there. As a collective, if we’re respected and validated and understanding and working together on our unique challenges, that’s a wave of change that’s unstoppable.”

By Dylan Mann-Hazell

Profile

Article

Charlie Martin
She/Her
Racing car driver

Writers Profile

Driving Change for Trans Awareness: Charlie Martin Shares Her Advocacy Work in Motorsport

In the world of motorsport, visibility for LGBTQ+ individuals has historically been scarce. However, for one trailblazer, coming out on Trans Day of Visibility (TDOV) in 2018 marked a significant stride toward inclusion and awareness in an industry largely uncharted in terms of LGBTQ+ representation. For Trans Awareness Week, Britain's racing car driver Charlie Martin talks to myGwork about her trans activism work in motorsport, and what more the sporting world can do to improve trans inclusion and awareness.

Hi Charlie, can you tell us about your current role/advocacy work in the trans inclusion/awareness, space?

I came out in my industry (motorsport) in 2018 on TDOV, at a time when there really wasn't any LGBTQ+ visibility in this space, so a lot of my activism is just that – being open and visible in a way that can empower positive awareness and acceptance. I work with a number of charities, most notably as a Stonewall Sports Champion, as well as Racing Pride. Away from the track, I've used my unique life experience to help multiple Fortune 500 companies become more inclusive. Through a combination of story telling and tested methodology, I teach organisations how to support LGBTQ+ colleagues by increasing awareness and acceptance, with structured advice on how to improve allyship and how to authentically engage with employees.

What initiatives are you involved in to mark Trans Awareness Week this year?

I've been working with Google and ZF to help them support their trans employees and create more allyship within their businesses, and I was supporting Trans in the City last week which was great to connect with so many people from the Trans community. I've also been posting a lot of educational content across LinkedIn which has received fantastic engagement, it's so important to see that support from allies right now.

Can you tell us a bit about your personal transition journey?

Like a lot of people from my generation, I waited what felt like a long time to transition mainly due to a lack of understanding and acceptance in society. When I finally committed, I gave up on motorsport as I couldn't ever imagine it being okay, and going back a year later was tough. While it's not been easy, I've had some amazing support in all aspects of my life; I couldn't be where I am today without it.

What were some of the most difficult challenges that you faced along the way?

A genuine lack of awareness was a big factor. Most people hadn't met a trans person before and I think this is still a problem for many people today. They are worried about saying or doing the wrong thing.

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In your opinion what are some of the biggest challenges that people in the trans community still face, especially at work, and what can organizations do to help them overcome them?

I think a big area of opportunity for progress lies in helping people to understand what effective allyship looks like. Often people are scared of making mistakes, and this leads to inaction or simply withdrawing from engaging with people. It's the exact same issue I had to confront in the race paddock. The key is education and creating empathy. Put simply we just need to connect, listen, and be kind.

What advice can you offer someone who's considering transitioning right now?

Sadly, the UK is at a historical low point in terms of support available for trans people looking to access medical support, but there are a lot of support groups. We are an incredibly strong and resourceful community. Personally I found the experience of connecting with others (online and IRL) early in my transition immensely helpful. I made some lifelong friends and we helped each other get through a lot.

How important is trans inclusion, especially on the sports/race track?

Trans inclusion in sport is a big topic; and unfortunately one that's often misunderstood and factually misrepresented in the media. While motorsport avoids many of the issues other sports face due to it being a mixed sport (men and women race together), it's absolutely vital that everyone feels welcome however they identify. Living authentically has had such a dramatic effect on my performance as an athlete that I cannot underestimate the importance of creating inclusive environments where people feel able to be themselves – whether that's on the race track or in the boardroom.

In your opinion, how important are trans allies to promote inclusion?

We are living at a time when we need allies to be vocal and emphatic in their support of trans rights. Globally the community is under attack from so many angles that it's not enough to assume that being passive implies acceptance. If we are going to turn the tide of discrimination, then we really do need everyone to stand up and make it a priority to visibly support us as allies.

How are you personally promoting trans inclusion in the racing world?

In recent years I've come to appreciate that when I go racing I have to be 100% focused on the job at hand to achieve the best possible result. My teammate Jason Keats, CEO of OSOM Products (our title sponsor) is personally very committed to all forms of inclusion; and we've added the Progress flag to our Lamborghini's color scheme, so that's a very visible way to fly the flag throughout the season. I generally believe the best way to build on that is to be your best and be on the podium come race day; that's a win in all senses.

What more can sporting organizations do to improve trans awareness and inclusion?

I think MSUK has done very well by engaging and listening to the trans and non-binary people within the sport, before working collaboratively on a policy that reflects their needs and it provides effective resources for anyone seeking guidance in motor racing. I can only hope that other sports follow a similar approach instead of adopting a herd mentality and pandering to the media and political pressure.

What's your all-time favorite movie/show and how many times have you watched it?

Haha Top Gun I guess - having watched it countless times. I wanted to be a fighter pilot as a kid – that's where is all began. I loved the sequel last year – well worth the wait.

What's your most favorite holiday destination to date?

I'm always torn between the mountains and the sea as I love hiking and surfing, and those make up some of my favourite holiday memories. We had a pretty amazing trip to Lake Garda in August too. I'd happily go back there.

What do you do to unwind at the end of the day?

I love trail running around the South Downs – my girlfriend is a PT so we're always exercising outdoors. That said we love playing pool – we're both very competitive (in a good way) so a few hours of pool is always a nice way to relax.

By Pepi Sappal

Stephie Elms
She/Her
Head of DEI: Disability
Writers Profile

Stephie Elms on realising she was trans later in life

myGwork sat down with Stephie Elms, Head of DEI: Disability at Novartis, about her journey navigating her identity, the importance of safe spaces and how the support of allies can be.

Stephie Elms didn't realise she was trans until she was 47. "I feel almost fraudulent," she laughs, "because I didn't have thirty years of feeling that I was in the wrong body. I was just unhappy but couldn't put my finger on why. Now I feel genuinely happier than I have ever felt."

The story for Stephie begins in the Southeast of England, in a working-class family with an upbringing that she describes as "the standard heteronormative boy's experience". Now she lives in Switzerland – a fact she is grateful for, given how quick and supportive the Swiss healthcare system was to help her transition – working for Novartis as the Head of Diversity and Equality for Disability.

Stephie has been with the company since leaving school, working for the first third of her career in England around manufacturing and quality assurance before moving to Switzerland, Singapore, Germany, and back to Switzerland to support the company's IT. Now, she's Head of the Disability section of the company's DEI team. "I hit 50 and asked myself what I was going to do with the rest of my life. I realised I needed to do something I was passionate about, and that was working directly with people."

A Diversity Champion whilst in Singapore, going back to DEI resonated strongly with Stephie, and she took a role working with the company's talent engagement team. "Novartis is always looking to improve our recruitment process, for people with disabilities, for example, to make it more inclusive." Now, Stephie's work covers planning the diversity and equity programmes for disability, and she's excited that some of these programmes are on the cusp of launch. "I'm super happy with my role, and I love it. I meet with great people, and I'm able also to use my time to support LGBTQIA people as well as those with disabilities at the company."

Coming out was not always easy, though. "You feel as though you're living a double life, and you get angry as a result of that." Stephie is very candid about the experience – her first marriage struggled under the strain of the challenge of this double life before Stephie ultimately split from her ex-wife just before Covid hit. "Suddenly, it's the middle of a pandemic, and you don't see anyone for a year."

It was hard, Stephie says, but she got through it, and now on the other side, is happier than she's ever been. "I had been open with my ex-wife since I first realised I felt this way. We had a friend who transitioned about a decade ago, and I got in contact with them to say, 'I'm having these feelings, can you relate?'" Stephie felt she had to do something about it or risk being unhappy for the rest of her life. She began transitioning at home, "but when I went out the door, I had to be 'him' again. It was difficult, and I probably wasn't very pleasant to be around."

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Stephie began going to counselling to explore her feelings, which led her to the GP to access healthcare to support her transition. This meant she needed to start coming out to those around her, and allies were instrumental in helping her with this. “With the support of allies at Novartis, I came out and was greatly looked after.”

The Head of DEI in Switzerland was very helpful, and the Pride Employee Resource Group (ERG) enabled Stephie to meet people who would, in turn guide her through the steps on her journey. “In the end, I think I sent an email to people I had worked with over the last 30 years; I had come out to probably a few hundred colleagues at work.” Where she had worried about being rejected, getting hate or being fired, none of it came true. Instead, the opposite happened.

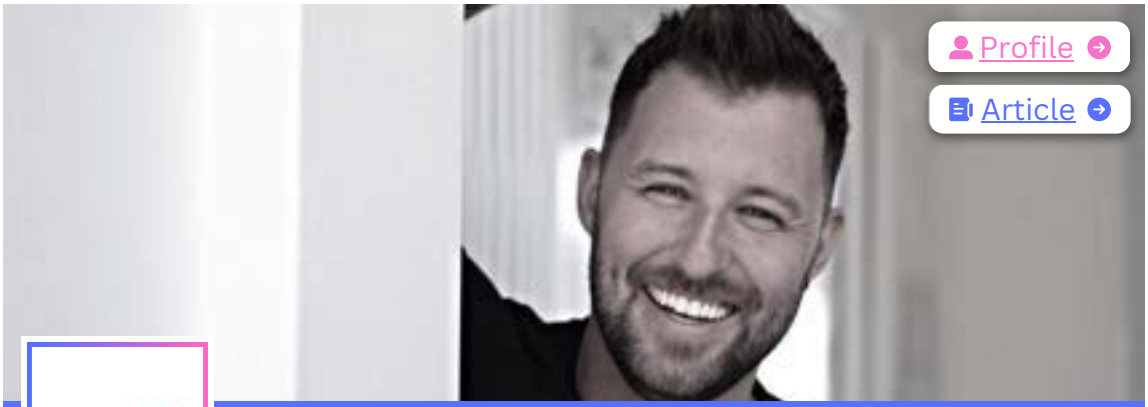
“It was just before the start of Trans Awareness Week, and so I went to the company’s campus in Basel for the first time as Stephie and joined the global webcast celebrating the week. The Global Head of DEI came and sat with her and supported her throughout.

It also made Stephie realise she needed to end the “double life”. If she was going to come out, it would be to everyone. Family came next; Stephie’s sister has been supportive since day one, and her parents, although they needed time to adjust, are increasingly accepting. They speak weekly, and Stephie will return to the UK soon to see them in person again. The double life was over: Stephie was Stephie, and everyone that mattered knew. She immersed herself in her work, trans spaces, and set about figuring out what the future held for her.

“The trans community is not easy to find,” Stephie reflects. “When I look at a lot of the trans people I know, it’s through spaces like Twitter. However, with the way Twitter is going, it’s not safe to be as open or visible on the platform anymore, and we’re losing what were otherwise safe spaces.”

Through these spaces, Stephie met her current fiancé, Ellen, and the pair now live together in Switzerland. “We need those safe spaces, especially as the onslaught against trans people continues. I don’t think of myself as a danger to society, but when you constantly hear this, it wears you down. Safe spaces, allies, being able to come to work and be yourself are all vitally important to ensuring that trans people can exist happily.”

By Dylan Mann-Hazell



Profile
Article

parexel

Ben Davidson
He/Him
Senior Regulatory Affairs Consultant

Writers Profile

Parexel exec Ben Davidson on family and authenticity in business

myGwork spoke to Ben Davidson, senior regulatory affairs consultant at Parexel, about his journey into the industry, how he's grown a music career alongside this and how his workplace shows up for LGBTQ+ families.

"I had an accident when I was 10, and I was on life support and in a coma. This is a big part of why I've always been interested in pharmaceuticals," Ben opens with. This meant that medical advancements saved his life, and he's now on antibiotics every day, so with pharmaceuticals keeping him alive, he's always been curious as to how they work.

Despite this initial interest, he somewhat fell into the industry. After starting a boy band at 15 and touring with Westlife and Sugababes, reaching his twenties, he wasn't sure what his next move would be. He lived in the seaside town of Margate, also home to Pfizer's European headquarters. Ben had a few friends who worked there, and it looked like a good place to start a career, so he started applying for anything that came up. He interviewed for a document management specialist role, and although he knew he didn't quite have the right experience, he told his interviewer: "You won't find anyone that wants this as much as I do. I'll learn everything."

This approach worked – he got a call a few days later from the hiring manager: "There are other people that have the relevant experience, but you were so prepared." Ben had the job on a three-month trial basis, and he ended up spending 11 years at the company. He's now a senior regulatory affairs consultant at Parexel, among the world's largest clinical research organizations (CROs), providing the full range of Phase I to IV clinical development services, where he's been since 2015.

"I'm a product of hard work, determination and trust from companies to invest in young people. Although I didn't have the experience or education to come in at a high level, they took me in and let me work up from the ground up."

Working with a global team, since joining Parexel, Ben's been able to strengthen and develop his skills. He's also working alongside Parexel's diversity and inclusion group as he leads the LGBTQ+ network with two allies. Ben explains that the whole team really sees the value and importance of inclusion, which is why you see so much involvement from allies.

They've just moved to new offices where they have gender-neutral toilets, and a variety of Pride events taking place each year. There is also support in place for employees who are transitioning, and Ben's seen any time someone has changed their name or pronouns they are met with warmth and acceptance. "It's that inclusive, as soon as you come in, you feel safe."

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Having been out and visible in his identity since he was 19, he's able to use this life experience to support his LGBTQ+ colleagues and push forward inclusion. Reflecting, Ben laughs, explaining when he first came out, he was "very colourful and very flamboyant," but this wasn't always appreciated by his workplace, and he experienced difficulties in previous companies. Parexel, on the other hand, is the complete opposite, he's always felt supported and accepted.

"Parexel celebrates and embraces who you are," Ben adds. "They actively encourage open conversations and want you to show up authentically."

Growing up, Ben knew early that he was gay but didn't feel the environment was right for him to come out, and when he did, his dad didn't take it well, so he ended up moving out. On the other hand, his mum has always been his biggest supporter, also working in the pharmaceutical industry, she's always there for him.

"School was tough, because I wasn't out, but I was very identical to I am now which is very outspoken and confident. I sang and performed in the local theatres and shows. So, I always advocated for being yourself, even from a young age."

Music and performing have always been a part of Ben's life, having been a singer from a young age. At just 15, he became the lead singer of his band, Most Wanted, and toured the world. Then, alongside his professional career, he's always performed and gigged, whether at the local pub or Pride events. In 2017, a video of him singing went viral; one thing led to another, and before he knew it, he was signed to a label with a debut album on the way.

Since then, Ben's been pouring his heart into his lyrics and releasing music non-stop, with his latest single, Wow, coming out earlier this year. His songs have charted the UK Top 40, and he's been featured as a rising star in The Sun's Bizarre column. He describes his lyrics as diary entries: "You can hear my heartaches in the words, you can see when things are good and when things are bad. It's real life, which is why people connect to it."

At first, there was a hesitation to use gendered pronouns in the song – but he realised there was importance in the queer representation his authenticity would give. So, when he wrote a song about his husband, he wanted his audience to know it was a love song about two men.

Ben's family play such a central role in his life it just wouldn't make sense to hide this within his music, and he's hopeful that younger LGBTQ+ people will see the representation and it will resonate with them. Ben and his husband have two kids: Drew, who's 10, and Logan, who's six. They're his biggest fans and Drew tells everyone that his dad is his favourite singer. "They're the best thing I've ever done and ever will do," Ben says fondly.

Having two young kids means the flexibility Ben is given at Parexel is invaluable. Juggling a professional career, family-life and a music career is made possible because of the support he receives and added flexibility. Knowing if the kids are unwell that he can be there to look after them, makes the world of difference.

Parexel also offers an initiative from May to September, the summer holidays for England and Scotland, where you can condense your hours to four days to give you more time to spend with your family. "They're very flexible to give you the opportunity to do your work within the hours that you need to and take time to spend with family and children. Family is so important, and Parexel understands this."

There's a particular vulnerability with performing on stage, Ben shares, that impacts all parts of his life – it makes him a better parent and a better colleague. His job at Parexel might be analytical, and although this is something he excels at, his biggest strength has always been how personable he is.

In that first job interview back in his late teens, Ben admits he wasn't the obvious choice for the role. There were likely other people with more experience or education, but perhaps it was this vulnerability that connected with the person in front of him, convincing them to take a chance on him. His career proves that taking a chance on someone with a background different from everyone else you've hired can pay off – Ben's career has spanned decades, and he's worked hard to better his industry. Every industry can benefit from offering alternate routes into different careers, and a team from different walks of life will think differently, an asset that is not to be underestimated.

By Zoë Schulz

Profile

Article

Lady Phyll
She/Her
CEO and Co-Founder of UK Black Pride

Writers Profile

Lady Phyll: Pioneering pride and progress

To mark Black History Month, myGwork's Pepi Sappal interviews Phyllis Opoku-Gyimah, famously known as Lady Phyll – the powerhouse behind UK Black Pride and a pioneering advocate for racial, gender, and LGBTQ+ equality – about her inspiring vision for UK Black Pride and the future of equality.

Lady Phyll has been a trailblazer in transforming the landscape for Queer, Trans, and Intersex People of Color in the UK and beyond. As the co-founder of UK Black Pride, she launched Europe's first event celebrating LGBTQ+ people of African, Asian, Caribbean, Middle Eastern, and Latin American descent, focusing on the spiritual, emotional, and intellectual wellbeing of these communities. Recently, she stepped down from her role as Executive Director at the Kaleidoscope Trust to fully dedicate herself to this mission as CEO of UK Black Pride, which was celebrated on August 11 this year.

Question: Can you tell us more about your recent decision to lead UK Black Pride? What motivated this move?

Lady Phyll: Certainly. It's always interesting when I'm asked about my roles at Kaleidoscope Trust and UK Black Pride because there are so many connections between the two. Leaving Kaleidoscope Trust was bittersweet; I deeply admire the international work it does. But as UK Black Pride continues to grow, it requires more resources and attention. Transitioning to focus fully on UK Black Pride felt natural because I've been involved for a long time. The aim is to expand UK Black Pride beyond just a celebration, turning it into an organization that actively combats racism, homophobia, biphobia, transphobia, and other forms of discrimination faced by Black and POC queer communities.

Question: What are your ambitions for UK Black Pride in the coming years, especially in terms of combating discrimination?

Lady Phyll: My ambitions are straightforward, but implementing them requires effort. UK Black Pride will always have its annual festival, but we also have initiatives like our Community Action Fund and Community Action Plan, which support grassroots organizations tackling issues like HIV/AIDS, mental health, gender identity, and healthcare for trans and non-binary people. We're particularly focused on supporting young Black and POC queer people outside of London, who often get overlooked. There's a lot to do, but with a dedicated team and support from organizations like myGwork, we'll make it happen.

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Question: Despite the progress made to date in LGBTQ+ equality in the UK, there is still much work to be done to achieve true equality. What steps should leaders in corporate and political spheres take to create lasting change?

Lady Phyll: I want to start by saying that UK Black Pride isn't aligned with any political party. However, politics is crucial for lobbying and advocating for the changes we need, given how our identities are often politicized. Corporations need to better understand their corporate social responsibility and collaborate more with grassroots activists. It's about understanding the dynamics and nuances of these communities and how corporations can amplify and support their essential work. Collaboration and partnerships are key. We also need to see political leaders focus less on rhetoric and more on implementing policies that ensure LGBTQ+ people have access to housing, healthcare, education, and fair employment opportunities. This requires a strong, action-oriented manifesto from all parties involved.

Question: Can you walk us through your career journey and share some key milestones and lessons you've learned along the way?

Lady Phyll: I've been working for 30 years, starting in roles like selling double glazing and Tupperware. My formal career began in the civil service, where I spent over a decade working in various departments, from the benefits agency to fraud investigations. I later became the first Black senior lead negotiator for both public and commercial service unions, dealing with employment rights frameworks. After that, I led political campaigns and equality initiatives before moving to Kaleidoscope Trust as executive director. Throughout my career, I've always been involved in advocacy, whether it's volunteering at women's refuges or working with refugees. My passion for social justice and community activism stems from my upbringing and the struggles my parents faced as immigrants in the UK.

Question: You've held key roles where you were often the only Black woman, or even the only woman, in the room. How have you navigated these spaces?

Lady Phyll: That's accurate. Being the only or the first in these spaces is fine, as long as you're working to open doors for others. I don't want to be the only one; that would mean nothing is changing. We need to disrupt spaces that have historically excluded women, LGBTQ+ people, Black people, and others. My work takes an intersectional approach, understanding how race, gender, and class intersect and create barriers. It's about more than just diversity; it's about dismantling systemic oppression.

Question: Given your rich background in political activism, do you see yourself returning to a political role in the future? If so, what areas would you focus on?

Lady Phyll: While I enjoy advocating for change from outside traditional political spaces, I find the current systems to be quite antiquated and bureaucratic, which can stifle voice and agency. That said, I won't rule it out, but for now, my focus remains on international human rights and advocating for the rights of trans and non-binary people, as well as issues related to race, especially concerning Black and Asian women's health and workplace equality. I plan to continue this work for as long as I can, because there's still so much to be done.

Question: What advice would you give to individuals who want to advance equality and inclusion in their communities?

Lady Phyll: Get involved. There are many grassroots organizations in need of support, whether through volunteering or offering your skills in areas like finance, marketing, or communications. For those in corporate spaces, join your Employee Resource Groups (ERGs) and engage with their strategies. It's crucial to hold your senior leadership accountable for taking equality, diversity, inclusion, and belonging seriously. Change doesn't happen by sitting on the sidelines; it requires active participation.

Question: What are your thoughts on allyship, fostering unity, belonging, and equal opportunities for everyone?

Lady Phyll: Everyone can be an ally. It's about solidarity, doing your homework, and not relying on those with lived experiences to educate us all the time. We must actively listen and think about how to use our privileges to amplify others. For corporations, it's about putting your money where your mouth is – supporting smaller, underfunded Pride events and ensuring your actions have a meaningful impact.

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Question: How can more people and companies support UK Black Pride and contribute to its mission and growth?

Lady Phyll: UK Black Pride always welcomes support and partnerships. It's about building meaningful relationships with clear actions that promote the growth of both our communities and your ERGs. Start with a conversation – let's discuss our needs, aspirations, and the data that drives our work. Volunteering is invaluable, especially since many organizations like ours don't have the funding to recruit more people. As UK Black Pride continues to grow, we need sustained support from corporations that are genuinely committed to engaging with and uplifting diverse, intersectional communities.

Question: What are you currently reading, and is there a podcast you'd recommend to our audience?

Lady Phyll: I just finished reading Cack-Handed by Gina Yashere, a Black lesbian comedian. It was hilarious but also very real and raw. I also recommend Sista!, an anthology that I co-edited with John R. Gordon and Rikki Beadle-Blair, which features 31 stories from Black British queer women. It's a beautiful collection that covers our trials, tribulations, and successes. For podcasts, I recommend Busy Being Black by Josh Rivers and Two Twos by Nana and Rose.

Question: What's your favorite travel destination?

Lady Phyll: I love the Caribbean St. Lucia, Jamaica, Grenada. But Tonga, in the Pacific past Fiji, is probably my favorite. The journey was long, but it was worth it. Tonga also has one of the longest-running trans groups, the Tonga Leitis' Association , which does incredible work.

Question: Do you want to share any final thoughts?

Lady Phyll: Let's keep having these conversations. The world often feels turbulent, and people can feel isolated, whether they're in a big corporate setting or working in grassroots activism. Ongoing dialogue helps us understand what we can do differently and how we can reach out to each other for support.

CELEBRATING UK BLACK PRIDE

UK Black Pride returned to Queen Elizabeth Olympic Park on Sunday, August 11, 2024. From its humble beginnings in 2005 as a small seaside gathering on Southend-on-Sea, UK Black Pride has exploded into the world's largest celebration of LGBTQ+ people of African, Asian, Caribbean, Latin American, and Middle Eastern heritage. Click here for more details.

By Pepi Sappal

Angharad Stevens
She/Her
Category Strategy Assistant Manager - Beauty & Wellbeing

Writers Profile

Angharad Stevens on being queer and moving to a big city: “It was like I had 21 years of catching up to do”

myGwork spoke with Angharad Stevens, Skin and Hair Innovation Assistant Manager at Unilever, to talk about her experiences growing up, moving to a big city, and navigating her identity.

Life began for Angharad Stevens in New Quay, Wales, but her childhood involved moving between small towns and villages across England and Wales, sticking to small communities. Even at her university, Warwick, the community was not as large as some other UK cities. It wasn’t until she decided to take a year studying abroad in Australia that she was confronted by the differences presented by life in the metropolis.

“There were no valleys anymore, no green, but I got so much excitement from realising I could be whoever I wanted, and it didn’t matter.” It was completing a childhood mission in many ways: “We were supposed to move as children until my mother got ill, which invalidated the visas. We’d had schools picked and houses looked at, so that story had started for me but never finished.” In no time, Angharad arrived in Melbourne, an LGBTQIA haven, and her world was about to change quite radically.

Arriving after 38 hours of travelling, knowing only one other person, Angharad settled into halls wondering if she’d made a mistake. “I was lying on a mattress without any bedding thinking to myself, ‘What had I done?’”

Ten thousand miles from home, it was only 48 hours before Angharad was phoning home – to tell them she was a lesbian. She had met a girl whom Angharad describes as “fiercely proud and out” and suddenly something in her clicked: this is who she was, who she was meant to be. “Before then, I hadn’t felt it was a reality. It was like night and day; it became so apparent to me, and it was the weirdest thing.” The benefit of being so far from home was that no one else had to know until she was ready – and this meant a year of being able to explore the queer scene like never before.

In many ways, Angharad feels that Melbourne particularly had this effect on her and others. She shares an anecdote of a friend who had gone from being quite a shy, closeted boy to very quickly marching up the street in thigh-high boots to nights out. “It was so different to anything I had ever known. On ‘Thursgay Nights’, everyone came out, and you could just be yourself, no questions asked, at any bar you chose.” Unlike small rural villages and towns, the curtain-twitching feeling was gone; it was possible to go out and not end up being the centre of attention or conversation for people who knew you.

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“It was like I had 21 years of catching up to do,” reflects Angharad of the experience. What was ultimately clear, however, upon returning to Warwick and Wales, was that small-town life would never be quite the same. Angharad threw herself readily into being authentic and exploring the UK queer community as much as she had in Melbourne.

After undertaking a graduate scheme, Angharad says an email arrived from Unilever, and she just knew she had to take the opportunity. Now, she’s the Skin And Hair Innovation Assistant Manager and is keenly interested in the UK LGBTQIA Committee at the company. It was what attracted her to the company in the first place – after working at an organisation that didn’t have any diversity and inclusion practices, the need to know that her employer was invested in supporting LGBTQIA people in the workplace and beyond was vital.

Angharad instantly got involved with the committee, supporting co-chairs Austin and Tyler, and is looking forward to getting even more engaged. “It’s so helpful to find your community immediately.” Part of this includes helping other people to find that community too – be it rainbow lanyards, events, or other methods; Angharad sees visibility as key to ensuring marginalised communities in corporate environments can quickly make connections and support networks they need to succeed at work.

“For me, it’s the comfort of knowing I’m safe,” says Angharad. “It’s about finding connections professionally so that I can get involved and drive the network.” There’s an intersectional angle, too – she’s steadfast in using her voice to advocate for people who perhaps aren’t out or as visible – and demonstrating to them that these safe spaces exist if and when they wish to access them. “You feel like you’re represented whether you want to get involved or not. It’s about us shouting for important causes to provide that visibility and safety.”

Particularly in the current climate, as attacks on our trans and non-binary siblings increase, Angharad thinks it’s crucial now, more than ever, that we put on a united front and show that any attacks on members of the community are an attack on all of us. “There’s safety and power in numbers. There may be a lot of joy in our celebration, but there’s also shared trauma, and we can all help each other directly or indirectly,” and she’s making sure the network at Unilever is doing precisely that.

By Dylan Mann-Hazel???l

Profile

Article

Jackie Crockford
She/Her
VP Global Business Services

Writers Profile

Jackie Crockford on LGBTQIA inclusion at AstraZeneca and realising her potential

Jackie Crockford, Vice President of Global Business Services at AstraZeneca, spoke to myGwork about realising her potential, striving to make a meaningful impact and putting effort into fostering inclusivity. A woman who values learning, embracing new experiences, and finding joy in her work, she also discussed her journey within the LGBTQIA community and how it relates to her experiences at AstraZeneca, where diversity is central to innovation.

Raised in a small village in Nottinghamshire, Jackie was encouraged by the adult figures in her life to pursue her full potential from a young age. Her passion for science initially led her to study the immune system – however, a fascination with how businesses operate inspired her to become an accountant. Working in a diverse range of roles from the very beginning of her career, Jackie gained valuable experience in team collaboration, an appreciation for people management and a strong understanding of the factors that contribute to company success.

“I had teachers and parents who encouraged me to aspire without limits,” she explained. “In fact, I was often the one to place limits on myself. But because I had champions who supported and encouraged me, I was able to keep learning, keep making mistakes but keep moving forward.”

After years of working in consulting, Jackie transitioned to working in shared services at pharmaceutical and biotechnology company, AstraZeneca. She recognised the opportunity to apply her experience and knowledge in global companies to drive the scientific potential of the business. Leading a team of around 1,000 people, she helps shape the direction and collaboration necessary to improve the company’s efficiency and support growth.

“My favourite moments always come with my teams. I have been lucky enough to build and work with some fantastic people. When the members of a team can challenge each other, be honest, bring their full selves to the table and deliver something that was not thought possible – that’s what I love.”

Jackie was especially drawn to AstraZeneca due to the company’s inclusive culture and commitment to embracing diversity. During her first interview, she was inspired by a picture of employees at Pride, which immediately symbolised the company’s celebration of equality and acceptance. Upon being hired, she continued the visibly proud representation by wearing a rainbow lanyard on her employee badge, along with many other LGBTQIA employees and allies. Beyond their Pride celebrations, AstraZeneca also empowers inclusivity through LGBTQIA Employee Resource Groups, providing safe spaces for community members and working toward representing their needs within the company.

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“The need to belong and to have a community is very important,” she said. “Having safe spaces to relax and just be ourselves is essential. The public gaze and expectations can be exhausting. Sometimes you just want to be accepted without explanation – or education!”

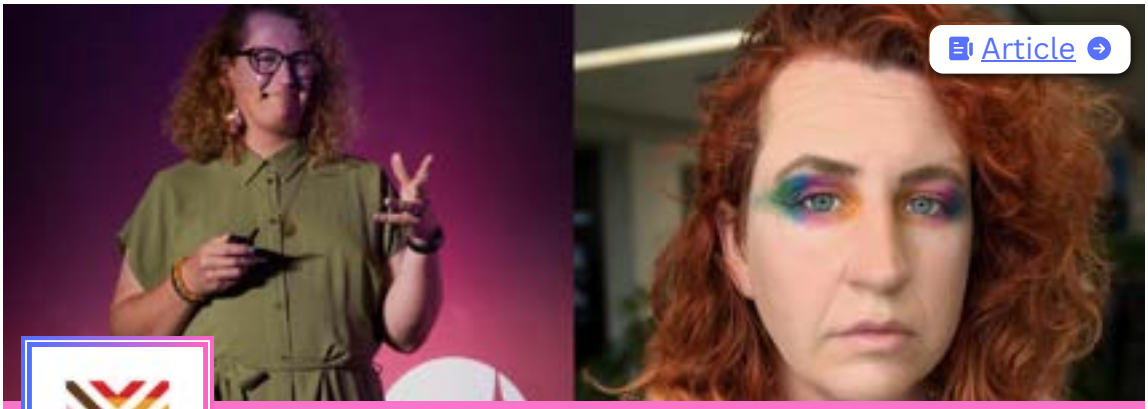
While Jackie hasn’t had many LGBTQIA figures to look up to throughout her career, she has recently found mentors and colleagues within the LGBTQIA community who lead in an inspiring manner. She emphasised the importance of being exposed to diverse role models and celebrating varied versions of success.

“The mentors and figures I have looked up to have been those who lead authentically and bring their vulnerabilities, flaws, brilliance, passion and true selves to work,” she said. “In the last few years, I have found more mentors, peers and colleagues who are leading in this manner, and they are also out members of the LGBTQIA community, which is personally energising but also, hopefully, helpful for those at the start of their career.”

Reflecting on the current challenges faced by the LGBTQIA community, both in the UK and worldwide, Jackie wished to place a spotlight on the increasing threats to LGBTQIA rights. In particular, the consistent hostility faced by the trans community globally. Despite turbulent times, she has maintained a positive outlook looking to the future, hoping for equal treatment in both business and wider society.

“I hope for the future, and for tolerance, acceptance and love to win. I am lucky enough to meet and work with people who stand up and advocate for communities who are discriminated against, even if they are not a part of that community. I have seen amazing acts of allyship that give me hope for a brighter, inclusive, accepting future.”

By Dylan Mann-Hazell



Article

Jamie June Hill
They/She
Creative Inclusivity Director

Writers Profile

Jamie June Hill: Pioneering change as the creative inclusivity director at VML

“Don’t ‘fake it till you make it’ – embrace yourself and be free,” Jamie June Hill (they/she) is steadfast in inspiring the next generation of changemakers. As creative inclusivity director at the global marketing agency VML, she works in an ever-evolving landscape.

Jamie June’s role goes beyond traditional diversity initiatives and strives to make real changes in the creative industry. myGwork sat down to learn more about their passionate commitment to fostering inclusivity and empowering marginalised communities.

As creative inclusivity director, Jamie June’s primary objective is to ensure that the work produced by VML truly reflects the diverse society we live in. Her focus spans LGBTQIA+, neurodivergent, and disabled communities while collaborating with the internal groups as well (such as the Multicultural Creative Centre of Excellence) to address racial and gender equality and representation.

“Everything I do is to make the creative work better, from consulting on ideas and scripts to internal education and external talks on creative inclusion,” says Jamie June. “When it all comes together, it hopefully gives everyone at VML the opportunity, understanding and confidence to create more inclusive work from day one.”

Through this comprehensive approach, they empower everyone at VML to better understand, appreciate, and integrate inclusivity into their creative endeavours, helping to create an environment where inclusive work is the norm from the beginning.

Speaking to Jamie June, it quickly becomes clear that her approach to diversity, inclusion and equity goes much further than the surface tick box exercises. Recently, they have delved deeper into how we can ensure our efforts are genuinely creating a better world, and she’s come up with a theory she’s named Purpose 2.0.

Soft-launched at the Mas Cartagena conference a few months ago, it is a ground-breaking theory born out of frustration and a desire for true change. Purpose 2.0 challenges brands to go beyond superficial gestures and to directly contribute to creating tangible change that improves the lives of marginalised communities.

Jamie June explains that ‘Purpose 1.0’ is what much of the industry currently focuses on: building awareness of an issue and funding a potential way to help. From changing logos to rainbow colours to picking a charity to donate a percentage of profits to – it has been about finding an issue your target market cared about and showing you did, too.

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However, they believe inclusion-focused work now needs to do more now and show what a brand truly believes in. This next phase of work entails embracing relevant human truths, taking real-world actions, and actively being part of the conversation and solution.

“Put simply, the theory is that brands need to directly make life better for marginalised groups,” Jamie June explains. “You can’t just show up and co-opt an issue anymore – you need to have a tangible role in making change happen. Be part of the conversation and solution.”

Jamie June is also the Transformation Lead for WPP Unite. In this capacity, they work behind the scenes to educate stakeholders about LGBTQIA+ issues, develop internal communications, and advocate for the rights and well-being of queer individuals throughout the network. Her commitment to creating a workplace where everyone can feel safe and celebrated further underscores her dedication to effecting positive change.

Plus, Jamie June often speaks at events, inspiring the next generation of creatives to embrace their identity and weave what makes them unique into their work. Speaking at both Fail Better, with D&AD New Blood, and with students this year, she noted how the most common advice she was given at the beginning of their career was ‘Fake it ‘till you make it.’

All these years later though, she’s reflecting and realising this led to her hiding who they are – trying to emulate the way creative directors dressed, the haircuts of ‘cooler’ colleagues, the style the slickest speakers had – everything.

“The irony was that eventually, I faked it until I made it completely impossible to remember who I was. I ended up depressed, lost, and out of love with being creative.”

This was when Jamie June realised things had to change – so they started therapy and the journey to discovering who they’ve always been deep down.

“As it turned out, I was also a closeted transfemme person. I’m sure my journey of being a queer person is directly tied to me burying who I really was, but the biggest problem is that copying others worked – I got good opportunities and was told I was doing good work.

That’s a problem that we as an industry need to fix. Because the irony is that now, putting my true self into my work, I’m making the best stuff I’ve ever made. Truly. Nothing I do could be without who I am, and I hope to show everyone they can do the same. So don’t fake it till you make it – embrace yourself and be free.”

Jamie June’s work extends beyond the immediate impact on the agency and organisation. She understands the importance of supporting the next generation and hopes by sharing their experiences, thoughts, and theories, that it can all inspire and empower young queer and marginalised individuals, allowing them to embrace their identities and create meaningful work that reflects who they truly are.

Through their ongoing dedication, Jamie June challenges existing norms and offers a powerful message to creators everywhere: embrace your authentic self, celebrate your identity, and let it fuel your creativity. Together, we can build a world where everyone feels valued and heard.

“Everything I do is for the next generation. Growing up in a world that told me from a very young age that the way I felt internally was wrong, and then in an industry with a giant hangover from an era of ‘Mad Men style misogyny’, I hid so much of myself. Which did real damage.

If I can potentially put my role, my thoughts, or my theories into the ether and show younger queer and marginalised people that who they are and how they think is a valuable asset, then it was worth getting out of bed. Basically, if I can stop anyone from going through what I had to, then it was all worth it. The most exciting creative work is coming from people slamming identity and creativity together, and I can’t wait to see, hear, feel, and imbibe what people continue make. Send it to me – seriously!”

By Dylan Mann-Hazell

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Profile
Article

Tona Brown
She/Her
Violinist and Trans Activist

Writers Profile

An interview with Tona Brown, a Musician, Advocate and Role Model for the Trans Community

Opera singer, violinist, music teacher and trans activist Tona Brown talks to myGwork's Pepi Sappal about her advocacy work both as a musician, advocate and role model for the trans community, as well as the many challenges the trans community in the US faces right now.

Tona Brown may be best known for being the first trans woman to headline at Carnegie Hall, as well as the first trans woman of color to sing the national anthem for a sitting president in 2014 when she sang for then President Barack Obama, but she is also an outspoken vocal role model advocating for trans rights, particularly trans youth and people of color.

Ahead of her keynote for WorkPride, last year, Tona shared a few insights into her advocacy work both as a musician, advocate and role model for the trans community, as well as the many challenges the trans community in the US faces right now.

Access to jobs, changing your name and getting all the necessary gender marker changes for a trans person in the U.S. “Really depends on what state you're in, and it’s more challenging in some more than others for the trans community as you can see from our politics with Ron DeSantis and Florida,” highlighted Tona. “Another big challenge for the trans community is finding people who will respect you as a gender non-conforming, non-binary or transgender person. That is a huge problem because everyone is trying to date you, but they don't want the world to know about it. So, it is not an easy life. The challenges are multifaceted.”

Tona is particularly concerned about trans youth right now. “LGBTQ+ youth are the most vulnerable,” she noted, describing all the misinformation around trans people as “Appalling. This is very, very harmful and it's regressing us back to before people had these freedoms. So, I fear for the youth right now.”

The anti-trans political sentiment and misinformation is currently relentless. Topics such as trans students in sports and access to hormone therapy are fuelled by misinformation, and these conversations are having very real consequences, such as “Suicide rates going through the roof.”

Tona shared her personal challenges growing up as a young child, as well as the bullying incidents at school for being different. She loved playing the violin and enjoyed dancing ballet, tap and jazz. However, after realising she was too “fleshy” to do ballet as a boy, Tona chose to spend her teens focusing on playing the violin and finding her unique voice.

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While at college Tona discovered that having a combination of masculine and feminine singing tones gave her unique vocal style which accelerated her music career as an opera singer, as well as a violinist. It was also then that she decided to fully transition, and shared how her family and tutors were hugely supportive of her decision. “My mother never denied who I was. She just wanted me to grow up with good self-esteem. So did my aunts and my grandparents. But there were others that were not [supportive], so my mom sheltered me.”

Although Tona was supported by the majority of her family through her transition journey she recognizes that, sadly, this is not the case for many in the trans community. Tona also explained how the arts world, which is now more accepting of the LGB community, has excluded the trans community for many years. “You would think classical music and opera where there is so much cross-dressing would be more open and inclusive, but there’s actually a lot of bias and microaggressions, especially in the audition space.” She recalled one coach during an audition say “Oh, this repertoire goes above an F - you probably can't sing anything over that,” which ultimately limited her access to many roles.

This is precisely one of the reasons why Tona started her own teaching company Aida Studios, which offers masterclasses, seminars, workshops for colleges and universities, as well as DE&I speaking engagements for corporations. She goes into the homes of all kinds of students to coach them on their voice and singing skills, in person and virtually. She is also urging the arts sector to be more trans-inclusive and provide the much-needed funding to improve awareness and representation of the trans community.

Tona wants the young trans community to know that there are people like her advocating on their behalf, by being that vocal role model that she never had, especially for trans youth of color. Her advice to those struggling with family and friends right now, is to “Find that group of people that support you and your transition, and love you for who you are, and are going to call you by the gender that is affirming to you.”

“Everyone is not going to get it. Everyone is not going to like you,” she added. “So don't stay in situations with people that are going to be disrespectful to you all the time because that's what causes most of the psychological harm. It's imperative to find that small circle of people who are going to be respectful to your identity and support you.”

Tona’s other key advice to LGBTQ+ youth is to find a hobby or an interest “Where you can be in a supportive environment and live your authentic truth.” Through her latest projects, like her upcoming memoire Tonacity (her nickname growing up), which will be available to buy on Amazon soon, and setting up a non-profit called Music Saves Lives, she is encouraging trans people to follow and achieve their wildest dreams, just like she did.

By Pepi Sappal

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Richard Chapman-Harris
He/Him
Global Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Leader

Writers Profile

Marsh McLennan's Richard Chapman-Harris on his passion for advocacy

Richard Chapman-Harris, Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Leader for International at Marsh McLennan, spoke to myGwork about his passionate advocacy for fairness and equality. With a career spanning over seventeen years, Richard has dedicated himself to addressing bias and discrimination in all its forms. He opened up about his career, highlights at Marsh McLennan, his journey with identity, and what he believes it takes for DEI to be successful.

Richard was born and raised in Barbados before moving to the UK at 12. He fondly describes his upbringing, reflecting on how fortunate he was to have had a diverse group of friends, family, and teachers from all around the world. Family was integral to his childhood and helped him shape his worldviews. With a large family, including a Muslim stepfamily on his mum's side, an appreciation for different beliefs was felt strongly, ultimately enabling him to challenge Islamophobia from a more informed perspective later in his adult life.

Richard's experiences gave him access to diverse role models, who he believes are not as well represented as they could be in the UK. He also recalls encountering homophobia in school, leaving him unable to express his true self. However, moving to the UK provided a safer environment to explore his identity. "This was a part of my self-understanding journey that was suppressed until my teenage years when I was then in the relative safety of the UK," he explains.

Discussing his journey with his identity, Richard hopes for a future where more people experience acceptance and inclusivity without the need for formal coming out processes. He emphasises the importance of creating inclusive spaces and challenging heteronormativity. Expressing his gratitude to friends and family for supporting him throughout his journey, he adds, "I was fortunate to have been on this journey – which was not always easy – but was definitely survivable. I have friends and family to thank for this."

Now International Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Leader at Marsh McLennan, Richard has worked to push forward acceptance and equality for close to two decades. To him, it's a field that is all about people and tackling unfairness in its many forms.

"I felt I was helping in my own small way," he explains, reflecting on why he first joined the sector. "Although ideally, I wouldn't need to do this work, and there would be no bias or discrimination to address – I am happy to keep working until this is achieved and can then happily retrain and do something else!"

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Richard also emphasises the daily efforts of the incredible people he works with, praising their “can-do” approach. A recent highlight includes Black History Month celebrations and his collaboration with the Black Colleague Support Group and the MOSAIC Employee Resource Group on race and cultural inclusion, which Richard admires and respects for their many achievements. “At Marsh McLennan, we are committed to a diverse and inclusive workplace culture where everyone can thrive. Our DEI strategy provides colleagues with live and online learning, our colleague resource groups organise events, and our Candid Conversations series helps to explore a rich diversity of topics that many DEI calendars don’t always cover.” To Richard, it’s vital that everyone feels heard, listened to, and supported and that the workplace is a safe space to be authentic.

Part of the role means that Richard supports approximately 40,000 colleagues across 120 offices globally. He works closely with People and Talent Partners in each region to design and deliver DEI plans, involving policy and process developments, learning and engagement activities, and working one-to-one with business leaders and key external partners.

Richard stressed the importance of everyone’s involvement in the essential elements of DEI success. He believes that DEI is a collective effort where each individual has to recognise and celebrate their similarities and differences. Understanding that systemic inequalities exist, Richard emphasises the responsibility of those with privilege to actively combat unfairness. “Everyone needs to understand that DEI is about all of us. We all have a part to play.”

There is also an importance in maintaining a sense of community and diversity within the LGBTQ+ community that Richard is acutely aware of when embarking on this work. Drawing from his own experience as a cisgender, white, gay man, he acknowledges the privileges he holds and aims to leverage this to support others by challenging ableism, racism, and sexism across society and also within the LGBTQ+ community. Visible role models are a vital part of the jigsaw when it comes to recognising and appreciating intersectionality, highlighting that no one is one-dimensional and that it is crucial to value and celebrate diversity within and across communities, Richard explains.

Regarding the rising tide of transphobia in mainstream media and politics, Richard stresses the importance of recognising and actively combating this issue wherever possible. In particular, there is a need to call out misinformation and promote more balanced messages to ensure that marginalised groups are not misrepresented and that unfounded fears are not exploited to divide society further.

Richard ultimately underscores how transphobia, homophobia, and misogyny intersect with each other, acknowledging that these forms of discrimination require collective efforts from all members of the LGBTQ+ community and beyond to dismantle.

By Dylan Mann-Hazell

Profile

Article

Swiss Re

Amera Otaifa
She/Her
Head of HR UK & Ireland

Writers Profile

Swiss Re HR exec Amera Otaifa on building an inclusive workplace

Amera Otaifa's unique background and passion for diversity, equity, and inclusion have shaped her approach towards creating an inclusive workplace. Recently joining the team at Swiss Re as its head of HR UK & Ireland, she chats to myGwork, sharing insights into her career journey and the importance of LGBTQ+ inclusion within the HR department.

Amera's career started with an apprenticeship in business administration, which allowed her to explore different industries and gain valuable insights into what elements felt right for her career. Then, while working for a charity, her colleagues encouraged her to apply for an HR assistant role, and she's been in the sector ever since.

Embarking on a journey of continuous learning, Amera studied part-time to obtain her Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD) qualifications and later completed a master's degree in HR, all while also working full-time. This dedication and hard work paid off as she climbed the corporate ladder and achieved the roles and promotions that she set her sights on. A career in HR includes a variety of work, all with a strong human element – which is a part of the reason it is an industry that has resonated so strongly with Amera. Now, after more than two decades in HR within investment banking, she's moved to re-insurance, inspired by Swiss Re's vision to make the world more resilient.

Joining Swiss Re just six months ago, she found herself in a work environment unlike any other she had experienced before. The culture at Swiss Re is inclusive, collaborative, professional, and friendly. She immediately noticed that the organisation embraces new ideas and prioritises making the company an even greater workplace. She has had the privilege of working with a fantastic HR team that excels in their roles while also promoting a sense of enjoyment and camaraderie. She is also co-sponsor of the SR UK charity committee, a position she feels honoured to have. "Being able to give back to the community has always been close to my heart and something that I have always done, so it feels like a privilege to be the co-sponsor with our UK & Ireland CEO," she adds.

Amera's affinity for diversity and inclusion extends beyond her professional career. She has long advocated for diversity, equity and inclusion, and her journey with the LGBTQ+ community has been profoundly impactful. Having witnessed discrimination faced by an LGBTQ+ mentor early in her career, she became committed to making sure she did not see that behaviour again, working hard to build a culture of inclusion and acceptance. She also dedicated her master's dissertation to understanding the business case for diversity, going beyond the financial benefits, and emphasising the importance of treating people with dignity and respect.

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As a staunch ally, Amera believes true allyship involves standing up for those who cannot safely do so for themselves. It encompasses actively raising awareness, educating others, and amplifying the voices of underrepresented groups. She envisions an inclusive workplace where everyone can show up as their whole selves, and believes allyship is crucial in achieving that vision.

“As an ally, you have a pivotal role in actively increasing the awareness and equity among all colleagues in a work environment, but also in the community you live in – in short ‘standing up,’” Amera explains. “For me, it’s about doing the right thing, advocating for people, and making a difference.”

In the context of HR, LGBTQ+ inclusion holds immense importance. HR professionals are responsible for gauging the progress of their company’s inclusivity efforts, measuring inclusivity through feedback, and actively training employees. When it comes to supporting LGBTQ+ employees, Amera has valuable advice for HR professionals, emphasising the importance of continuous education within the field, as it is a rapidly evolving space. Collaborating with the LGBTQ+ community to understand their needs and finding collective solutions to address their challenges is also crucial.

“Listen to and take the time to learn from and understand your LGBTQ+ workforce. Acknowledge their lived experience to help promote inclusion and acceptance. Demonstrating visible and vocal allyship is key to promoting an inclusive workplace. It’s important to recognise the value that can be brought from gestures of support and how far-reaching these can go in helping individuals to feel included.”

Swiss Re is dedicated to investing time and resources into initiatives that pave the way for employees to show up as their true selves. All employees are invited to join employee resource groups (ERGs) during onboarding, fostering a sense of belonging. Additionally, the company conducts a yearly global survey that allows employees to self-identify voluntarily, identifying disparities and gaining insights to improve the employee experience. Swiss Re’s policies, learning platforms, and inclusive facilities further reinforce the message that the organisation is open supportive, and encourages individuals to embrace their whole selves.

Looking to the future, Amera is committed to working alongside her Swiss Re colleagues to make the world more resilient and further the focus on inclusion. “I want to play my part in putting in place the foundations to build a truly inclusive organisation where everybody thrives.”

Through Amera’s inspiring leadership, Swiss Re continues to pave the way for creating an inclusive workplace where individuals can bring their authentic selves and diversity is celebrated. Her career journey is a testament to the power of passion, hard work, and a commitment to championing equality and inclusion.

By Dylan Mann-Hazell

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Profile
Article

Francisco Martinez-Garcia
He/Him
Chief Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Officer

Writers Profile

Moody's chief inclusion officer on fostering a culture of acceptance

"Authenticity and success can coexist. Aligning yourself with companies that foster a culture of acceptance can be a powerful support system," Francisco Martinez-Garcia, chief inclusion officer at Moody's, spoke to myGwork about his ongoing efforts in inspiring diversity and inclusion in the workplace. He described his career path to date, and how he utilises his extensive background and experiences to foster a culture of acceptance and equality.

"I am originally from Mexico, where I began my academic journey studying economics for my undergraduate degree," shared Francisco. "I later moved to the US to pursue a graduate degree in Industrial and Labor Relations from Cornell University." His educational pursuits laid a solid foundation for his career in the field of human resources.

Francisco spent 17 years in a company that allowed him to work in diverse locations globally, which ultimately shaped his understanding of the importance of diversity and inclusion. "This exposure to different cultures and business environments was incredibly enriching and helped shape my worldview and approach to work," he explained.

Nearly five years ago, Francisco transitioned to Moody's, initially assuming the role of Head of Global Compensation. This new position allowed him to leverage his skills and experience in a different context. He later moved into a People Business Partner role, working closely with different parts of the business, which ultimately paved the way for his current position. Today, he serves as Moody's chief inclusion officer, where he draws on his diverse experiences and insights to foster an inclusive culture within the organization. "It's a role I find both challenging and rewarding, and I'm excited about the work we're doing," he said.

As a member of the LGBTQ+ community, Francisco reflected on the challenges he faced growing up in a Latin American society steeped in traditional values. "The fear of rejection, the internal struggle with tradition, and the courage to be true to oneself can be daunting." However, to his surprise, he found solace and acceptance in the workplace.

"I found an unexpected sanctuary in the workplace," he said. "I was fortunate to work for companies that not only welcomed but celebrated diversity. In an era when acceptance was a little rarer, work became my safe space, inspiring me to grow. Companies like Moody's showed me that authenticity and success could coexist. Aligning yourself with companies that foster a culture of acceptance can be a powerful support system."

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Throughout his career, Francisco witnessed significant progress in attitudes towards diversity and inclusion. “I see a transition from a mentality of fostering DE&I simply because it’s the right thing to do, to viewing DE&I as a business imperative and a competitive advantage.”

At Moody’s, inclusivity is an integral part of the company’s culture. Francisco explained how they always aim to foster a culture of true inclusion and belonging, valuing everyone’s unique perspectives and contributions. At the core of their beliefs, diversity and equity are essential to build a workplace where inclusion thrives – and this very much includes the LGBTQ+ community.

Reflecting on his standout moments in his career, Francisco pointed to the decision to leave his previous company and join Moody’s as a defining moment. “It was a risk, I had nothing but good experiences with my previous company, but I felt my growth opportunities were limited,” he recalled. The move to Moody’s provided Francisco with new avenues for personal and professional development.

Francisco’s inspiring journey from a small traditional town to becoming the chief inclusion officer at Moody’s showcases his commitment to championing a world of true, authentic equality. His experiences and insights inspire others to celebrate diversity and pave the way for a more inclusive future.

“In my career and personal life, I have seen tremendous progress on LGBTQ+ rights and equality, however the reality is that the experience is still very disparate,” he explained. “Not all members of the community and not all countries and regions have the same access to the rights and freedoms that we have been gaining in some cases. I would like to see progress for other members of the LGBTQ+ community, especially in some regions where being LGBTQ+ is still challenging.”

By Dylan Mann-Hazell

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Michiel Kolman
He/Him
SVP

Writers Profile

Elsevier exec Michiel Kolman on embedding LGBTQ+ acceptance in the corporate world

Michiel Kolman, senior VP at Elsevier, has had a remarkable journey in both his personal life and professional career. He spoke to myGwork about growing up in Amsterdam, his work within the world's largest science publisher, and his impactful involvement in promoting diversity and inclusion, and advocating for the LGBTQ+ community.

Reflecting on his childhood, Michiel explains how growing up in a city as large as Amsterdam, as well as being raised by parents who both worked, helped spark an independent streak in him from a young age. He was a naturally curious child who found comfort in learning and expanding his knowledge of the world. This interest in learning was filled with such passion that he eventually spent a total of eleven years studying at university. It was during this period at university that Michiel came to terms with his identity, in his mid-20s, taking the leap to come out as gay.

"I had a girlfriend in high school, but in college, I realised that was not for me," he recounts. "I came out a bit late when I was 25 when I met my first boyfriend – we stayed together for seven years and are still in touch. I am now married to a man, and we are on our journey towards fatherhood."

With a background in astronomy and a PhD in the field, Michiel transitioned into science publishing and joined the scientific publishing company Elsevier almost 30 years ago. Since then, he has held various roles and responsibilities and currently represents Elsevier in the academic world by contributing to activities around sustainable development goals and diversity and inclusion. Highlighting the company's commitment to D&I, he explains that the company's leadership is dedicated to prioritising inclusive strategies and the importance of Employee Resource Groups (ERGs) in driving change.

Additionally, Michiel plays a pivotal role as co-chair of Workplace Pride, an international organisation for LGBTQ+ workplace inclusion. Under his leadership, the membership has diversified and expanded, placing significant focus on international outreach and inclusivity benchmarking. "Our membership, which is quite diverse – ranging from multinationals and NGOs to government and academic organisations – has grown enormously over the last couple of years from 80 to 125."

Michiel's involvement with the International Publishers Association (IPA) has been notable, particularly in advocating for freedom of expression and championing inclusivity within the publishing industry. He currently chairs the Inclusive Publishing & Literacy committee, where sustainability, accessibility and progressive outlooks all play a key factor.

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He has also been instrumental in the launch of Elsevier Pride, which has grown to include multiple chapters globally, fostering inclusivity and support for the LGBTQ+ community within the organisation. Besides internal advocacy, Elsevier Pride organises a variety of events worldwide, including educational and social gatherings intertwined with fundraising activities, along with supporting external initiatives such as the Amsterdam-based AIDS Fund's work in sexual health in Indonesia.

When asked about the significance of networks in shaping inclusive workplaces, Michiel places emphasis on the pivotal role of ERGs and why they are necessary for any organisation to expand upon its diversity and inclusion efforts.

"ERGs are the catalysts in any organisation – without them, you miss the bottom-up activism and the connection between the workplace and the broader society, like the Pride groups and the LGBTQI+ community."

This open-minded culture at Elsevier has allowed Michiel to be out and open about his identity at work and within the industry. However, he has endured experiences in countries where homosexuality is not accepted or criminalised, having to navigate going back into the closet. Sharing humour over the situation with his husband helped him see a light side to it, for example, when his husband had to send gifts under the guise of being his "wife," they were both able to see the humorous side to it.

Michiel sees the crucial role of visible LGBTQ+ leaders across the organisation as crucial, particularly at the senior and executive levels. He is also an advocate for Elsevier and RELX's self-ID program, designed to assess and enhance LGBTQ+ representation throughout the company. As an out and visible queer leader, he understands the importance of authenticity and aims to be a testament to the possibility of LGBTQ+ employees ascending to leadership positions within Elsevier.

Sharing his thoughts over the increasing challenges faced by the LGBTQ+ community globally, the ever-growing dismissal of diversity and inclusion as merely "woke" in some environments is a cause for concern for Michiel. Looking ahead, he expresses his hope for global progress, advocating for a reduction in the criminalisation of homosexuality and an increase in marriage equality. He underscores the importance of embedding LGBTQ+ acceptance within national laws and in the DNA of corporate cultures.

By Dylan Mann-Hazell

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Jeff Willy
He/Him
Toxicologist, and the San Diego Research site safety lead

Writers Profile

Vertex scientist Jeff Willy on importance of 'bringing your full self to work'

Jeff Willy, a toxicologist, and the San Diego Research site safety lead at Vertex Pharmaceuticals, spoke to myGwork about his background and interest for science, and how it intersects with his passion for inclusion. Day by day, Jeff is making significant contributions to the biotech industry while advocating for diversity and embracing his identity.

Jeff's journey toward becoming a toxicologist at Vertex is anything but conventional. His academic pursuits began in the world of music with a degree from the Eastman School of Music. However, an unexpected turn of events led him toward a career in science. After completing his bachelor's degree in molecular genetics from the University of Rochester, Jeff decided to take a leap and accept an opportunity with a pharmaceutical company (where he simultaneously earned his PhD from Indiana University School of Medicine), trading his musical aspirations for a chance to make an impact in a scientific field.

Currently serving as a Senior Research Fellow in Toxicology at Vertex, Jeff is instrumental in ensuring the safety of investigational medicines throughout the drug development process. Collaborating with chemists, biologists, and interdisciplinary teams, he conducts experiments and plays a crucial role in the meticulous selection of molecules to prioritise patient safety. His work exemplifies the dedication and precision required in the ever-changing biotech industry.

As a gay man, Jeff's journey towards embracing his identity was not without its challenges. Growing up in an environment with limited acceptance, he felt compelled to suppress his sexuality when returning to Indiana for work. However, after an enlightening conversation with a student, he realised he had an opportunity to provide a voice for the community.

"I was at a conference talking to a graduate student, and I made some comment about my partner and used the pronoun 'he'," Jeff explained. "And this student just said 'Oh, that's so cool. I haven't met that many out scientists in the industry.' And I thought 'Wow, I'm not — but I probably should be if I'm going to be a leader and mentor in the field.' I shouldn't be afraid to be who I am. That really started my journey."

Recognising the need for change, Jeff sought an opportunity at Vertex, a company that prioritises inclusion, diversity, and equity. Within Vertex, Jeff found a supportive environment where he could bring his whole self to work.

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Drawing inspiration from his experiences, he became an advocate for the LGBTQ+ community. By joining the Boston-based PRIDE employee resource network (ERN) and going on to co-found the San Diego PRIDE chapter at Vertex, Jeff took charge of his own path. Additionally, he pursued his creative interests by producing LGBTQ+ films centred around the coming out experience and sharing powerful stories that resonate with many in the community.

“I started creating LGBTQ+ films for others on topics about coming out, and other stories that needed to be told,” said Jeff. “I’ve done a handful of small projects, and they’ve gone through to film festivals and won multiple accolades. By making them, I try to allow other people to be heard.”

Jeff’s impact extends beyond his role at Vertex. As the PRIDE ERN co-chair for San Diego, he leads a passionate community that has grown from a handful to over 50 active participants over the past five years. The San Diego PRIDE ERN chapter focuses on initiatives such as reverse mentoring with senior leaders, community outreach, and participating in events like Pride Parades and HIV advocacy walks. By creating safe spaces for open meetings and celebrations, Jeff and his team foster a sense of belonging and support for LGBTQ+ individuals within the Vertex community, and beyond.

Jeff recognises the progress made in the journey towards LGBTQ+ inclusion while acknowledging the work that still lies ahead. He believes in exercising patience to pave the way for meaningful change. Fortunately, Vertex is committed to fostering an inclusive environment, actively working on initiatives like self-identification programs to gather data-driven insights that will further drive progress.

“I was very thoughtful with what company I joined, and Vertex checks all the boxes,” he explained. “We’re passionate about science, everyone’s incredibly genuine, we walk the walk and talk the talk. All the way up to the senior leaders, we care about making sure you bring your full self to work if you choose to, whether it’s LGBTQ+, neurodiversity, your race or ethnicity – whichever parts of your identity you’re most proud of. Vertexians are 100 percent committed to this, which allows everyone to really focus on their jobs and bringing new medicines to patients.”

Through his role as a toxicologist at Vertex, Jeff not only contributes to scientific advancements but also champions inclusion and belonging, ensuring that LGBTQ+ individuals within the Vertex community have a safe space for support, education, and celebration. With leaders like Jeffrey, Vertex continues to pave the way for a more inclusive future in both science and society.

By Dylan Mann-Hazell

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Profile
Article

SOHO HOUSE

Chris Glass
He/Him
Global Director of Diversity, Equity and Inclusion

Writers Profile

Soho House exec Chris Glass on finding shared identities outside of sexuality

Chris Glass, global director for diversity, equity and inclusion at Soho House, speaks to Zoë Schulz from myGwork about creativity, connection and community.

“I try to avoid defining myself by the job that I do but rather by my talents. I’m a problem solver,” Chris opens with. “I use creativity and service as the lens through which I try to solve problems. My purpose is very deeply rooted in helping people to live better lives by elevating the ordinary. This includes my role as the Global Director for Diversity, Equity and Inclusion at Soho House.”

Chris has been with the member’s club since 2009 and is one of a handful that has been with the company that long – seeing it grow, expand, and flourish. Starting as the membership manager for the Berlin House, it was the first time they had opened in a non-English speaking country, Chris recalls, so there was a mix of risk and innovation all at once.

Growing up in Atlanta, Chris has now been in Europe as long as he lived in America, feeling equally tethered to both parts of the world. As the European Membership Director, he built Soho House creative communities in various cities around Europe until he realized he wanted to take time to investigate who he was outside of work.

Chris switched to working part-time and it was during this break that he dove into his own creativity, cultivating a love for interior design, modelling, and event programming. This included advising as the interior expert on a German makeover TV show for two seasons. As a kid, Chris explains he was fuelled by creative energy, remembering back that even book day was an excuse to find a long t-shirt and twirl around with a ribbon in the air. It was his English teacher who took note of this, telling his parents: “He’s very creative and loves to express himself. I would encourage you to find an outlet for it.”

So they did, Chris was enrolled in acting classes, which later led him to attending a performing arts school. “It was always evident to me that something was different about me. I didn’t have a name for it, and I didn’t understand why I felt different. I think what I was demonstrating was probably the beginning of my queerness, but I also had this creative expression that I just wanted to share with people.” Chris spent his younger years constantly performing – singing, dancing, and acting. It was always presumed he would be a performer. Honing his craft, he was accepted into the Boston Conservatory of Music, studying musical theatre. While there, however, he felt as though something wasn’t right and the realization that he was deeply unhappy set in. Knowing this wasn’t right for him, Chris left, and life led him on a different path – but the ability to listen to what he really needed, outside of the often arbitrary goals we are told to chase, would stay with him.

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It was within the filming of the makeover TV series that Chris once again heard this voice. Watching himself on the show, unapologetically himself, was a cathartic experience.

“Seeing myself on screen, I couldn’t not see the wholeness of myself. The show was focused on four queer people helping others to redefine their lives. It allowed me to see not only my queerness more fully but to see all of myself more fully. I was able to accept and embrace more of the truth of who I am, and that’s something that I continue to unpack every day. I’d found that essence of self that I’d been in search of.”

Chris stepped back into a full-time role at Soho House, even better equipped. Now leading the team on their diversity and inclusion journey, he is adamant in how they can lessen the inequalities of marginalized people within their business.

As a space for the creative community to connect, their member base has always naturally been an anchorage for the LGBTQ+ community – particularly with their very first House in Soho, the LGBTQ+ epicentre of London – but adding a layer of intentionality to their queer inclusion cements this into their foundation.

This sentiment is felt in the way Soho House want to show up for each and every person.

Following the death of George Floyd in 2020 and the events that followed, a new incarnation of Soho House’s diversity and inclusion journey was born, Chris explains, knowing they have a responsibility to push for a world that stands by people of colour. These are also not separate journeys, but each intertwines as do our identities and communities.

“We’re living in a time when intersectionality is not only important but vital to lean into. As much as I appreciate people recognizing me as a gay man and creating space for that, I’m not just a gay man. I’m a person of colour. I’m an immigrant.

There are different aspects of identity that come together to make me this unique individual, and I think it’s necessary for brands and employers to try and begin to unpack those individual pieces that make up the whole picture. None of our identities are limited to a single entity, and even within that – such as me being a gay man, I don’t represent all of what it means to be a gay man, because we are not a monolith.”

These parts of Chris’s identity are a fundamental part of who he is, and he doesn’t leave them at the door when he shows up to work – nor does he expect his team to either. As someone who has been othered throughout his life, Chris adds, it is even more important to him that he leads with empathy and to make sure his team can show up in their wholeness.

“We want the folks that are the best at their jobs, but also people that live and breathe hospitality and that lean into this space of being able to show up as all of who they are at work. I choose consciously not to separate my lived experience from the way that I lead. I’m very intentional about showing up as a leader with empathy, which is a choice that I make. Sometimes it’s more of a challenge, but I try to always be intentional about making that choice.”

Interior design continues to be a creative outlet for Chris. He explains it as an exercise of creativity but also as a way to communicate; weaving storytelling and aesthetics into one. Again, it comes back to problem solving and figuring out how to take the essence of who someone is and manifest that into a physical space. Most of all, though, Chris explains, it’s a way to connect with people. “Community is a part of human nature,” Chris ponders. “It’s in our nature to yearn for connection and I think connection is the route of community.”

He goes on to note that if we look back at the earliest civilizations, people were clustered together, moving around together based on a need but also in theory because of a sense of shared interest and ideals. This drive for connection is an innate part of our humanity, and although it’s changed exponentially since then, perhaps in some ways, it’s not so different.

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This drive to build authentic connection is present in all avenues that Chris winds down, whether it's his creative ventures or in the physical space at Soho House. Although the way we foster community has changed from early civilization, perhaps the way in which we need this for survival has not, particularly with the current political climate. Whether we are connecting to one another, or connecting to the truest version of ourselves, it is a light that sparks hope when we need it the most.

"I think we're in a particularly dark moment when it comes to the reversals of civil rights for women, queer people, and trans people. There's a phrase that says that hope dies last, so I'm hopeful that we will continue to react and challenge what we are seeing happen, and perhaps this will be a way for us to reconnect as a community.

"I want to see us coming together again, supporting each other, lifting each other up and also bridging the gap between young and old. Hopefully bridging the gap between queer people and people who aren't queer too – I want to know how we can all come together and find a shared identity that goes beyond our sexuality or geography and find ways to connect in a world that is intent in many ways on our disconnection."

By Zoë Schulz

Baxter

Amanda Goodhines
She/Her
Senior Regulatory Engineer

Writers Profile

Amanda Goodhines on LGBTQIA role models and self-discovery

Amanda Goodhines, Senior Regulatory Engineer at Baxter International Inc., shares with myGwork her journey of self-discovery, LGBTQIA+ visibility, and the pursuit of joy.

Growing up in Syracuse, New York, Amanda greatly appreciates the friends and family she has always had around her. Growing up, Amanda always yearned for a big sister. So, when she gained an older stepsister, it was a dream come true. Looking back on their relationship, Amanda reflects on how her stepsister became an inspiring role model. Seeing her stepsister come out showed Amanda that you could be true to yourself and find acceptance from others.

Amanda realized the need to come out to those around her during her time at the Rochester Institute of Technology, where she was studying biomedical engineering. It was during her university years that she discovered the importance of sharing her truth, especially after her older brother had also come out as LGBTQIA. Even though Amanda found support from LGBTQIA friends in her soccer and softball teams, the decision to come out remained challenging and daunting.

“Seeing my friends and siblings at the time live authentically, be open about their identity, and be accepted was helpful and made it easier for me to do the same,” Amanda shares. “Just seeing this visibility, knowing I wouldn’t be the odd person out, was impactful. It didn’t make it any less scary to come out to my parents, though, even though my siblings had done it.”

“It was scary to come out to my parents and close friends,” Amanda admits. Nonetheless, Amanda approached the process of coming out gradually, taking it one person at a time, and was met with overwhelming support and acceptance. Once she had informed those closest to her, she realised – she no longer wanted to feel the need to come out continuously. Motivated by this desire, she made a bold decision to post a photo of herself at a local Pride Parade, accompanied by the following empowering words:

“Roses are red, groutfits are grey.
Yesterday was Pride, and I’m gay.”

That was that. Sometimes, a single act of unwavering visibility can permit us to show up in our most authentic form. This was true for Amanda.

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Now in her role as a Senior Regulatory Engineer at Baxter, Amanda remains steadfast in her commitment to visibility and authenticity. She serves as the chapter co-leader of Baxter's PRIDE Business Resource Group (BRG), which aims to ensure all LGBTQIA people and their allies can be their authentic selves at Baxter. As chapter co-lead, Amanda brings members together to drive employee and community initiatives that align with PRIDE's mission.

"I'm proud of the number of allies in the PRIDE BRG. From my perspective, it's great to see so many people I work with feel passionately about being involved. Some of our members have non-binary, trans and gay children, and it's nice for me to be able to see a parent who's going all out at their workplace to make sure LGBTQIA people feel accepted and included. So, to me, that's something extraordinary."

Amanda recently shared her story on Baxter's social media channels for National Coming Out Day and found it empowering to openly talk about her experience and hear about other people's journeys. It also meant a great deal to her to see so many of her colleagues express empathy, understanding and a genuine desire to learn from people with diverse experiences.

Amanda is eager to continue working with the PRIDE BRG to support the LGBTQIA community and foster a culture of allyship and support at Baxter and beyond. As part of these efforts, the PRIDE BRG is working to establish connections with young people at local colleges and high schools to organise events and serve as positive role models in the workplace.

Amanda also hopes we will reach a point where people won't have to come out. Despite being met by support, coming out was a scary experience for her. She looks forward to a future in which people don't presume one another's identity and instead let everyone figure this out freely.

"Having a support system when I came out has brought me joy in my life, along with finding a partner who I can share my life with and our love together." It's also the simple things that continue to bring Amanda joy. Having been with her partner for five years, she hopes that at some point, they will be able to buy a house together and adopt a dog.

Amanda's journey exemplifies the transformative impact of visibility and acceptance. As she continues to advocate for inclusion and diversity within Baxter, Amanda's unwavering commitment to fostering a culture of allyship sets a powerful example for colleagues and peers alike. And now, coming "full circle," she can be a visible role model for those around her, showing it's okay to be your true self.

By Zoë Schulz

Article

Mel Nagel
She/Her
Talent Acquisition Business Partner & Lead

Writers Profile

Growing up as LGBTQIA in Apartheid-Era South Africa

Mel Nagel, Talent Acquisition Business Partner & Lead at IG Group, spoke to myGwork about her incredible journey. From her experience growing up during apartheid-era South Africa and having now settled in the UK, to learning to feel confident and proud in her identity, Mel's moving story is a testament to the power of community in difficult times.

The golden thread throughout my life, even from all the way back when my memories begin, has been my innate ability to foster and maintain relationships. Even as a kid, I was always really good at connecting with others on a personal level.

I attribute this to the emotional intelligence imparted to me by my mother – a magnificent woman, who taught me most of what's in my heart – which allows me to relate to others, and the natural empathy cultivated in me by my father, who was always bringing home lost, abandoned and injured animals and encouraging me to build connections with each of them. I sometimes wonder how many people can say that their corporate career path was determined by a mangy goat, a noisy cockatiel, wide-eyed rabbits and countless cats and dogs! This ability has had a profound and far-reaching impact on all aspects of my life.

I grew up in the 1980s in apartheid-era South Africa, where treating different people differently was the norm. I realized at a very young age that I was "different" too, although it took me a while to figure out what that difference was. My formative days were spent in suburban Johannesburg and I was blessed with a successful school career. In school activities, I was always grouped with the boys, even though I didn't want to be one. I was a tomboy, and that's just what happened to tomboys at that time.

Despite a positive schooling experience and a cheerful childhood, I always felt like I was keeping a secret. In a way, I was troubled, and this brewed anxiety in me that I didn't understand until much later in life. Uncertainty spilled out into my life in ways that were scary and dark and sometimes isolating. There were more than a few times that those feelings manifested in ways that could have changed my life for the worse, but I had very supportive parents and friends, and I am loved, and that carried me through all of it.

All through my teens, I suffered silently on an emotional level. I struggled enormously with my sexuality, and like many, I kept all my suspicions, fears and worries inside. It was lonely, and in hindsight, I wish I had had more faith in my own convictions – because when I did eventually come out, it was so much less traumatic than I thought it was going to be!

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It didn't take me long to realise that I was attracted to females instead of males, but I spent a good portion of my youth trying to convince myself that this wasn't the case. I struggled. I suffered from depression. I was lonely. But I was loved, and that, I suspect, is the reason why I dared to come out on that random day in my early twenties.

One day I woke up and I'd just had enough of all the insecurity. I gathered up all the inner strength I could muster by repeating to myself that my family loves me, my friends support me, and I know that I can stand on my own two feet. I held little gatherings with the people that mattered – dinner with my folks, a barbeque with friends – and I simply… came out. And it was okay! I was absolutely floored that everybody simply accepted me. To this day, I am so grateful for this. The absence of extreme reactions from the important people in my life gave me room to breathe, and I automatically started being happier in my personal life.

I began my career at IG as a Senior Recruitment Consultant in October 2018. I didn't start out in the position I'm in now, but IG showed me good faith right from the get-go. They didn't lowball me when they knew I really needed and wanted the job – they offered me what I deserved based on merit, so it was a no-brainer for me. I have come to respect that protocol at IG greatly.

My main responsibilities revolve around strategic planning for all non-tech hiring globally for IG. I lead projects related to overall recruitment processes and candidate and hiring-manager experiences, whilst ensuring that we stay aligned with optimum hiring ratios, cost-effectiveness, diversity and inclusion, and I report back to senior leadership teams with quarterly reviews and feedback on results by department. I'm considered the subject matter expert for the design and implementation of global programs for non-tech hiring and global employer brand strategy, and I'm the leader of global training for hiring managers and interviewers.

When I was promoted to team lead at IG, I actively developed my abilities and skills, training to learn how to become great at people management. I started out in an operational role at IG and in just under four years I've grown into this more strategic one, helping my team to become the best recruiters they can be and achieve their personal best career levels.

Having grown up in a society plagued by prejudice, my cynicism and fear mean that I can never relax entirely. I'm not blind, I see the condemnatory looks us gays still get, often over squinted eyes and pursed lips. Even when I joined the IG Group, I chose to not disclose my orientation as I was worried that it would impact how people perceived me.

But it wasn't long before I saw and experienced the IG Open network, with rainbow flags everywhere that people put on their desks to show support, and events like Cupcake Day and Pride being actively supported by everyone. Even then, I tentatively joined the network as an ally and remained as such for about a year and a half. As I became closer to my colleagues, I started meeting people who were openly out – some in senior leadership positions – and this made me feel more comfortable about things like using my partner's pronouns in conversation, and so my progression to being openly gay at IG was organic.

The aim of the IG LGBTQIA network is to create understanding and mindfulness within IG that allows for fundamental acceptance and freedom for people to comfortably and confidently be exactly who they are. I think that IG understands that this is the kind of environment that allows people to flourish. IG doesn't merely promote tolerance; it celebrates what makes us different. The network proudly serves the community across our offices in the UK, Germany, Geneva, Japan, Australia and South Africa: the support truly is worldwide.

My experiences with the general public haven't always been as positive. In South Africa, we are no strangers to open prejudice. There are companies that will not do business with gay people; many churches will not allow gay people to join their congregations. Some people will spew their hatred onto you if they get the chance, insulting and degrading you from the safety of the opposite pavement. But we are survivors, we adapt, and there are allies everywhere. Thankfully, the world continues to move forward, albeit slowly. I'm at a place in my life where I know when and how to stand up for myself. I can now call myself confidently gay. Proud.

I love that we are represented by rainbows, that what we stand for is beautiful and hard-earned and worth it. Today, I'm proud of the differences that set me aside from some yet to include me in an international community like no other. I'm grateful to be alive at a time that has witnessed historical changes in the gay movement and gay rights. I love where we're headed as a global community, and I'm honoured to work with a company that actively supports that journey.

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Like all of us, I want to see more change, and less hate. My personal Gay Utopia is nothing more than basic vanilla equality! As a South African, I'm gratified by my country's progression in gay rights – South Africa was the fifth country ever to legally recognize same-sex marriage and I fly that flag with honour. But, at the ground level, prejudice, maltreatment, bias and abuse against gay people are common in South Africa and everywhere else in the world. I would like for all of humanity to realise that gender, sexual identity and orientation are not voluntary, and do not make a difference to character, values or ethics – and shouldn't influence career choices.

I look forward to a time when gay people across the world can live without fear, travel without restrictions and are looked upon in business and in life as no different than anyone else. As equal.

By Dylan Mann-Hazell

Profile

Article

Adam Chater
He/Him
Hotel Manager

Writers Profile

Whitbread's Adam Chater shares LGBTQIA+ adoption advice: 'Don't let stigma or myths stop you'

"There's a myth that LGBTQIA+ people can't have children." Adam Chater, Hotel Manager at Whitbread, always knew he wanted children. After meeting and falling in love with his husband, Andy, they both had their hearts set on growing their family. After considering different options, they landed on adoption – understanding that there is a huge importance in giving a child who needs a loving family a safe place to call home.

"Children find themselves in circumstances through no fault of their own," Adam says. "And adopted children deserve that loving care just as much as anyone else." At just two years old, the little boy they welcomed into their family was considered an "older child" by adoption standards. As a child gets older, their chances of adoption decrease, so Adam was adamant in letting the agency know this wasn't a barrier for them.

So, Adam and Andy's world grew as they added a little boy to their family. Now four, he's completely changed their lives, but only for the better, explains Adam. He adds that the adoption process can seem scary, but it is worth it, and their agency, Adoption@Heart really supported them throughout the journey, making it just that little bit easier.

"He's my world and seeing him grow is such a pleasure. I think often people are scared off by the process because of the meetings with social workers. You have to talk quite openly about your life. For LGBTQIA+ people, this can put them back into a vulnerable place, which can be quite hard. But if you can do it, it's a real strength because that's what these children are going through too. This is why I think LGBTQIA+ adopters are so well equipped to support adopted children because of the lessons their own life experiences have given them."

Adam sees himself just how his own life experiences have made him a better parent, friend, and colleague. Growing up just outside of Birmingham, in Kingswinford, alongside his family, Adam was drawn to languages and the allure of travel early on. Fuelled by this, he enrolled in a French and Spanish degree program at the University of Bath. These four years became a pivotal time in his life. He not only honed his language skills but began to explore and better understand his own identity.

During Adam's studies, he embarked on a placement year that led him to work for Disneyland Paris, discovering his love for hospitality. This, coupled with a brief stint at American Airlines in Madrid, solidified what he already knew – that this was the career path for him. Another defining moment Adam remembers vividly from his studies was coming out during Freshers Week. It allowed him to finally build connections based on genuine authenticity and live without pretence. This newfound confidence led him to share this part of himself with his family later that year, a journey he was grateful to say was met with unwavering support.

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Joining Whitbread as a graduate, Adam has made his way up the ranks over the past decade. He takes immense pride in the strides the company has made in fostering inclusivity, ensuring that every person feels respected and valued within the organisation. He explains that Whitbread understands the significance of creating a supportive environment, recognising the true value that diversity brings to the table.

The hospitality company runs many of the UK's most loved brands, including over eight hundred hotels. Adam is now the Hotel Manager for two of Birmingham's biggest Premier Inn's. This encompasses running a team of over one hundred, and he feels there is immense importance in ensuring every single employee and customer that walks through their door truly feels accepted and welcomed.

"I've had a really supportive journey, but I'm also aware that other people aren't always as lucky," adds Adam. "That's why I'm passionate about our LGBTQIA+ inclusion because everyone deserves to feel accepted."

Part of Adam's work in creating a genuinely inclusive environment has been his involvement with the company's LGBTQIA+ network, GLOW. His role represents operations, and the network allows LGBTQIA+ voices across the business to be heard and represented. Just a snapshot of their work has included raising money for LGBTQIA+ charities, improving policies, and achieving first place for hospitality in the Stonewall Index.

Adam also meets regularly with Whitbread's Managing Director as part of the reverse mentoring programme, building informed allies in all parts of the business. "He's so passionate about change within our organisation and very curious. He's constantly wanting to know more and always striving to be a better ally," explains Adam. "It's been a great way for me to influence change on a more senior level and advocate for the needs of the LGBTQIA+ community."

Adam also feels hugely grateful for the support Whitbread showed his adoption journey. It's not a straightforward process – you don't have an exact timeline or often even know what date your adoption might take place till right before. Adam's team was incredibly flexible when he needed time off to meet with social workers and had a great adoption package, meaning he was able to take the time off to spend with his child to form that vital bond.

If there's anything Adam could tell other potential adoptive parents, it's "Don't let stigma or myths stop you from achieving what you want." He hopes more and more LGBTQIA+ people realise this is a rewarding and wonderful option available to them. It's a journey that comes with challenges, but it's always worth it, he shares. As with many adopted children, his little boy had quite a traumatic start to life. This meant that he was initially very shy with other people. But seeing this change as he has come out of his shell has been incredibly rewarding to Adam and Andy.

"Seeing that growth just makes you feel so proud. He's now a completely different child. He couldn't really talk to start with. He had about three words when he first came to us at two years old, which is unusual. So, he was quite a late talker, but we've been filled with pride with every word he's learnt." The nursery Adam's son attends even celebrated World Adoption Day last year. He put his hand up proudly in front of all the other kids, declaring: "I'm adopted, and I have two daddies!"

Going back to work, Adam felt torn. He wanted to do the best job he could do while being the best parent. The added flexibility and support of his team means he always has enough time for his son, admitting there is no better feeling in the world than when he picks his son up from nursery and sees him run out the door into his arms.

Adam's journey highlights the importance of challenging stereotypes, embracing authenticity, and fostering acceptance in all aspects of life. Whether he's showing up for his family or co-workers, his dedication to creating a world where everyone can be their true selves is apparent. "It's so important for people to feel loved and accepted so that they can always be their true selves. There are still things that are happening daily, where unfortunately, we don't have the equality we need across the world. Demonstrating that that fight is not over."

By Zoë Schulz

Profile

Article

Luca Condosta
He/Him
Global Leadership Learning Ecosystem Community Lead

Writers Profile

ABB's Luca Condosta wants to build a more respectful world for people to be happier in

Luca Condosta spoke to myGwork about his commitment to diversity and inclusion at ABB. He discussed how he turned the despondent era of lockdown into an opportunity for social progress, driving significant and impactful change within the corporate world and beyond.

Raised in the stunning landscapes of Apulia, Italy, Luca describes his upbringing as simply "normal but nice." The youngest of three kids, he fondly recollects his summers spent by the beach with friends, basking in the South Italian sun. Reflecting on when he came to terms with his identity, Luca opens up about coming out later in life, a decision influenced partly by fears of potential career limitations.

"My coming out at work happened very late, when I was already in my 30s, and I already had an established career in finance," he says. "This was a way for me to protect my career growth because back in the day, I didn't see many role models, and I was not sure about bringing my full self to work. A pity, looking backwards, but I also needed time to normalise the situation with myself."

Despite having to keep his true self a secret for so long, Luca still managed to pull off a successful, multi faceted career, reflecting his determination to excel in various fields. Beginning his professional journey as a computer programmer while finishing his degree in Business Administration, he navigated his way through the finance industry, first delving into accounting and eventually rising to a leading position in a listed company in Italy.

Luca's transition to leading tech company ABB saw him assuming the responsibility of Global Business Service centers in North America and North Europe before moving to various leadership roles in finance. Years later, he currently serves in the People Development Department of ABB, where his team is dedicated to delivering leadership learning programs for the company's managers. Notably, since the COVID lockdown in 2020, Luca has been at the helm of the global LGBTQ+ program at ABB. The inception of this program is a stand out moment in Luca's career so far. The first year of Pride, despite the challenges posed by the pandemic, saw Luca and his team initiate the program with a remarkable engagement of 2,500 individuals across the company.

"That was the moment I realised how I could use my power to influence and generate something bigger."

At ABB, inclusivity is not just a catchphrase but a fundamental principle of the company – they actively strive to create an open and inclusive environment for all employees. From explicit inclusion statements in job postings to signing the UN Code of Conduct for Business, ABB's dedication to promoting diversity and combating discrimination is evident.

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Luca describes an early incident in his career where he was on the receiving end of a passive-aggressive comment referring to his identity, indicating just how much diversity and inclusion efforts have shifted in the business sector over recent years. From raising awareness to implementing the systemic changes needed to make the business environment a place for all LGBTQ+ employees, the global program touched many angles and multiple stakeholders so as to amplify its impacts.

Employee Resource Groups, psychological support, comprehensive benefits review, and an amended Code of Conduct are among the many steps taken by ABB to foster an authentic and inclusive space, to work against such biases. ABB exemplifies a refreshing shift to see a business look inward, recognise potential flaws, and work twice as hard to create progressive change for the better.

Looking ahead, Luca lays out his vision for a future marked by greater LGBTQ+ equality in both the professional sphere and broader society. His late coming out was largely due to a lack of LGBTQ+ role models in higher positions paving the way – so naturally, he would like to see more diversity in leadership roles to prevent these inhibitions. He also aspires for a more respectful and aware society, one that embraces individuality and inspires an environment where everyone can freely pursue their paths to happiness.

“It’s crucial for the new generations and instrumental for the old ones to normalise the topic of LGBTQ+ equality. We have to talk about these themes and why they are important until they become non topics,” Luca continues. “In the wider society, we are experiencing a high level of polarisation in many countries. I hope the world I’m contributing to building for my kids will be more respectful, with greater awareness of people’s uniqueness and allowing them to be who they want to be and to be happy.”

By Dylan Mann-Hazell

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Profile
Article

Abraham Moreno
He/Him
Account Strategist

Writers Profile

Meet the gay guy whose travels through Tanzania, Rwanda and India helped solidify career ambitions in LGBTQ advocacy

“I would like the LGBTQ+ community to be as inclusive as we want other people to be with us,” says Abraham Moreno, Account Strategist at Criteo, who spoke to myGwork about his incredible journey and the global experiences that led to his passion for inspiring inclusion. From the challenges he faced in his younger years in Mexico City to his diverse and impactful professional experiences across the globe, Abraham’s story is a testament to his unwavering determination to make the world a more accepting place.

Born when Mexico City grappled with unparalleled pollution levels, Abraham’s younger years were marred by environmental challenges that often forced the city’s residents indoors. On top of this, the pervasive fear and uncertainty – including the kidnapping of fellow schoolmates when Abraham was only 10 years old – ultimately prompted his mother to relocate to a nearby city, seeking a safer environment to raise her family. However, the move brought about its own set of challenges. While it offered a reprieve from the immediate threats of violence, it also exposed Abraham to the stark contrast of a more conservative community.

Abraham’s struggles with self-expression and acceptance were further compounded by the city’s conservative values, posing hurdles on Abraham’s journey of self-discovery. The turning point in his life came with his decision to openly embrace his sexuality. When he was 16, he fell in love with another boy and decided to tell his mother – despite fearing rejection. Growing up, occasional comments had been made by Abraham’s family to suggest that he wouldn’t be accepted as a gay man.

Despite this, Abraham’s courage to be open and authentic led to an emotional reconciliation with his mother, who apologised for unintentionally pushing him into the closet. This, coupled with the surprising support from his uncle – a military man who Abraham expected to be less understanding – inspired a newfound sense of self-confidence in him.

“I’ve been out since I was 16, and since then, everywhere I go, I try to make people feel comfortable with expressing and being who they want to be,” says Abraham. “Feeling comfortable with being queer or being any kind of different.”

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This pivotal moment marked the beginning of Abraham's unwavering commitment to authenticity and advocacy, propelling him to embark on a journey of self-discovery and empowerment. Driven by a passion for the human aspect of business, Abraham pursued a degree in international business and ventured into the realms of commercial and international trade.

However, it was his experiences as a volunteer in communications for internal and external comms in Tanzania and subsequently as a national director for human resources in Rwanda that solidified his resolve to advocate for LGBTQ+ rights in diverse and often challenging environments. Particularly in Rwanda, where societal norms dictated discretion regarding sexual orientation, Abraham sought to educate and promote inclusivity as much as possible, recognising the importance of representing the community.

Throughout his global travels, Abraham encountered diverse cultures, traditions, and mindsets, each enriching his understanding of inclusivity and diversity. He met his partner after spending a year in India, and together, they decided to move to Brazil. Here, Abraham found a home at Criteo, an advertising company that inherently embraces and celebrates diversity.

"Joining Criteo was a breakthrough in my career," explains Abraham. "Most of the time, I worked with banks, which can often be pretty conservative in their culture. So, joining Criteo made me realise that there's another side of the corporate world, one open to diversity, truly believing that embracing a diversity of profiles brings the most richness to a company and to the world. – and it's incredible."

At Criteo, Abraham acts as Global Co-lead of the Pride Community, an integral role with the aim of fostering an inclusive and supportive environment, drawing from his rich experiences to guide the organisation towards greater diversity initiatives, including enhancing inclusion and transgender policies. At Criteo, the Cares Division encompasses a range of communities, including BIPOC, education, parents, Pride, and green initiatives. Through collaborative efforts, they have orchestrated events that bridge these communities. In a notable instance last year, during International Pronouns Day, a crossover event was held in partnership with the education community. This event delved into the usage of pronouns and provided insights into the perspective of allies in this landscape.

"At Criteo, we don't celebrate Pride just during Pride month. We have events all year long; we celebrate our identity all year long. We sit at the table, and we actually speak for ourselves. It's not just us and them, we are all together. And that makes us stronger."

Abraham's unwavering commitment to creating spaces where individuals can authentically express themselves lays the groundwork for profound societal and organisational change. His advocacy within Criteo and beyond exemplifies the transformative impact of embracing diversity and inclusion. Looking to the future, he wants to see the community unify and set aside differences in the hope for a more inclusive world.

"I would like to see more respect within the community. I would like the LGBTQ+ community to be as inclusive as we want other people to be with us. We must realize that our community is diverse and this diversity is what makes us strong, but sometimes we reject what does not belong to our social circle and hurt other people in our community with our own words."

By Dylan Mann-Hazell

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RWS
Steven Morgan
He/Him
Quality Director
Writers Profile

RWS' Steven Morgan says his son coming out was 'a great help' to coming out himself

Steven Morgan, Quality Assurance Director at RWS chats to myGwork about imposter syndrome, coming out later in life, and how his son inspired him to live authentically.

Steven describes his personal journey as a 'jigsaw' – one that cannot be completed until all the edge pieces are in place; only then can you start in the middle. Born in Greenwich in 1964, Steven's family moved to Basingstoke when he was young, then to Reading, where he spent most of his childhood.

"Life was hard," he says, looking back. "But the one thing that was clear was the love my parents had for each other and us three children."

Growing up in Reading in the 70s and 80s was different from life today. Steven enjoyed playing outside and would often be gone all day without his parents worrying about the dangers that young people face today. Despite this, he shares that he was a bit of a loner without a strong circle of friends.

"I would probably say that this was the time that affected me the most with self-confidence and which ultimately led to a lack of self-worth. The most depressing point here was that I didn't understand why."

At just sixteen, Steven left school and began to wonder what he wanted out of life. Family had always been special to him, and having a family himself was one of the only things he knew he wanted in his future.

It was the early 80s, and the HIV/AIDS pandemic was beginning, alongside a very negative attitude towards the LGBTQ+ community, including what you saw on the TV and in the papers. "Although at that stage I hadn't even considered that I may be gay, it is clear now that being gay was not an option for what I wanted out of life," Steven says.

It wasn't until the age of 18 that Steven began to consider his sexuality – but rather than embracing this discovery, he instead found himself burying those feelings, inevitably impacting his self-confidence and self-worth. "In terms of my life being a jigsaw, I was having trouble finding all the edge pieces at this point."

"After a few years of coming to terms with the life I was leading and having buried any thoughts of being gay, I met someone and was married in 1991, just after the birth of my son," shares Steven. Life continued, and within a few years, their family was complete with the birth of Steven's two daughters.

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“Unfortunately, life wasn’t easy, as my wife had become a Jehovah’s Witness, which put a great strain on the marriage, which eventually ended in 2004,” Steven explains. “By this time, we were living in Northampton and away from our families, so support at that time was limited, which didn’t do anything to help my self-confidence and self-worth.”

A couple of years after the divorce, Steven met someone who he shared common interests with, and they ended up married. In hindsight, he realizes they should have remained friends, but it’s not always easy to see these things as they unfold.

After they then eventually separated, Steven rented a room in a shared house and, by chance, was sharing with mostly gay housemates. “During the weeks that I rented the room, I found myself thinking back to when I was 18 and wondering if I had made the right decision to bury my thoughts and feelings regarding my sexuality.”

His landlord had come out later in life and his story interested Steven. They were sat chatting one night when Steven decided to open up to him about his feelings about his sexuality. “This was probably the hardest and best decision I have made. We sat talking into the night and on numerous evenings after that, and it soon became clear to me that I needed to explore the side of me that I had buried so many years earlier.”

Once his divorce was finalised, Steven could finally explore his identity freely. He also came across GADS (gay and dads support), a support group for dads who have come out later in life. This was precisely what he needed, and he does not know what he would have done without them.

“It soon became obvious that I was gaining self-confidence and had more self-worth. This newfound confidence was affecting everything – not only in my personal life but also in my work life, and the imposter syndrome that I had struggled with all my working life dissipated as my confidence grew.”

Imposter syndrome had followed Steven from the beginning of his career. However, now Group Quality Director at RWS, it’s the first workplace he has been able to show up fully as himself and be accepted wholly.

From the very beginning, Steven has seen firsthand that at RWS, fostering an inclusive environment where employees can authentically express themselves is not just a goal but a fundamental principle. This commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) is evident through various initiatives and support structures, including dedicated DEI pillars such as the LGBTQ+ Group.

As a leader within this pillar, Steven has seen the power of community and allyship in creating a workplace where everyone feels valued and respected. The network’s efforts extend beyond mere acknowledgment of Pride Month or World AIDS Day, but they actively engage in policy development, training programs, and awareness campaigns to drive meaningful change.

After a negative experience at his previous workplace, Steven’s journey at RWS has been transformative and he has found a deep sense of belonging. His experience is a testament to RWS’s genuine commitment to inclusivity, where being LGBTQ+ isn’t just accepted but celebrated as part of the fabric of the company culture.

Coming out, for Steven, came with many challenges, but the biggest was coming to terms with it himself. His son had come out to the family many years before at just sixteen, so in some ways, Steven feels as though his son pathed the way, inspiring him to also be true to himself.

“On reflection, my son coming out and the reaction from the family was a great help to me, as I didn’t have any issues with telling my family once I had made my decision. So, I owe a lot to him for breaking the ground and enabling me to come out without the added pressure of how my family would react.” Then, in the summer of 2019, Steven met Anthony. Although they lived in different areas of the UK, the pair soon called each other every night and visited every weekend they could. In December that same year, Steven moved to Kent to be with Anthony. It was a leap of faith in many ways, but it was one of Steven’s best decisions.

“When we first sat down and talked about what we wanted from a relationship and our lives, we made a five-year plan, and in July this year, exactly five years from the day we met, we are getting married. I will finally be able to say that my jigsaw is complete.”

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From the challenges of navigating societal expectations and burying his true identity to finding the courage to embrace his authentic self, Steven's story is one of perseverance and growth. Through the support of his family, communities like GADS and the inclusive environment fostered at RWS, Steven found acceptance and a newfound confidence that permeated every aspect of his life.

Steven's journey inspires all those who may be grappling with their own identities, reminding us that it's never too late to embrace who we truly are and find the love and acceptance we deserve.

By Dylan Mann-Hazell

Profile

Article

Gabi Chiummo
She/Her
Senior Specialist - Global Regulatory Affairs team in Europe

Writers Profile

Gabi Chiummo on allyship: “More insights and ideas are generated in a culture of belonging”

Gabi Chiummo, Senior Specialist on the Global Regulatory Affairs team in Europe at MSD, spoke to myGwork about her devotion to allyship, bravery in the face of life-changing moments, and the value of belonging.

Gabi has found her unique path within the pharmaceutical industry, cultivating a career that has taken her from Brazil to Germany and offering opportunities for personal and professional development along the way. She serves as a Senior Specialist on the Global Regulatory Affairs team at MSD, effectively merging her expertise as a veterinarian with her role in regulatory affairs. Not only has she excelled in her technical capacity, but she has also embraced a leadership role within her workplace, guiding the DE&I (Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion) team and serving as the Global Communication lead for the Rainbow Alliance EBRG (Employee Resource Group).

Embracing her love for exploration and new horizons, Gabi finds joy in being a Brazilian living in Germany. A self-described bookworm, travel lover and runner, her affinity for new experiences matches her enthusiasm for her diverse career, leading to a fulfilling balance that energizes her professional and personal life. Looking back on her journey with MSD, Gabi’s highlights are deeply intertwined with the company’s transformative role in her life.

“We are building a nice story together,” she reflects. “MSD was my first intern job. They saved me from a career that didn’t suit me, showed me that veterinary science is so much more than clinical practice, [and] presented me the pharmaceutical company universe.” Her experiences have resulted in personal and professional growth, the creation of enduring connections, and an international career that has broadened her perspectives beyond imagination.

The transition from Brazil to Germany posed significant challenges, but Gabi approached these with resilience and gratitude. “Everything was a huge challenge: moving, the language, the goodbyes, and the new life,” she shares. Despite the obstacles, Gabi found a silver lining, remarking, “I now have two homes. I have Brazil, my forever home, and lucky me, I also have Germany, which has given me so much more than I could have ever imagined.”

Gabi also spoke of the immense challenge in communication, particularly as everything was initially conducted in German. Despite feeling out of place, Gabi saw this as an opportunity to effect change. With the support of her site manager, team lead, and enthusiastic colleagues, Gabi and her team of 20 dedicated individuals are all united in their mission to cultivate a workplace where everyone has equal opportunities.

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For Gabi, DEI is deeply important due to its ability to unite diverse perspectives, experiences, and ideas, facilitating innovative solutions and fostering creativity throughout various fields. As an ally to the LGBTQIA commitment, Gabi is determined to create an environment where everyone feels free to be their authentic selves, reflecting her belief that diversity is just the beginning, equity is the way forward, and inclusion is the ultimate destination.

“Allyship manifests in various ways and in various circumstances,” she explains. “We can all do more to support one another, to ensure that everyone feels safe and supported enough to bring their whole selves with them everywhere they go. More insights and ideas are generated in a culture of belonging.”

Gabi also shares her remarkable journey of confronting a brain tumour, which she has endearingly named Rosangela. By naming her tumour, she was able to humanize this life-changing experience, and she found empowerment and resilience. In her own words, “Of course, there are difficult days, they need to exist. We need to experience the shadows in order to fully appreciate the light, and life is made up of this eternal dance. However, I feel lit up, awakened, inspired and full of life.”

Within MSD, Gabi’s journey has become an emblem of the company’s commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion. She highlights the company’s proactive approach to fostering an environment where employees feel a sense of belonging. Through educational initiatives, MSD ensures that diversity and inclusion are at the forefront, creating a workplace where everyone’s unique narrative is acknowledged and embraced. Gabi’s own story, shared through MSD’s platform, has resonated globally, reinforcing the company’s dedication to supporting its employees through adversity and triumph.

Reflecting on the unwavering support she’s received, Gabi speaks of the profound impact of genuine kindness, stating, “From professional to personal, I received so much support and kindness that I feel ready to face whatever life brings next, I know I have the best with me.”

Looking forward, Gabi is hopeful for life’s simple and extraordinary moments, emphasizing the importance of cherishing the present. Her message is one of profound connection and understanding, encouraging individuals to seek out and share their unique narratives, for it is in these exchanges that true empathy and community flourish.

Gabi’s story is a testament to resilience, empathy, and the power of inclusivity. Her journey and advocacy serve as a beacon of hope and understanding, inspiring others to share their stories, seek out diversity, and foster an environment where everyone feels they truly belong.

By Zoë Schulz

Profile

Article

Nacho Igual
He/Him
Lead Director, Business Developmen

Writers Profile

Proud Parents: Navigating career success with parenthood

The Trade Desk's Nacho Igual talks to myGwork's Pepi Sappal about how he navigated his career success alongside his challenging journey to parenthood.

Nacho's life took an unexpected yet joyous turn when he received a life-altering call from Spain's National Adoption Centre. After a tedious eight-year wait, he and his partner were finally next in line for the adoption selection process.

Spain's arduous adoption process involves meticulous scrutiny and a considerably long waiting period, shared Nacho. "But we felt very supported throughout this by the National Adoption Centre. Thanks to Spain's progressive policies, all parents are evaluated equally."

Adoption waiting lists can close for up to four years or more in Spain. Nacho and his partner got on the list thanks to a timely prompt from a good friend just a week before it closed. "Once on the list, there's at least an eight-year waiting list to get assessed, verified and granted a 'carta de idoneidad', which is an official requirement to be an adoptive parent in Spain," explained Nacho. "Even then, there's no guarantee you will get a child through adoption. It's a long and tough process, as very few babies are put up for adoption thanks to Spain's excellent social care."

After nearly a decade of waiting, it was another 10 months before their baby came home with them. Nacho praised the professionalism and meticulous interviews in the selection process carried out by Spain's adoption agency. The supportive treatment was also mirrored by his employer, The Trade Desk. Nacho's managers accommodated his requests for time off for the interviews and assessments required by the adoption process.

Nacho soon discovered that The Trade Desk's caring culture extended beyond the adoption process. "When we finally got the news that our baby was ready for us, my colleagues rallied around me to celebrate the news of my son's arrival."

Having an employer that is compassionate and flexible is hugely important to Nacho. "Shortly after I returned to work in April 2023, I was promoted to Lead Director, Business Development, which involves additional responsibilities to bring in new business, on top of supporting existing clients and improving marketing KPIs. The company also continues to offer flexible work arrangements, which I deeply value."

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Parenthood, however, comes with many challenges in Spain, particularly for LGBTQ+ couples. “Options for gay male couples in Spain are limited to adoption and fostering, as there is a ban on surrogacy,” explained Nacho. Fostering is an avenue that Nacho and his partner may explore later on, should they decide to extend their family.

Nacho’s story offers great hope to others in the LGBTQ+ community seeking to become adoptive parents. However, he emphasised the importance of early applications to avoid missing out. His experience of fatherhood has been intense, marked by “profound feelings of love and protection.”

Reflecting back on his life, Nacho never imagined that he would be able to live the authentic life he does now. As a child born in Valencia in the 1980s, he grappled with the fear of living a closeted life: “I knew I felt different and was attracted to boys from the age of 12, and I worried that my friends and family would discover I was gay. As a teen, my biggest fear was that I would have to remain closeted and enter a traditional marriage with a woman and not be able to live authentically. Coming to terms with my identity was really frustrating as a young person.”

He was terrified to come out to his friends, but when he did, his worst fears disappeared. Nacho came out to his friends and family in his early 20s while at university. Once he fully assumed his LGBTQ+ identity and came out, he also began inviting his dates and partners to his family reunions just as his siblings did. “I was grateful to my parents for embracing my identity without any awkwardness. In fact, I never had to sit them down and talk to them about me being ‘gay,’ as they already seemed to know, so it was a really smooth transition,” shared Nacho.

It was after Nacho moved to Madrid for work in 2006 that he met his current partner, who he married in 2013: “We had an extravagant big Spanish wedding in Madrid, inviting over 200 friends and family.”

Nacho’s journey as an openly gay man unfolded against a backdrop of societal transformation in Spain. The country’s commitment to equality is evident in its ground-breaking legislation that supports the rights of LGBTQ+ individuals. In 2005, Spain proudly became the third European country to legalise marriage equality, and the second to permit adoption by same-sex couples.

Nacho believes that the timing worked in his favour as attitudes towards the LGBTQ+ community were changing for the better: “It was becoming more normalised and accepted to be gay, with more spaces to go out and hang out with other LGBTQ+ people, so I didn’t feel the need to hide my identity anymore.”

Non-traditional families are quickly becoming the norm in Spain, especially in the bigger cities, added Nacho: “While not all cities and towns are as advanced as Madrid, Valencia or Barcelona, my experience of being LGBTQ+ has been a very positive one, where I feel that I have the same rights as heterosexual people in Spain.” Of course, he acknowledges that older LGBTQ+ people did not have it as easy as his generation, especially under Franco’s dictatorship back in the seventies when LGTBQ+ people faced harsh persecution.

Progressive attitudes in Spain have enabled Nacho to come out and stay out. His father has also recently come out as gay thanks to the country’s progressive changes: “After my mother passed away a few years ago, my father confided in me that he was confused about his identity. Although he had a very happy marriage, and loved my mother very deeply, he shared that he suspected he might be bisexual or gay. My advice to him was to take some time out to explore his identity.”

Thanks to Nacho’s advice, his father has once again found true love and happiness – this time with a man: “They now live together with their dogs and are very happy. My father says he is indebted to me as he believes he would not have found happiness again had I not given him my blessing to explore his identity. But for me, it was just my way of paying him back for the unconditional love and support that he and my mother had always shown me.”

Nacho is grateful to live in a time, and a city, that embraces LGBTQ+ and non-traditional families. However, he calls for continued advocacy for LGBTQ+ rights, stressing the need to remain vigilant, even in regions where these rights are firmly established.

“We still need to carry on fighting for our rights because, as history shows, things can change very quickly. We must not lower our guard. Those that have a voice must continue to be vocal for those in other parts of the country and world where equal rights for the LGBTQ+ community have yet to be established,” concluded Nacho.

By Pepi Sappal

Profile

Article

Marina Del Frate
She/Her
HRBP Coordinator

Writers Profile

Marina Del Frate on the importance of equity and empathy in the workplace

Marina Del Frate, HRBP Coordinator at Reckitt Industrial, believes it's important to stand up for all marginalised communities, regardless of whether you identify with them. myGwork sat down with Marina to discuss her passion for the arts and how this connects with her unwavering commitment to diversity and inclusion.

Raised in Brazil, family has always served as an anchor in Marina's life. In particular, her close bond with her younger brother stands out as a profound source of strength and connection, shaping her outlook on life. Marina recognizes the importance of empathy, support, and understanding in personal relationships – a mindset she has kept close to her heart along her path through the world of diversity and inclusion.

"I've made errors; I'm not perfect. No one is. But it's always a learning journey, and if we have mutual support and continuous action, then tomorrow is a whole new world. It's a path that we all need to follow to have a more inclusive and fairer world for everyone."

Starting with a background in public administration at university, Marina found her niche in Human Resources through internships in the corporate world. This route led her to become a Business Partner in various HR functions, culminating in her current role at Reckitt Industrial as an HRBP Coordinator specialising in supply areas.

Marina's impact at the company is most pronounced in her passionate involvement in Diversity and Inclusion initiatives, particularly within the LGBTQIA community. As president of an ERG group, Marina focuses on year-round inclusion efforts, going beyond token gestures during awareness events such as Pride Month. Her dedication stems from a deep-seated belief in equity and empathy, as well as the need for advocacy for marginalised communities throughout the year.

"It's crucial to recognize that Diversity and Inclusion (DNI) is a continuous journey, not a one-time action," says Marina. "We have a long path ahead and must advocate for more effective policies that promote non-discrimination and equal opportunities in all workplaces."

Marina's leadership of the ERG reflects her personal commitment to ongoing actions to create a more inclusive environment based on mutual support. Her advocacy journey is characterised by a willingness to learn and grow – something she considers an important part of authentic allyship.

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One pivotal moment that showcased Marina's proactive approach to inclusivity was when she advocated for better-fitting caps for employees with diverse hair types in the factory. This act of inclusivity, outside of her usual remit, exemplified her passion for driving positive change within the business landscape. To Marina, true allyship means standing up for marginalised communities, regardless of whether you are a part of them or not.

A formative event in Marina's life happened in 2020 when despite the challenges posed by lockdown, she married her husband, a magician she met through a shared love for the arts. Acting and musical theatre are not just hobbies for Marina but serve as pillars of passion. They have acted as empowering influences, improving her ability to connect with others on a deeper level, both in a personal and professional context.

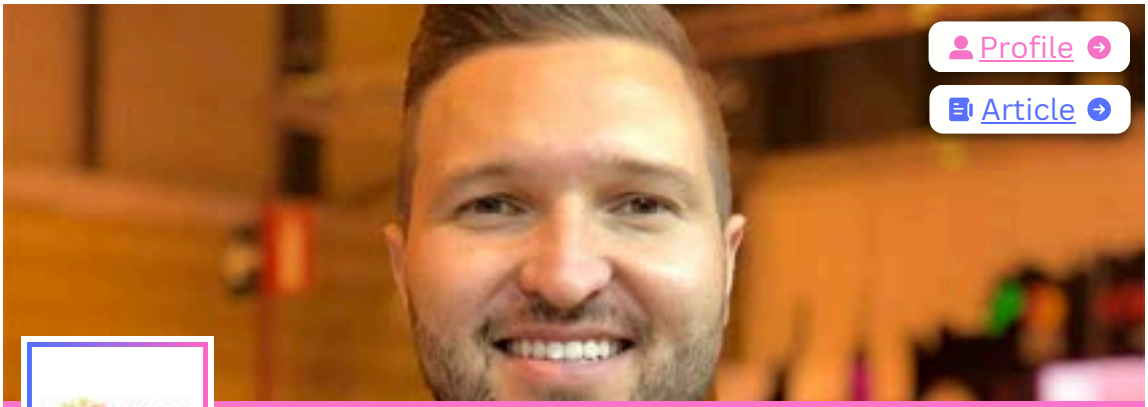
Marina's move to Reckitt Industrial allowed her to align personal and professional values with the company's people-first principles and approaches. There, the commitment to diversity and inclusion is palpable. Initiatives to improve recruitment practices, training to mitigate workplace biases, and support for LGBTQIA rights underscore the company's dedication to inclusion. By partnering with forums and participating in awareness days such as International Women's Day and Pride Month, the company sets a standard for embracing diversity across its operations.

Emphasising continuous progress, Marina advocates for ongoing diversity, equity and inclusion efforts including the necessity for workplace-wide policies that prioritise equality. She also underscores the need for global legislative advancements to solidify civil rights, calling for collective action in empowering marginalised communities.

"Improved legislative advancements are important to ensure civil rights and equality for all people. While progress has been made in Brazil, with rights for same-sex couples, there is still much room for improvement in the legal framework to achieve true equality for everyone."

The impact of Marina's initiatives –from advocating for better workplace conditions to driving inclusive recruitment practices — showcases the value of her commitment. Through sharing insights from her journey, Marina encourages everyone to take action, stand up for marginalised communities, and champion equality wherever they can.

By Dylan Mann-Hazell



Felipe Cardenas
He/Him
Board Chairman at IGLTA

Writers Profile

Meet and greet: Felipe Cardenas, co-founder of the Colombian LGBT Chamber of Commerce, and President of the Diversity Chamber

Can you tell us a bit about your role, career journey to date and the organization you are working for?

I am a Colombian entrepreneur with a background in Business Management and Trade. I have lived in Europe, the Caribbean and Mexico, and in the latter, I had the opportunity to join PwC, where I learned how to be a business consultant. After a couple of years, I quit my job and came back to Colombia to open my own consultancy firm. Through this company, I was invited by the US Embassy in Bogota to co-found the Colombian LGBT Chamber of Commerce, and since September 2012 I have been the Co-founder and President. This non-profit provides economic empowerment opportunities to LGBTQ+ Colombians and migrants through membership, certification, training, events and other networking opportunities. Recently, we celebrated our 10th anniversary as LGBT Chamber of Commerce. Having expanded our reach, we re-launched the organization in October 2022 as the "Diversity Chamber". This has allowed us to have a stronger focus on Diversity, Equality and Inclusion (DE&I) with a broader spectrum of different minority groups and an intersectional approach. Sexual diversity and inclusion in the workplace will remain a strong priority for us.

What's the biggest highlight of your career to date and why?

The biggest career highlight for me is being recognized globally by the tourism industry for advancing LGBTQ+ Tourism in emerging destinations like Colombia, and for being elected as the first under-40-year-old Latino/Colombian, as Chair of the Board of Directors from IGLTA, the International LGBTQ+ Travel Association. This is highly relevant not only for my career but for the strong message it sends to the UNWTO ecosystem of governments, corporations, businesses and professionals that LGBTQ+ tourism is indeed a global priority and plays a key role in the economic recovery after the pandemic, especially for emerging economies that are advancing LGBTQ+ rights and more inclusive behaviour in their societies.

How important is LGBTQ+ inclusion in the workplace in Colombia/Latin America and for you personally?

LGBTQ+ inclusion has become an absolute priority for Colombia, especially with the new 2022 government in power. Colombia now has the Ministry of Equality for the first time in history, which is led by our Vice President, also our first Black-Afro Descendent woman in history to get one of the highest government roles.

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Colombia has enjoyed LGBTQ+ rights since 2016 and currently has the second most advanced legislation in Latin America for LGBTQ+ citizens after Uruguay. This is a strong signal that our country is finally evolving into a more fair and comprehensive society that accepts and embraces our differences as human beings. Personally, for me, this gives me not only hope but also the energy to continue working harder with more businesses to create discrimination-free workplaces across my country and the Latin America region.

What's the most challenging aspect of managing people right now?

For me, as President of the Diversity Chamber, the biggest challenge is talent retention, especially given the fact that most of our team members are constantly exposed to corporations, our national government and other businesses. A few of them have ended up being recruited by partners/members of our Association, and this is a great path in their individual, professional careers, but as a nonprofit, we can only offer so much in terms of job descriptions and salaries, and of course, corporations or other business can offer more attractive compensation and career plans. I guess it's a good problem to have, as the individuals who come to join our team will end up in great corporate/business roles in the short term.

What attributes do you look for in new recruits and why?

Lately we have learnt that leadership skills are more important than education/background. Sometimes we see resumes with very robust experience or coming from Ivy League Schools, but at the end of the day, not all those super-qualified professionals have what it takes to get the job done. We are true believers that everyone should have a fair opportunity in a selection process to prove their skills/abilities to perform. Breaking this mindset, which is full of unconscious bias about talent, has been a great learning experience for us at the Diversity Chamber.

What's your favorite inclusion campaign to date and why?

I would have to choose recruitment programs that we promote for remote work for LGBTQ+ migrants - focused on Venezuelan migrants in 2020 during the quarantine period and curfews experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic. This program, thanks to funds from the US Embassy in Colombia, was able to provide training to over 800 LGBTQ+ Venezuelans living in Colombia and elevate their working skills to be more eligible to access remote/virtual work opportunities in the challenging times of 2020. A few dozen of them could access great job opportunities, and a couple of hundreds of them became entrepreneurs thanks to this program.

How do you encourage staff to have a worklife balance in the Latin countries, especially with the increase in remote/hybrid working?

It is indeed a challenge, but since implementing a "2 days a week working from home" policy in 2021 and remaining true to our contracts, working policies require us to work 8 hours per day and just one Saturday morning (from 9am to 1pm), once a month. So regarding organizational culture, we are strict with deadlines but very flexible with the way we deliver projects, meaning how our team members pair up to ensure work completion on time, even though our organizational structure defines how we interact as team leaders and members, we have learnt that this flexibility actually drives and optimizes our performance, working in groups to deliver a project than rigid schedules. As long as the work is done with the quality expected, on time and on budget, we are good to go. This, we believe, is a great opportunity for us in Latin America to elevate our productivity rates and break the mindset that working from home and strictly in one department goes against efficiency.

What podcast series are you listening to right now for your career development? Are there any DE&I-related podcast series you would recommend?

I'm not a big podcast fan, as I am very visual, so I prefer videos instead. But if I were to mention one, I personally enjoy "The School of Greatness" from Lewis Homes a lot. Its content is not necessarily linked with DE&I, but I find it fascinating how he balances topics that are so close to personal development but totally applicable to our business activities, and especially our work in DE&I.

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What was the last book you read (fiction/non-fiction)? Any interesting take-aways and would you recommend it to fellow leaders?

For Latin America perspectives in DE&I, I recently read Coming Out by Diego Tomasino, an Argentinian Accountant based in Miami with great stories about how his work in Panama and now in the US is helping corporations to come out of the closet and embrace sexual diversity in the workplace. A very personal fiction book that I love from my favorite writer Agatha Christie is 4.50 from Paddington. As a Colombian, I will always recommend reading the Magical Realism masterpiece from the one and only Nobel Prize winner Gabriel Garcia's One Hundred Years of Solitude.

What do you do to relax at the end of a hard working day?

I go to the gym, for nice dinners with my partner or friends, or enjoy a movie. But nothing beats a glass of Chardonnay for me. White wine is the perfect way to end a tough day.

By Pepi Sappal

Profile

Article

Liz Moseley
She/Her
Managing Director

Writers Profile

Liz Moseley on LGBTQIA inclusivity and representation at Hearst UK

Liz Moseley, Managing Director of Good Housekeeping/Good Housekeeping Institute, spoke to myGwork about her journey from Yorkshire to the heart of the UK media industry in London, shedding light on her personal experiences and the strides Hearst UK is taking towards inclusivity and representation.

Having been raised in Yorkshire, Liz reminisces about the idyllic surroundings of the Dales, growing up in a place where many vacation to relax. Despite leaving at the age of eighteen and the nuanced complexities of navigating her LGBTQIA identity within a religious family, she will still always consider this part of the world her home.

The journey to Liz's current role at Hearst UK saw an impressive and transformative progression through the world of magazines in the early 2000s. Beginning in 1997, working for the Scottish Time Out, Liz branched out to London to work with notable publications, including the likes of ELLE, Red, and New Woman. With an incredible amount of experience under her belt, a pivotal moment came in 2005 when fate intertwined her path with Katie Vanneck-Smith, who would later become her boss at Hearst UK.

At Hearst UK – the home of brands including Good Housekeeping, Harper's Bazaar, Country Living, Women's Health and Esquire – inclusivity and belonging stand as foundational principles. With active employee groups such as Hearst Pride, the company encourages a safe and accepting environment for LGBTQIA employees and allies. The unwavering stance on authenticity at the workplace underscores the ongoing commitment to creating a space where everyone feels respected and valued in their individuality.

"Representation matters," Liz elaborates. "We have active employee groups, Hearst Pride is the one for our LGBT employees and their allies, but there are a number of them. There's a multi-faith room in the office, of course, and we have our policy house in order to offer guidance, support and commitments. Our CEO is very, very clear about this – people should turn up to work as themselves, and if anyone makes them feel uncomfortable in any way, we will not stand for it."

In sharing her personal journey with the LGBTQIA community, Liz candidly reflects on the complexities of her identity. As a lesbian who was once married to a man, she opens up about the challenges faced in a Christian household that didn't, at least openly, embrace homosexuality.

The journey from internalized societal norms to self-acceptance was a tumultuous one, marked by encounters with bigotry and misogyny. In particular, the blatantly misogynistic but disturbingly normalised standards of the media throughout the early 21st century.

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“1990s and noughties London, working in women’s media... looking back, I can see that the misogyny was real,” Liz reflects. “The media was pretty brutal. We were probably all really damaged by it, but at the time, it just seemed like this incredible experience.”

Despite the obstacles, Liz found solace in accepting her true self, a process that was both freeing and challenging. In fact, throughout her career, the evolution of attitudes towards diversity and inclusion has been palpable.

From the implementation of active resource groups to initiatives championing gender equality, Liz has witnessed firsthand the shift towards a more inclusive professional landscape. Though to achieve true, authentic equality, she asserts there is still a long way to go for women in the workplace and that the spotlight is now pointed in the direction of companies to improve conditions.

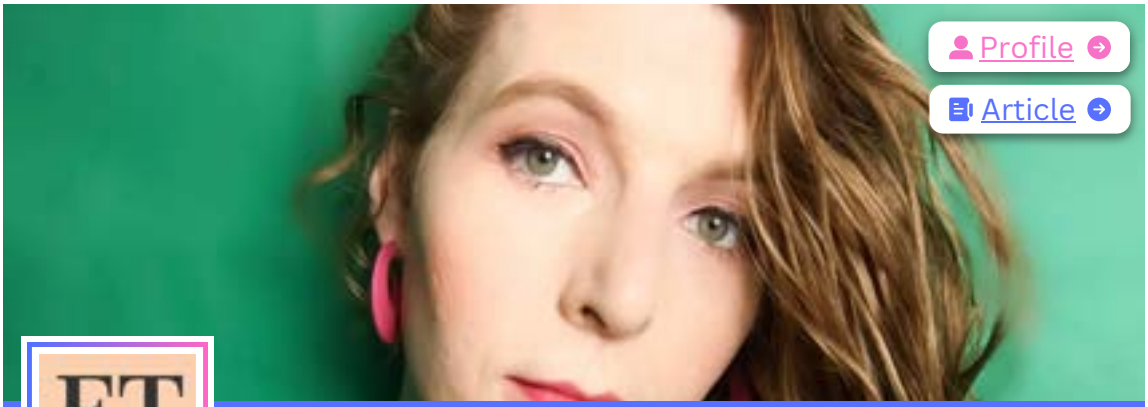
“Lockdown was a watershed moment. The world went online, and discourse online is so different. It moves faster, and it’s harder to moderate. We had to regroup. Black Lives Matter, trans rights, more recently the end of Roe v Wade in the States. It’s all felt very live recently – companies can’t fly under the radar anymore.”

Looking ahead, Liz envisions a future where LGBTQIA equality is more than a checkbox—it’s a lived reality. Advocating for greater intersectionality in pay gap reporting and increased support for mental health and social care, she highlights the need for comprehensive measures to address the unique challenges faced by members of the LGBTQIA community.

Beyond these integral changes, she also hopes to see a larger range of venues and locations specifically for lesbian women to socialise – in particular, she dreams of seeing a chain of pubs open across the UK for this exact demographic.

Through Liz’s story, a journey of resilience, growth, and a firm commitment to championing inclusivity in an ever-evolving media landscape, she stands as a beacon of empowerment for women and an advocate for a more diverse and inclusive future for the LGBTQ+ community.

By Dylan Mann-Hazell



Ændra Rininsland
She/Her
Creative Technologist

Writers Profile

Ændra Rininsland on why we need more trans people in journalism

Ændra Rininsland, Senior Data Journalism Engineer at Financial Times, spoke to myGwork about her journey with her identity and why we need more trans people in journalism.

Ændra (pronounced ɛndrɑ) has always been interested in journalism and tech, and her career has been a journey interweaving the two together. She remembers teaching herself web programming at a young age and publishing her first website in 1997. Similarly, she tried to push for a school paper throughout elementary school, spent all her High School years as part of the newspaper team, and was the opinions editor and then production editor for her university paper.

Growing up in Saskatchewan, a small Canadian province, Ændra realised from an early age she wasn't straight. Reflecting, she shares that she knew this by age nine or ten, but her environment meant she stifled and hid that side of herself. Her family were very Evangelical, and she was brought up in the church, which meant it was not a particularly conducive place to be queer.

Moving to Calgary for university meant Ændra was able to start exploring herself, but she tiptoed, taking the journey slowly. "I was still really afraid to come out or be who I was," she says. As she got older, this impacted her relationships with those around her, and looking back now, she can see why she struggled to connect and share the deeper parts of herself.

"I felt just alone a lot of the time and like I wasn't being heard. It felt like a part of me was being neglected, that wasn't being given oxygen."

Entering her thirties, Ændra slowly started to share her queerness with those around her, and within a few years, all her friends and family knew, and she was able to begin medically transitioning. This changed everything for her, and her life has been completely different ever since, but she wouldn't change it for the world.

Now based in London and working at Financial Times, Ændra has a workplace where showing up authentically is encouraged and championed. "A big part of what allowed me to feel comfortable coming out at work was the fact that I saw people like me who were living their lives and weren't afraid to be trans at work," she explains.

"That was a huge part of why I felt comfortable expressing this side of myself. Being trans in the workplace is scary in many, many ways, but seeing people like you within your work environment is just so utterly crucial to feeling comfortable. Being able to share experiences and support each other is incredibly important."

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Ever since coming out, Ændra has been involved with Proud FT, Financial Times's LGBTQIA network. This has included contributing towards a trans inclusion policy, where Ændra and many other trans employees were consulted to ensure the policy met the needs of the trans community across FT. She's also on the steering committee and FT's representative for InterMedia UK, a network of LGBTQIA networks across the media working together to build a more inclusive industry.

ProudFT helped push for adding gender-affirming care to the company healthcare plan, which launched in the UK last year and the Trans Inclusion Policy is scheduled to launch in the US next month. Over the past six months, Ændra started electrolysis fully funded because of this, and it's had an amazing impact on her quality of life.

"I feel so much more confident at both the office and outside of it. It's been incredible. I'm really proud we were able to accomplish that. The FT's one of the first UK newspapers to offer a gender-affirming healthcare benefit (if not the first), and it's already having a material impact on the lives of trans people in the company, including my own."

Ændra is also a part of the Trans Journalist Association, which has become a place of solace and support for her, particularly when the wider industry can be a hostile environment for the trans community. They are a professional organisation made up of journalists from across the trans spectrum; they have everyone from student journalists who are still studying to people who've been working in the industry for thirty-plus years.

"The Trans Journalist Association has helped me to feel like I belong in my industry. Seeing other professional journalists who are also trans has done wonders for making me feel like I am not alone in the industry, and I hope that there are more trans people in journalism, telling trans stories and talking about our own community."

The Trans Journalist Association provides crucial research and resources; for example, they have released a style guide for journalists covering trans topics. With over twenty contributors, it is available freely to support journalists in reporting on the trans community accurately and fairly. It also shares best practices for language that captures the range of trans experiences in a way that gives the trans community dignity and respect – something that is too often missing in reporting.

As a Senior Data Journalism Engineer, Ændra's role combines journalism and tech. Coming under this is the coverage of elections. With the possibility of a UK election around the corner, alongside the US, Ukraine, European parliamentary elections and more, it's set to be a crucial year for Ændra and her team.

The way in which they report is currently being reimagined, with the climate constantly shifting, she explains. The drastic shift in Twitter/X is one example of this – a platform journalists relied on for fact-checking and live reporting is no longer reliable or entirely useable. This also means it is a time when they are seeing a lot of innovation and new ways of working across the industry.

Part of this is the shift in the tools available for storytelling and journalism. The work they do now, Ændra explains, wouldn't have ever been imagined a decade ago, and that makes it exciting. The media can, however, also be a very challenging space to work, particularly for the queer community. Ændra feels grateful to have the full support of her workplace at FT and The Trans Journalist Association, but that doesn't shelter her from what is being seen in the wider industry when it comes to conversations about trans lives.

"I think that in the last half-decade, the British media has done enormous damage to the trans community. As an industry, we're failing to learn the lessons that we should have during the HIV/AIDS crisis. I find it endlessly frustrating because it feels like some of our best practices are being weaponised against trans people.

As an industry, it's challenging because, on the one hand, you want to be able to present a plurality of viewpoints, and you want to be able to discuss conflicts within the world. At the same time, so often, trans identities are seen as open to debate, and they're not. Our identities are who we are. We're people trying to live our lives, and we don't want our existence to be an open question."

Despite the challenges posed by the media's portrayal of trans identities, Ændra remains steadfast in her belief in the power of storytelling to foster understanding and empathy. Her call for greater representation and respect for trans lives serves as a reminder of the responsibility journalists bear in shaping narratives that reflect the diverse realities of our world.

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“Growing up, I saw zero queer representation in media, and I think I would have transitioned earlier in life if I had. It’s only in the last couple of years that we’ve started to see trans people on television and trans lives being written about.

I’m hopeful and optimistic, knowing that the way things are right now will continue to change, and it will continue to change for the better. I also find it inspiring to see that young people are vastly more accepting of sexualities and genders that aren’t straight and cisgender. It feels like this will ultimately translate into a more accepting future for queer people.”

By Zoë Schulz

Profile

Article

Raga Dsilva
She/Her
Director & Editor at The Views Room & Outspoken Voices

Writers Profile

Meet & Greet: Raga D'silva - Author, Public Speaker, Co-Founder/CEO Outspoken Speakers Network CIC

myGwork: Can you tell us a bit about yourself and your current work in the LGBTQ+ space in both the UK and India?

Raga: I am a middle-aged highly successful gay Indian woman, woman of color, mother of twins, legally married to my same-sex partner of sixteen years, and decided to finally shed my fear at 50, and 'came out' publicly through my book, Untold Lies in 2019. I am an entrepreneur, public speaker, writer and host of several shows – both online and live in-person. More importantly, I am an LGBTQ+ advocate and activist.

I was born and raised in India in a very traditional catholic family. I lived in New Zealand for several years before moving to London. After working in advertising agencies in India and New Zealand for two decades, I set up my own consulting agency to support international businesses with their market entry into India. Later in 2008, I also set up India's first speakers bureau, Speaking Minds.

I have dedicated my life to advocate for our rights in the LGBT+ community and was one of the petitioners for same-sex/gender marriage equality rights in India. Along with my partner, we have created and produced several positive LGBTQ+ content on various platforms – including 'coming out stories from India', Today with Totally Out Now that discussed marriage equality hearings at the Supreme Court in India with several petitioners and influencers from the community in India.

My personal coming out journey has been featured across various media channels internationally including BBC India in 2022 in several Indian regional languages. My story has also been featured on BBC One morning show recently and several other media outlets. I publish opinion pieces in several publications on LGBTQ+ related issues, including Diva Magazine. I set up the UK's first women (and non-binary) speakers bureau OUTspoken Speakers in September 2023, which has provided a platform to several queer women and those non-binary, to share their subject matter expertise as well as their lived in experiences. This agency also focuses on bringing difficult conversations from our community to organizations through panel discussion on topics such as domestic abuse, menopause and its impact, queer families, etc.

My YouTube channel works on amplifying voices in the LGBTQ+ community and over time, we will launch another vertical to include voices from London and around the world. I am also on several DEI Boards in India, including Aristocrat Technologies India & Sony Pictures India as well as a Trustee on the Board of one of India's largest charities – Child Rights & You (CRY UK). I have recently joined PBNF (Pride Business Network Foundation) India on their Advisory Board. This is a transgender-led organisation focused on empowering the transgender/hijra community in India through economic inclusion programs.

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myGwork: You came out publicly through your book, Untold Lies, in 2019, at the age of 50. Can you share your coming out story and the challenges you have had to overcome, especially as an LGBTQ+ Catholic, South Asian woman?

Raga: Growing up in India, I had crushes on girls and one particular female teacher, but I hid it thinking that was wrong and unusual, as most of my friends had crushes with boys. I went to a convent school in India, which has both catholics and non-catholics, and was very strict.

In the 1980s there was absolutely no understanding of the LGBTQ+ community in India. In fact, the words lesbian or gay did not even exist. We knew of 'homos' and they were boys/men who were effeminate and treated with ridicule. The Bollywood films, which was our key entertainment also used gay caricatures and mocked them. This meant that deep inside I became homophobic towards myself and fearful, so I never disclosed this part of me to anyone and ran away from it.

So, basically, there was no room for me to 'come out' even to myself. So, I lived a heteronormative life in a heteronormative society, predominantly wrapped with social conditioning and what we say, 'log kya kahengay' in hindi, translated to, 'what will people say'. Firstly, the word 'sexual orientation' did not exist in my growing up days, or even until 20 years ago. All I knew was that I was deeply attracted to women but, I did not know it was normal to feel that way.

I had an intense emotional relationship with a woman in my early twenties in India. But, neither of us knew that we could have any future together. That was not even discussed, and therefore eventually when I married a man, that romance just faded.

It wasn't until I was "outed" by my mother after I was married and had children, did I even seriously consider exploring this part of me. Even after that, it took me years to deal with my own internal homophobia, clear my own confusion and then eventually accept my sexual orientation. My current partner and I have been together 16 years, but even during the initial period with her, I was unsure about wanting to lead this life and so without questioning anything, I would say things like, 'It's not about being gay. I am in love with a woman at this moment, and that's all that matters". I believe this gave me the comfort of not being committed to my sexual orientation.

myGwork: Can you share some of the challenges you faced being an LGBTQ+ South Asian mother and the painful backlash you faced from your family/community?

Raga: As you can see from my first TEDx talk, 50&OUT, I lived and worked in Wellington, New Zealand from 2001 for a decade. I was 'outed' there and started dating women there. Apart from the severe vitriol and abuse I faced from my own Indian community there, I also made extremely poor personal choices.

My first proper relationship with a woman was an extremely traumatic and abusive one. I got involved with an alcoholic who would use any opportunity to put me down and beat me up physically, and I would be threatened to be 'outed' at my workplace and to my extended family in India. To those who do not understand this, please know when you are going through a journey of confusion of your own sexual orientation, you are at your most vulnerable. I felt scared and vulnerable all the time and had to work hard to protect my children from my own dysfunctions and also from a highly abusive, overtly dysfunctional woman. It took me years to get out of that relationship and when it ended, I think it was the biggest victory of my life.

myGwork: You mentioned before that the father of your children, is actually one of your biggest allies and remains one of your best friends. Can you tell us more about this and what this means to you?

Raga: It took us years to work on our own relationship as 'ex-s'. He wasn't of course happy that we had separated and then that I had started dating women. He saw me going through a very dysfunctional phase, getting involved with an alcoholic and abusive woman. We were both aware that our responsibility was towards our children and I had them full time after going through a few months living separately.

Over time, when I got involved with my current partner (now 16 years together), he noticed that we were good together, our children were settled and happy, and he made an effort to be a part of our lives. We all made an effort. My partner also made a huge amount of effort to include him in our lives.

He now encourages me to follow my authentic life – and is always the first person to stand by me through all my ups and downs. He celebrates me as a woman, a mother, as a gay woman and as his best friend. I celebrate our love and respect for each other. We are like our twins, soul mates who had to go through this together to come out stronger. Our relationship is much deeper and beyond that of what we had when we were married.

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myGwork: You have dedicated much of your life as an advocate for the LGBTQ+ community, and more recently fighting for same sex rights in India. Can you tell us more about this? For example, what are some of the main challenges that the LGBTQ+ community faces in India?

Raga: Section 377 of the Indian Penal code, criminalizing homosexuality was overturned in India only in September 2019. Those in hiding came out, slowly and started voicing their pain, abuse, humiliation and started fighting for rights. Corporate India also started slowly creating discussions and policies to include our rights and to sensitize the organisation on the community. Allies came out in support. Groups were set up by parents supporting their children who had 'come out'. Yet, most of India still remains homophobic and transphobic.

Sadly, the marriage equality petition in the Supreme Court was not successful, as we expected. We are awaiting next steps and realize that we need to consult with broader communities to decide our strategic plan to ensure that we do see progress soon. Currently, this looks very unlikely. We have huge challenges ahead in India. Marriage is regarded as a very important part of the social fabric. The opposition voiced their disagreement and hate openly and put out a statement saying that same sex marriages will destroy this social fabric, it will create havoc in society and that it is against our Indian culture. It also stated that marriage was a union between a biological man and a biological woman. Through this you can imagine the complexities and challenges that this brings to argue our points with the courts. I was on several national television channels as part of a panels discussing and debating our side, and have had to face several humiliating moments with the opposition calling us 'filth' and 'abnormal'. There is constant fight to create space in a 'normal' heteronormative society in a very traditional patriarchal structure and to be accepted for who we are.

myGwork: Your work is featured on many platforms, and your story is being made into a feature film. Can you share more details about this?

Raga: The great part of this is that a story I wrote during lockdown, loosely based on my life is being made into a film. The difficult part of it is that the filmmaker is struggling to find financiers as it is seen as an LGBTQ+ film and no mainstream cinema will buy the rights. We are still fighting that battle. Maybe I will produce it myself – and take the plunge as I have done with many other aspects of my life.

After all, we have all lived and influenced by Gandhiji's words: 'Be the change you want to see in the world.'

myGwork: You've had a long and exciting international career working in the international marketing in the entertainment space. Can you share your career history with us, and how you have ended up creating/producing various shows in the LGBTQ+ space in both India and the UK?

Raga: As a media, events, and entertainment industry specialist for over thirty years, I have worked in many countries including India, the Middle East, Southeast Asia as well as New Zealand and the UK and utilize my skills, networks, resources and knowledge for my advocacy work in the LGBTQ+ community.

I worked in India in the advertising for 10 years in some of India's largest agencies. I was only 28 years old, when I was made the Branch Head and VP of a large agency. I moved to New Zealand in 2001 and had to re-start my life, which was not easy. However, I made my way back up very quickly – but worked across fundraising, sponsorship, marketing and finally back in to advertising.

The homophobia that I faced finally made me set up my own business – as I set up a consulting company, which in its first year was shortlisted as the best new business. I was elected as the Deputy Chair of the New Zealand Business Council in 2004, which was the first ever position held by a woman. I also set up a speakers bureau in 2007 in New Zealand, which later moved to India and we grew.

As shared earlier, since my public coming out in late 2019, I have now dedicated my life to the LGBTQ+ community and I do everything possible to use my resources, knowledge, expertise to amplify our voices, do advocacy work and fight for our rights.

myGwork: You have also become a vocal speaker in this space, and recently set up the UK's first women (and non-binary) only speakers bureau agency. Can you share more about this?

Raga: Look at the statistics – we women have to fight for our space. I have run speaker agencies for enough years to see the fee disparity even in this space. I have observed and encountered multiple experiences when women are pushed away from a particular project to make space for a man, or for younger heterosexual person. Inviting men to speak at events as experts, is on auto pilot. The organizations always seem to want men as speakers – it's their default expectation.

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I want to change this mindset. In my own way, I have created space for LGBTQ+ women and non-binary speakers – focusing on talent and expertise. When it comes to women, organizations are also very ageist. They focus on our lived experiences rather than our expertise. I also want to make older speakers visible and create opportunities to share expertise, knowledge and skills acquired over years of work. Whilst our agency does focus on queer women, we are extending it to all women, so that organizations invite us for our expertise, not just our sexual orientation. I am a strong speaker myself – and it is not just my story that I speak about. Often people forget that I am more than my sexual orientation. I am a highly successful entrepreneur having worked and operated my businesses in several countries. I have expertise in personal brand building that has helped me build 'speaker' brands. My speakers are highly successful and have worked around the world. I am most proud of building such 'personal brands'. I speak about biases, entrepreneurship, diversity and intersectionality. I talk about doing business in India, which is one of my highly sought after talks.

myGwork: You have won many accolades for your work in this space, and have currently been nominated for the National Diversity Awards and were one of the finalist amongst 90,000 nominations. Can you tell us more about this, and how the community can vote for you.

Raga: Along the way, I have won numerous awards for my work as an entrepreneur and for my work in the LGBTQ+ community, including two 'Woman of Courage' at the UK Houses of Parliament. I was shortlisted last year, in 2022 for the Woman of the Year award by Asian Achievers awards.

I am a two times TEDx speaker (50&OUT), screenplay writer, Host and Editor of 'Today with Totally Out now', Producer and Host of 'Coming Out Stories from India'. I am often invited to speak and host shows.

I was pleasantly surprised and somewhat shocked to have been nominated in three categories by a few people for the National Diversity Awards. I used to shy away from awards – even the ones in my professional capacity. But, I have realized that awards and accolades are important – not from a personal achievement point of view, but from the influence it can have on our voice. It provides people like me a platform to make ourselves visible. South Asian women from LGBTQ+ spaces, particularly of my age, are not commonly visible. This award gave me the platform to continue with my fight for us women, for us South Asian women, and for my non-binary and trans siblings who really struggle.

myGwork: Finally, what are you focusing on currently and how can the community support you in your journey?

In the last year or so, I have realized that the road I have chosen is a very hard road. Whlst I do receive a lot of love from within the community, there has been some negativity. I am a strong person; but ill equipped to handle rumor mongers and those who are ill meaning towards me and our community. The negativity within the community is difficult to handle. I willingly fight for our rights and often face threats from strangers. I am unable to fight the toxicity within our community. I am focusing on my writing, which is my way of supporting our community through stories that have power to change our narrative. I am also focused on building the OUTspoken Speakers Network – a community interest company – into a stronger platform for women who need to raise their voices. My dream is to have more kindness and empathy in our community, towards each other. We need to hold each other up, so together we can bring in the change that is so needed.

By Pepi Sappal

By Pepi Sappal

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Profile
Article

Kat Bellamy
They/Them
Knowledge Manager

Writers Profile

Thermo Fisher Scientific's Kat Bellamy on journey towards confidence

"It's been a really beautiful experience for me and very healing to look back on where I've come from and look at where I am now. I never thought this would be me, and I feel very proud." Kat Bellamy from Thermo Fisher Scientific spoke to myGwork about their journey from a shy child in a small conservative town, to the confident leader of an LGBTQ+ business resource group.

Raised in a rural conservative town in the US Bible Belt, Kat grew up with minimal exposure to diverse sexualities – let alone gender identity. Despite this, they recognised their own differences from a young age.

They recall a distinct memory from around the age of five when they started desiring a haircut more typical of boys. Kat's mother showed open-mindedness in taking them to a barber shop to get this haircut. This left a lasting impression, with Kat later reflecting on how progressive their mother's actions were. This early exploration of gender identity remains a source of pride for Kat, who now sees their adult self as embodying the essence of that brave, inquisitive child.

"I started exploring my gender identity when I was young which, looking back, I now feel really proud of my younger self for being able to do that. And now as an adult I'm living out this thing that I started exploring when I was just five years old, and that just feels pretty cool."

Around third or fourth grade, Kat started being pressured to conform to gender roles, unfortunately bringing feelings of shame. In college, they began forming LGBTQ+ friendships, increasing the negativity and bullying experienced around them. These experiences, coupled with the church's messages that being gay was a sin, led Kat to internalise negative beliefs about their own identity.

Post-college, Kat embarked on a journey of self-acceptance and unlearning the negative beliefs instilled in them. Therapy became a crucial tool in this process, helping them on the worthwhile path to love themselves for who they truly are. While the road to self-acceptance was fraught with immense challenges, Kat now proudly openly identifies as queer, reaching a point where they feel content and confident in their own skin.

The journey to accepting their gender came next. When Kat moved to Portland in 2021, they were still physically presenting as female. While hanging out, a new friend used they/them pronouns by mistake. After apologising, the friend mentioned that Kat has "a non-binary energy". This comment made Kat pause and think, and actually consider this a possibility.

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Now, Kat proudly identifies as non-binary and transgender. They have put years of internal struggle behind them and are more refreshed and confident than ever, able to live as their authentic self.

“It’s been a really beautiful experience for me and very healing to look back on where I’ve come from and look at where I am now. I never thought this would be me, and I feel very proud.”

Initially working for a conservative nonprofit organisation, Kat found it challenging to be themselves, yearning for a more inclusive work environment. They decided to explore other opportunities, and during an interview with biotechnology company Thermo Fisher Scientific, Kat boldly expressed their need for a LGBTQ+-friendly workplace. To their delight, the company embraced them wholeheartedly, offering support from the beginning.

Empowered by this experience, Kat quickly involved themselves with an LGBTQ+ business resource group (BRG) and is now the proud co-lead of the global network. They first got involved with the Communications Committee, collaborating on event planning and promoting engagement. The sense of community within the BRG resonated deeply with Kat, especially seeing queer people in leadership roles. They participated in discussions aimed at raising awareness and fostering a more wholly inclusive environment. Despite challenges brought on by the COVID-19 lockdown, the BRG successfully transitioned to virtual platforms, even expanding their reach.

Kat remains passionate about improving accessibility to inclusive bathrooms at site locations. They acknowledge the challenge of altering existing building structures to accommodate gender-neutral or inclusive restroom facilities, but believe this is necessary. Kat expressed their hope to see this change happen not only within all Thermo Fisher sites, but across all other companies and locations.

Kat highlights the significance of allies in driving progress: “You can’t do any of this stuff without allies,” they say. “Having allies who actively show their support is crucial. I’d love to see more impactful allyship in action.”

Kat shared the importance of educating and guiding allies within the company through discussions, training sessions, and allyship panels. By encouraging a culture of active allyship and continuous learning, they believe the company could further enhance its support for the entire LGBTQ+ community. Kat’s vision for the future centers on creating a more welcoming and truly diverse workplace, where employees are empowered to bring their whole selves to work.

“I feel that I’m in a really important position to be able to, hopefully, help change situations for future queer people at work. It’s also just a really cool opportunity to be able to share and be the listening ear for someone who’s trying to learn how to be a better ally.”

By Dylan Mann-Hazell

Profile

Article

Mhairi Williamson
She/Her
ER and Reward Administrator

Writers Profile

Mhairi Williamson on the importance of advocacy and allyship in the workplace

Mhairi Williamson, Employee Relations and Reward Administrator at Kellanova (the company which owns Kellogg's and Pringles) spoke to myGwork about the importance of visible allyship in the workplace and ongoing advocacy for marginalized groups.

Like many in her generation, Mhairi was raised in an environment ingrained with heteronormative ideals, navigating the complexities of her sexuality during a time when "gay" was considered an insult. The concept of identifying as LGBTQIA didn't truly resonate with Mhairi until after high school when she would initially label herself bisexual. After grappling with challenging societal expectations, especially those rooted in the male gaze, Mhairi would finally come to understand and accept her lesbian identity.

"Growing up very femme and girly also contributed to my own misconceptions of the lesbian community as there was a lack of role models who were like me," Mhairi explains. "People telling me 'You don't look like a lesbian' or assuming I have a boyfriend influenced me more than I realise looking back. Although I know I benefit from femme privilege, I think it did influence how easily I came to realise my own lesbian identity."

Finding herself in spaces where queer representation was scarce, Mhairi found solace and solidarity as she delved deeper into the LGBTQIA community. The more she learned, the more she found her perspective broadening, kindling a desire to advocate for inclusivity.

Soon after university, Mhairi made the bold decision to relocate from her hometown in Scotland to Manchester. Driven by the desire to apply her academic knowledge practically, she sought opportunities that aligned with her educational background in Human Resource Management and Marketing. After securing a position at Kellanova (which has its UK HQ in Manchester), Mhairi was able to swiftly settle into her role as an Administrator, contributing to her falling in love with life in Manchester also.

She continued to progress within the company, where she is now the Employee Relations and Reward Coordinator, also serving as the Coordinator for Kellanova's Pride and Allies Business Employee Resource Group (BERG). Within the BERG, Mhairi drives initiatives to promote LGBTQIA inclusion and equality throughout Kellanova – a task she takes seriously – and commits to with enthusiasm and pride.

"Our Kellanova culture is very unique, we ensure there is a seat at the table for everyone and it's the heartbeat of what we do," she says. "Our culture unlocks all aspects of ED&I as it celebrates boldness and empowers our people to challenge the status quo, achieve results, and win together."

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To Mhairi, ED&I (Equality, Diversity and Inclusion) is an evolving landscape, with the goalpost constantly moving. She reflects on her coming out in 2017, mentioning that during this time, it wasn't as significant a topic. Mhairi notes that the evolution of inclusivity is considerable, with an increase in business focus within these areas. However, she also observes a sense of fatigue among people who have long worked within ED&I spaces, expressing concern that ED&I may not always be considered important.

"I'm a lesbian woman in a straight male-dominated world and I will always inherently care. I think the difficulty is how we get allies to continue to advocate and speak up, even when it doesn't impact them day to day," she continues. "I do think support for some of those big topics is dwindling due to over-consumption of information about so many things but the best way to combat this is to be creative and bring the agenda back to what we need as a community."

Mhairi also wants to use her voice to put a spotlight on the safety of the trans community, who still face significant threats in the workplace and broader society. She advocates for stronger legislation to protect trans rights and the complete elimination of all conversion therapy practices. She stresses the importance of inclusive workplace policies while remaining hopeful for a future with more awareness of wider LGBTQ+ issues, the creation of gender-neutral spaces, and visible allyship beyond Pride Month.

"I think we can often operate in our bubble in the LGBTQIA community, focusing on our own letters and not realizing our experiences differ and even more so if we are intersectional. I want to see a society that protects one another, regardless of if they themselves are impacted. Loud allies can massively contribute to the initiatives of the LGBTQIA community and without them, we cannot make the impact we need to."

By Dylan Mann-Hazell

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Profile
Article

Antony Kontellis
He/Him
Senior HR Director

Writers Profile

Coca-Cola's Antony Kontellis on being an active and proud LGBTQ+ role model

"I'm dreaming of the day when one won't need to continuously come out anymore; when it will be safe for everyone to just be who they want to be and to love who they want to love, without fear of being mocked, discounted, or even persecuted," Antony Kontellis' path in diversity and inclusion has led him from Australia to the Middle East and eventually to the vibrant landscapes of Greece, where he now resides as a Senior HR Director at Coca-Cola. He speaks to myGwork about his life journey and the initiatives Coca-Cola are taking to inspire LGBTQ+ inclusivity.

Antony's professional journey spans across continents, starting in Australia, weaving through the Middle East before settling in Greece. With a career that has given him transformative experiences in various corners of the globe, Antony's role at Coca-Cola over the last five years has solidified his expertise in the industry. Amidst his professional pursuits, he now happily resides in Athens with his husband Dimitri, surrounded by a supportive network of friends and colleagues.

Though Sydney is now known for its cultural diversity and laid-back charm, the absence of visible LGBTQ+ role models during Antony's youth led to an initial internal struggle and to heavy bullying throughout his school years – an experience all too familiar to many LGBTQ+ youth. However, through perseverance and self-discovery, he emerged from those isolated feelings, embracing his identity instead of trying to conform to the pressures of his bullies, and challenging the stigma that once clouded his path.

"Shame is a dangerous thing," Antony explains. "And experiencing homophobia and bullying lit that fire of shame within me. I now know there was never anything wrong with me. And with a lot of patience, I survived that shame and those difficult years – they helped to shape who I am today."

Embracing his journey of self-acceptance, Antony recalls the challenges and nuances of his coming-out experience. The significance of seeking acceptance from those he came out to, instead of a complete understanding, paved the way for dialogue and a more inclusive worldview, both within himself and within his close circles. This marked the beginning of his journey in placing a spotlight on diversity and inclusion efforts throughout his career. At Coca-Cola, on top of his 'day job' as the Senior HR Director for two European functions, Antony has found ways to bring his passion for diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) into his work and beyond. Championing the European LGBTQI+ Inclusion Network, Antony embodies the values of acceptance and unity within the corporate landscape. Through his support for initiatives that promote collaboration and a culture of belonging, Antony aims to create a workplace where everyone is valued for who they are.

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“At Coca-Cola, we strive to include everyone, regardless of their background, identity, or position in the organisation. And we recognise, learn from and elevate one another,” he says. “Our overall DEI strategy focuses on creating a better shared future for all, and leading the way in our workplace, community, and business.”

One of the main goals of the European LGBTQI+ Inclusion Network at Coca-Cola is to create a safe and inclusive environment for all employees. In Europe, a strong commitment to DEI is exemplified through the establishment of five Inclusion Networks. Each network is dedicated to championing a specific diversity dimension – Gender Balance, Culture & Heritage, Generations & Life Experiences, Ability & Wellness, and the LGBTQ+ network, led by Antony and with over 100 members across Europe.

Antony expresses his immense pride towards the impact of Coca-Cola’s partnerships with prominent events like EuroPride – Coca-Cola has been the main official partner for EuroPride for the past 4 years, including this year’s EuroPride, which is extra-special for Antony since it is hosted in his home of Greece, in Thessaloniki. Beyond Pride the LGBTIQ+ inclusion network puts great emphasis on being ‘always-on’, with initiatives that have encouraged open dialogue and learning year-round. To mark IDAHOBIT and Coming Out Day last year, the network had employees share their personal stories related to their coming out journeys and adversities faced and overcome.

Employees from across Europe have since approached Antony and others from the network to convey their gratitude for providing a space for these discussions and visibility. These employee-driven initiatives help facilitate a wealth of diverse viewpoints and fuel creativity and teamwork throughout Coca-Cola, prioritising a culture that values belonging, awareness, and mutual respect. “We really felt the power of authentic personal stories to build understanding and bridges.”

“I never thought that a shy and introverted boy like me would one day be able to take an activist role on such a broad scale. I didn’t believe it because I never saw it…as with many others from my generation, there really were not any visible role models in my daily life and barely any even in mainstream media.”

By being an active and proud role model, Antony hopes to motivate others to embrace their identities and navigate a world that is beginning to celebrate diversity and authenticity. His message of progress over perfection resonates as a beacon of hope for those striving to create positive change in their communities and beyond. “Being the leader of the LGBTIQ+ Inclusion network is one of the proudest things I have done in my career.”

Looking towards the future, Antony envisions a society where ‘coming out’ is no longer a daunting task or a defining moment. He hopes for a world where equality and authenticity prevail, free from societal pressures and biases. His vision for inclusion crosses boundaries, bringing people together in pursuit of acceptance and mutual understanding.

“I’m dreaming of the day when one won’t need to continuously come out anymore; when it will be safe for everyone to just be who they want to be and to love who they want to love, without fear of being mocked, discounted, or even persecuted.”

Antony Kontellis and Coca-Cola’s unwavering commitment to LGBTQ+ inclusion stands as a testament to the transformative and enduring impact of authenticity in shaping a world where everyone is valued, respected, and celebrated for who they are.

By Dylan Mann-Hazell

Phil Clements and Paul Phillips: Championing LGBTQ+ inclusion at Omnicom Media Group UK

Through personal stories and professional leadership, Phil Clements and Paul Phillips from Omnicom Media Group UK (OMG) champion representation and acceptance across the business landscape and beyond, shaping a future of equity and empowerment for all.

The foundation of Phil Clements' appreciation of cultural diversity stems from experiences as early as his childhood. From moving between the Netherlands and the UK, to a developed interest in music, art, and film from a young age, his creativity cultivated in various forms of expression – particularly writing. Phil has had a rather unconventional career journey. After starting in a band, he then transitioned to working in Universal Music's finance department before joining OMG UK's finance department. He has been actively involved in LGBTQ+ initiatives, such as organising events and participating in industry networks like Outvertising and Omnicom's OPEN Pride network in the UK.

Similarly, Paul Phillips grew up in a loving working-class family where he was also exposed to a diverse mix of cultures. Raised in Nuneaton, Warwickshire, fondly referred to by Paul as "the nation's cultural heart", he developed a keen interest in reading and theatre from an early age. After university, Paul began his career in media sales including work for Gay Times. He has since worked across various UK agency networks, specialising in media strategy for a wide range of industries. Currently serving as a Strategy Partner and Board Member of OMD UK, he leads client planning. Paul and Phil's coming out stories bear similarities that many LGBTQ+ readers will recognise – notably, the impact of scarce representation. Phil found solace and inspiration in the music of defiant artists like Suede, Bowie, and Pet Shop Boys, coming out at age 16. Paul's coming out journey was marked by subtle decisions to disclose his sexuality more gradually. Initially selective about who he came out to, Paul made a more public declaration when he secured a role at Gay Times. The overwhelming support he received from colleagues and his family reinforced his confidence and sense of belonging.

"My family proved highly supportive – and still are, treating my partner like another son and brother," said Paul. "On that first weekend my late father even joined me for drinks at Nuneaton's only gay pub. The pub's now long-gone – bulldozed to make way for a pay-and-display car park – but the love and support of my family still stand strong."

Inclusivity at OMG is ingrained in the employee lifecycle. The LGBTQ+ ERG's motto is "Pride All Year Round", with year-long initiatives such as accessible learning resources, gender-neutral bathrooms, inclusive HR policies, and a variety of live and online events where everyone can participate. Paul added that the company also integrates inclusion into their client work. For instance, Paul's work on OMD's 'The Real Britain Series' sheds light on marginalised groups, aiming to improve authentic representation in advertising for LGBTQ+ people and other underrepresented communities.

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Reflecting on the shift towards diversity and inclusion over the past decade, Phil remarks, “It’s much more on the table than it was, say ten or fifteen years ago. It’s generally accepted that it’s not only morally the right thing to do, but that it’s also good for business.” He stresses that embracing diversity and inclusion in companies enhances employee retention and performance.

“A number of our new starters have told me that they specifically asked what our company does in respect of LGBTQ+ inclusion, and the response they got was part of their decision to accept the job offer. It’s fantastic to see this change.”

Echoing Phil’s sentiments, Paul underlines the business benefits of a diverse workforce, noting a potential 25% boost in commercial performance with a representative employee profile. He urges companies to go beyond symbolic gestures and fully embed diversity, equity and inclusion into their operational models for sustainable impact.

Looking to the future of LGBTQ+ equality, Phil emphasises the need for better provision for trans healthcare by health insurance companies, including these services being integrated into health plans without excessive costs. More broadly, Phil also highlights the importance of improved healthcare systems for the trans community and the legal recognition of non-binary identities in the UK. Beyond business, Phil also notes the importance of encouraging body positivity in the community. “The LGBTQ+ community has real problems in this area. People of different body types find themselves further marginalised. It lowers self-esteem. It creates isolation. It encourages eating disorders. But the problems are endemic in our society, and they go back hundreds of years. There’s a lot to unpick, so the sooner we all start, the better.”

With a similar perspective on progression, Paul advocates for structural changes within organisations to promote LGBTQ+ equality. He suggests that corporate business and public sector organisation must have board-level representation from every diversity, equity and inclusion group – ensuring marginalised voices are heard at the decision-making level.

By Dylan Mann-Hazell

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Profile

Article

TATE SMITH

Tate Smith
He/Him
Activist, Consultant & Speaker

Writers Profile

Meet & Greet: Tate Smith, Founder of Tate Smith Consulting

Hi Tate, can you tell us about your current role/business?

I founded Tate Smith Consulting earlier this year to equip brands and businesses with policies and specialist advice on trans inclusion. I've worked on everything from transitioning at work guidance to implementing gender-neutral bathrooms to reviewing CPD programmes and updating pronoun and gender identity fields in HR systems. My goal is to ensure that every workplace is a safe environment to not only come out in but to thrive in.

Can you tell us about your career journey to date?

I started my career in business support roles before eventually cutting my teeth as a legal secretary at Clifford Chance. Whilst at the firm, I redrafted their trans policy and successfully advocated for top surgery to be covered by their private medical insurance provider which helped me discover my passion for activism and public speaking. I took this forward to other law firms and started delivering my well-known lunch and learns and launched a new career as a consultant and speaker. I'm so grateful that I am now able to combine my legal, advocacy, project management and secretarial skills into a bespoke role which gives me so much purpose.

Are you involved in any initiatives to mark Trans Awareness Week?

I will be delivering a number of speaking engagements in front of large corporations and attending Trans in the City, and We Create Space's Trans Voices event - I'm particularly excited to hear the Trans Choir for the first time! In addition, I'll be sharing content in collaboration with Celebrate Trans Joy and JAAQ at Work to discuss trans awareness and allyship.

Can you tell us about your personal transition journey?

I came out as trans in late 2015, a few months prior to my 17th birthday and had to go back into the closet due to lack of family support. Once I left home, I started living full-time as a male and began medically transitioning in 2019 and then had top surgery the following year. It was the best decision I ever made, and I'm so proud of my younger self for prioritising my wellbeing. The odds were really stacked against me, but once I took control of my own life, things instantly got better for me.

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What were some of the challenges that you faced along the way?

The lack of support from my family has been particularly difficult, but I am so grateful to have created a life and chosen family here in London. There have been plenty of negative experiences coming out in the workplace, including inappropriate questions, unsupportive line managers and being outed by colleagues, but I have turned these into positive experiences and opportunities to share my lived experience and educate others.

What challenges are people in the trans community still facing, especially at work?

Unfortunately, trans people are still hiding their identity at work because they're in fear of discrimination. Many will be excluded by colleagues for being trans or gender diverse. I know many trans people who refuse to come out because they believe their workplace isn't doing enough, or some go back into the closet once they've finished transitioning because they don't have the capacity to keep coming out.

What advice can you offer someone considering transitioning?

Transition when you are ready, confident and comfortable and make sure you have a support network around you. You have a right to enter this phase of your life as your full and authentic self, so prioritise your wellbeing and do everything you can to ensure you live a happy and fulfilling life. Remember, it gets better!

How important is LGBTQ+, particularly trans inclusion in the workplace to you?

Incredibly important. With the number of employees going back into the closet and attacks on LGBTQ+ in the press and real life, I believe workplaces should be making a strong effort to promote LGBTQ+ inclusion and check in on their employees at this time.

In your opinion, how important are trans allies at work?

I would not be so out and confident if it wasn't for trans allies at work. They spoke up for me when I was too scared to challenge colleagues, gave me platforms to speak about issues impacting me in the workplace and encouraged my confidence when I did not believe in myself. Allies have the power to transform a daunting experience at the office into a positive one.

What more can organisations do to improve trans awareness and inclusion at work?

Workplaces need to create inclusive environments for trans+ people to come out by creating robust and informative policies, providing financial assistance for transition and ensuring technical systems allow for gender diverse individuals to express themselves.

Are there any podcasts that you are listening to or books that you are reading right now and would recommend to other LGBTQ+ professionals?

I'm currently alternating between Pageboy by Elliot Page and Trans Britain: Our Journey from the Shadows by Christine Burns, which I both highly recommend as they're really inspiring and informative.

What's your all-time favorite movie/show and how many times have you watched it?

My all-time favorite movie is an Italian film named Cinema Paradiso. I've lost count of how many times I've watched it. The story and soundtrack are so beautiful!

What's your most favorite holiday destination to date?

Rome! That was my first solo holiday and trip as a man. I remember sitting opposite the Colosseum, eating a pizza and drinking a Peroni, thinking, "this is the start of my new life."

What do you do to unwind at the end of the day?

Eat good food, listen to ASMR and journal my thoughts for the day!

By Pepi Sappal

Profile

Article

Synechron

Roya Shahilow
She/Her
Chief of Staff

Writers Profile

How living abroad helped expand my worldview and understanding of allyship

Roya Shahilow, Chief of Staff to the CEO of Synechron, actively embraces authentic allyship in both her personal and professional life. Raised in a small UK town, her early fascination with exploration and diverse experiences led her to a remarkable career spanning multiple continents and corporate roles.

Starting her career at Bloomberg in Singapore, Roya immersed herself in the finance markets and technology sectors. This experience provided her with vital knowledge and a solid foundation for her subsequent roles at Synechron. Here, she progressed from business consultancy to leading the UK HR team during the challenging COVID-19 period, showcasing her adaptability, resilience, and commitment to personal growth.

“Not only has Synechron supported my progression within the company, but they have also allowed me to explore a number of opportunities to learn and understand where my skills lie,” Roya reflects. Even though it was early in her career, her time in Singapore profoundly impacted her worldview and professional trajectory. Exposure to various cultures instilled a deep appreciation for the unique benefits diversity brings, expanding her global perspective and reinforcing a continuous learning mindset.

Roya thrived in a people-centric role at Synechron, drawn to the company’s emphasis on employee development and inclusivity. This environment allowed her to pursue a postgraduate qualification while excelling in her job responsibilities, ultimately leading her to her current position as Chief of Staff.

“The people at Synechron are what makes the organization special,” Roya notes. “We’re lucky to have a supportive global team and numerous groups that foster personal and organizational growth while making a tangible impact.”

Synechron distinguishes itself with its dedication to creating a welcoming, inclusive environment. Initiatives like the employee-run “Synclusive” DEI group and various global events promote a sense of belonging and empowerment among staff. This culture not only enriches the professional environment but also contributes to the personal fulfilment of employees like Roya.

A central aspect of Roya’s passion for allyship is her dedication to continuous learning, self-reflection, and advocacy for others. She proactively educates herself through diverse readings and participation in workshops on topics like microaggressions, demonstrating her commitment to understanding and empathizing with different experiences.

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“I take the time to continually educate myself about people with different experiences and backgrounds,” Roya explains. “For example, I love to read books written from other people’s perspectives in order to understand, empathize, and relate to them. I also think this is a great bias checker! When you read, you’re putting yourself into other people’s shoes, able to see things more clearly, and avoid making any undue assumptions.”

By fostering an environment of open communication and inclusivity, Roya ensures that every voice is heard and valued, making Synechron a more diverse, respectful, and supportive workplace. She places a lot of focus on the importance of being approachable, advocating for marginalized voices, and addressing inappropriate behaviour promptly.

“Living abroad inspired me to always be curious and ready for the next big adventure!” Roya remarks, capturing the spirit of her ongoing journey.

By Dylan Mann-Hazell

Profile

Article

Emma Cumming
She/Her
Director of Global Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion

Writers Profile

Pioneering change as an ally with passion and purpose through DE&I

In the dynamic world of corporate leadership, few individuals stand out as profoundly as Emma Cumming, a trailblazing ally and Director of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) at Quadient. With a career grounded in a deep understanding of human nature and an unwavering commitment to inclusivity, Emma's career journey to date is nothing short of inspiring.

Starting her professional journey with a degree in Psychology, Emma quickly found herself drawn to roles that emphasised human connection and support. Her early career experience as a Learning Support Teacher in Dubai was a transformative one. While working with students with disabilities and neurodivergent learners, she tackled educational barriers which spurred heron to champion inclusive educational practices, igniting a passion for addressing workforce challenges.

This prompted a move to London where she transitioned into a Human Resources role. She recalls her first HR role providing a comprehensive introduction to the field, where she managed the entire employee lifecycle through collaborating with stakeholders to drive organizational success. Naturally progressing into DEI, Emma's passion for impactful change found its true calling. Throughout her career to date, Emma has been at the forefront of evolving attitudes towards diversity and inclusion. She embraced HR/DEI opportunities across various sectors, including education, digital marketing, media, management consulting, and technology.

"Throughout these fields, I've had the privilege of working with exceptional individuals who are deeply committed to fostering real and meaningful change," notes Emma. "This work hinges on our collective ability to be vulnerable and build trust, as we strive to dismantle the systemic barriers that disadvantage marginalized groups within the workplace."

A defining career moment for Emma was creating 'brave spaces' where employees felt empowered to share their experiences, cultivating a culture of kindness, empathy, and authenticity. "These initiatives are not just about inclusion; they are about transforming workplace culture at its core," says Emma.

Emma emphasises that change is a gradual process requiring open-mindedness, empathy, and a relentless commitment to incremental actions. Through workshops, training programmes, and transparent conversations, she has reshaped behaviours and attitudes, championing the myriad benefits of diverse teams and inclusive practices.

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At Quadient, her ongoing work to integrate DEI strategies across the business is both innovative and heartfelt. Some of the company's inclusion initiatives that Emma is particularly proud of include:

The LGBTQ+ network, Love is Love: A vibrant platform for support, networking, and advocacy.
Partnership with myGwork: Connecting the LGBTQIA community and allies to share best practices and develop inclusive hiring solutions.

Educational programmes and allyship training: Equipping employees to support LGBTQIA colleagues.
Events featuring LGBTQIA leaders: Celebrations and educational moments throughout the year.

The Inclusion Policy and Code of Ethics Policy: Outlining expected behaviours, reinforcing a commitment to zero-discrimination, and embodying the EPIC values of empowerment, passion, inspiration, and community.
Emma attributes her passion for inclusion to her early life in Dubai. Born in Aberdeen, Scotland, and raised in a vibrant, multicultural environment, she developed a profound appreciation for diverse cultures and backgrounds. "I loved growing up in a multicultural environment because I gained experiences that enriched my appreciation for diverse cultures and backgrounds," shares Emma.

Her love for outdoor adventures like quad biking, dune bashing, and beach outings was matched only by her passion for drama, a subject that allowed her to express herself freely. Emma believes she gained the confidence that has shaped her into the inspiring leader she is today, thanks to the influence of a drama teacher who embraced his identity without apology.

Her personal journey with the LGBTQIA community began in the UAE, where she observed first-hand the challenges faced by LGBTQIA individuals in a society with restricted rights. Relocating to England broadened her perspective, exposing her to a more accepting and open environment. Inspired by the vibrant LGBTQIA spaces at university, she became a staunch ally, promoting inclusivity through her actions and advocacy. "As a committed ally, I actively engage in promoting inclusivity through inclusive language, proudly participating in Pride events such as London Pride, advocating for policy change, and ongoing education on LGBTQIA issues," shares Emma.

Although Emma has witnessed meaningful developments in attitudes towards diversity and inclusion throughout my career, she acknowledges the slow process to see real change. "The change in attitude is a slow and ongoing process that necessitates our consistent effort to identify and mitigate biases, which are deeply rooted in our personal experiences, socialisation processes, cultural differences, and various contexts," she explains. "Change doesn't occur overnight; it demands open-mindedness and empathy, as well as a continuous, daily commitment to small actions."

Throughout her career, Emma has deliberately created spaces for open discussion and learning through workshops and training programmes to "allow for self-reflection, accountability, and exploration of practical ways we can contribute to a more diverse, equitable, and inclusive workplace," adds Emma. "This approach allows for a gradual reshaping of behaviours and attitudes. By continually engaging in transparent conversations about the benefits of diverse teams and inclusive practices, we see incremental but significant shifts towards more inclusive behaviours."

However, Emma believes there's still so much work to be done for LGBTQIA equality in the workplace and the community at large: "In the workplace, I'd like to see comprehensive policy reforms that protect LGBTQIA individuals from discrimination and actively promote equal opportunities. We need to ensure that these policies are not only implemented but are also backed by robust support structures that address specific LGBTQIA concerns. This includes accessible mental health resources, gender-neutral facilities, and transparent grievance mechanisms. Beyond the workplace, societal changes should involve legal protections that guarantee the same rights and freedoms for LGBTQIA individuals as enjoyed by many citizens. This includes the right to marry, adopt children, and live without fear of violence or discrimination."

Emma's dedication to inclusion as an ally not only at Quadient, but outside of her DEI role at work is a testament to her commitment to creating a more inclusive and equitable world. Her allyship is a powerful reminder that with passion and purpose, pioneering change is not just possible, but inevitable.

By Pepi Sappal

Profile

Article

Lydia Bernsmeier-Rullow
She/Her
Business Analyst

Writers Profile

How BBC Pride has helped me to advocate for our LGBTQIA community

Lydia Bernsmeier-Rullow, Business Analyst at the BBC in the Technology & Media Operations division, offered a glimpse into the intricacies of her life and work at the renowned corporation. From “rainbow-tinted” childhood memories to positive experiences at the BBC Pride network, Lydia tells the story of her journey into the diversity and inclusion landscape.

Raised in the town of Bolton, just outside of Manchester, Lydia’s childhood was imbued with a passion for creativity. Amidst playing the piano and singing, one hobby stood out above the rest and resonated deeply with her – creative writing. This passion for poetry and storytelling would later become a common thread, weaving throughout her career and her life. Lydia fondly reminisces about the influential role her father, UK radio presenter Mike Shaft, played in shaping her understanding and acceptance of her own identity. His support was subtle, yet powerful, helping to normalise the concept of being gay during a difficult period overshadowed by the AIDS epidemic and the introduction of Section 28 legislation.

“When you look back on your own history, it’s amazing how memories become rainbow-tinted,” Lydia remarks. “I had my first crush on a girl when I was about six, gazing at an older girl in the junior playground. I suppressed those feelings for many years. I went to church every Sunday and had no idea that there might be other girls who felt the same as me.”

These formative experiences, coupled with a cherished tradition of festive visits to an Italian restaurant in Manchester owned by a gay couple, gradually unravelled the intricate layers of her true self. From cautiously jotting down “I think I’m g*y” in her diary at 13 to openly embracing her identity openly at 17, she found solace in the strong support of her family. By the time she ventured into higher education, Lydia had blossomed into a proud lesbian, actively engaging with the LGBTQIA community at Edge Hill University and embracing her authentic self.

“Once I was out, I never went back in, and I’m now married to the love of my life, Nickie, and pretty ‘homonormative’!”

In 2019, Lydia took a leap of faith and transitioned from a career in customer care to a trainee journalist role at the BBC. This bold move at the age of 35 marked the beginning of a new chapter in her life, one that would eventually lead her to her current position as Business Analyst. She fondly recalls the thrill of achieving her first byline at the BBC, a milestone that filled her with immense pride – seeing her name grace an article was a moment of validation and accomplishment.

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Joining the BBC Pride board out of a deep-seated commitment to supporting queer people, Lydia's dedication to advocacy shines through.

BBC Pride is the LGBTQIA staff network, which provides peer support and works to drive engagement in LGBTQIA inclusion across the organisation. 10% of BBC staff identify as LGBTQIA.

For the last few years, the BBC has delivered sessions on LGBTQIA allyship to help drive inclusive behaviours and create a sense of belonging for the LGBTQIA community.

Alongside her wife, Lydia has long been immersed in the vibrant queer community of Manchester, where their combined efforts in volunteering and activism have left an indelible mark.

In her capacity as a Communications Officer for BBC Pride, Lydia's responsibilities revolve around the creation and dissemination of vital information to members. Crafting engaging newsletters, email updates, and promotional materials, she ensures that the BBC Pride community remains well-informed about upcoming activities, milestones, and events. Her background as a writer and communications officer before her role at the BBC allowed for effective communication and storytelling.

Looking to the future of LGBTQIA equality, Lydia emphasised the importance of acknowledging intersectionality. With a nuanced understanding of her own identity, Lydia recognises the interconnectedness of various identities and their combined values, rather than viewing them in isolation.

"I am a cisgender, black, queer, disabled woman – you can't look at my identity as separate parts."

She also highlights the essential need for creating psychological safety across teams and departments in the workplace. Lydia says this is something the BBC does well by encouraging employees to speak up and address issues head-on.

She also points to their clear and robust policies that delineate acceptable behaviour and set boundaries.

Lydia goes on to say that these bedrock values are further demonstrated through the BBC Pride staff group. Lydia and the other staff members on the steering committee, give up their free time to represent and advocate for LGBTQIA staff at the BBC.

"Our team provides support, advice, and friendship to over 1,000 members of staff, both LGBTQIA and allies, via a range of communication channels. We offer social events, networking, and advocacy, as well as opportunities for LGBTQIA members of staff to be their whole self at work."

Lydia's vision for a more equitable workplace underscores the transformative power of an environment where people feel empowered to advocate for themselves and others.

By Dylan Mann-Hazell

Profile

Article

protiviti

Belton Flournoy

He/Him

Managing Director

Writers Profile

Meet & Greet: Belton Flournoy, Director at Protiviti

Can you tell us a bit about your career journey to date?

In high school and college, I knew I wanted to do something with people and originally considered PR or Marketing (which I also majored in). When I started working at Protiviti, I knew I had found a job I loved, being able to both work with people, as well as continually learn about new technology and trends. I started working in IT Assurance, which taught me the foundations of technology concepts and soon progressed to helping organizations implement next-gen technologies to help solve some of their most complex problems. Now, I lead the UK Digital Identity practice, covering many areas, including Privileged Access Management, Authentication and Access Governance.

What's the most challenging aspect of managing people right now?

What I enjoy about a career in consulting is the fact that your role is constantly evolving. You get to work with new clients daily, and you are always working to stay ahead of the newest technology trends. What I found most surprising at the Director level was finding a way to get people to develop that sense of ownership and achievement as part of their delivery. It's not only about achieving a higher level of output; it's about finding a way for people to be excited to be a part of a team while having a sense of ownership of their contributions towards the team's goals and objectives.

What attributes do you look for in new recruits and why?

I look for people who display a strong desire to learn. To be successful in technology, it's not only about 'what you already know', but it is also about your 'approach to continual learning.' I have found the people who speak of their ability to solve a new problem as a great way to understand their learning process. Those who speak about recent articles or books they read or how they solved a problem they were coding through an online forum are all good signs.

How important is LGBTQ+ inclusion in the workplace for you personally?

I am a Director in a cybersecurity practice working with some of the world's largest institutions to solve their most complex problems, yet I find I would not be where I am today without the support I have received from my company.

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I recall going to work with that voice in my mind saying, 'you are not good enough because of...', scared to let people know the real me, fearing it would prevent me from ever getting to where I am today. Ironically, I would not be where I am today if I did not find the power to become my true self at work and come out of the closet. When you feel comfortable being yourself, your productivity skyrockets, and you no longer spend time hiding those aspects that took up so much of your time before. I now want to work hard to help others achieve this same goal—not only is it the right thing to do for people, it's the right thing to do for our bottom line.

What's your favorite inclusion campaign to date, and why?

My favorite campaign was the 'authentically me' campaign that is currently running through my firm. It works by featuring senior leaders across the firm who share very personal stories about themselves overcoming adversity. We have had someone speak openly about their disability, another senior leader who had to take time off for stress and another who was feeling overwhelmed working and raising children. The beautiful thing about these stories is that they humanise us. They make us realise that everyone faces challenges sometimes, even our current leaders, and we are the type of firm that supports you no matter what you might be going through—if you don't speak up, you can't reach out for help from your colleagues or a programme your employer might offer.

How do you encourage staff to have a worklife balance, especially with the increase in remote/hybrid working?

As a consulting firm, it's sometimes hard to know exactly how long it will take to solve a problem, especially when we are helping to solve an extremely complex issue. Our leaders and managers work to ensure our people know they are valued and respected, and if they do ever feel overwhelmed, we offer a variety of programs and benefits to help, including flexible working, part-time working, sabbaticals and other mental health services. I also tell people to ask themselves, 'Will you get fired over this'... If the answer is no, then you should focus on ways to proactively manage what you can with the time you have and communicate potential delays before they occur.

What's the biggest highlight of your career to date and why?

I have two, one professional and one through my volunteer efforts. The biggest highlight of my professional career thus came when I was invited to program manager a global regulatory remediation program for a large investment bank. The project was challenging, had me working with the bank's most senior executives and had us helping them to solve problems that no bank had ever attempted to solve. To be in those board meetings and hearing these bright minds in dialogue was a truly rewarding experience. It was also this meeting that made me realize the power of being your true self can have on your output.

After this project, I decided to no longer hide who I was. I worked to create the LGBT+ network in Protiviti UK and soon started to work with Pride in London to launch Pride in the City, a mayor-backed initiative dedicated to amplifying the voices of LGBT+ people across London, impacting thousands during the 3 years I worked on it. I now sit on the advisory board for the London School of Economics Inclusion Initiative, as well as supporting the launch of the Technology Community for Racial Equality (TC4RE).

What was the last book you read (fiction/non-fiction)? Any interesting takeaways, and would you recommend it to fellow leaders?

If you are looking for a good book to read, I would recommend *Think Big* by Dr. Grace Lordan. It is a fantastic book about understanding priorities in life and how to address them. The other book I am currently reading is *4000 Weeks* by Oliver Burkeman. It is a productivity book that helps one to realize that by being more effective with your time, you only end up filling with more things to do rather than finding that sense of achievement. Instead, the book asks you to (1) understand the reality of how short life actually is (4000 weeks), and (2) to realize every decision is a trade-off.

The most impactful takeaway I learned is understanding how to live life alongside your 'constant to-do list' rather than working against it. Very powerful indeed. When you feel comfortable being yourself, your productivity skyrockets, and you no longer spend time hiding those aspects that took up so much of your time before. I now want to work hard to help others achieve this same goal—not only is it the right thing to do for people, it's the right thing to do for our bottom line.

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What do you do to unwind at the end of a hard day?

Belton: I like to start and end my day with a short walk through a park I live by. In the mornings, I walk without my phone. It feels good to be disconnected from it. And in the afternoons, I go for a walk, many times listening to a podcast or an audio book.

By Pepi Sappal

Profile
Article

Ian Faulkner
He/Him
Vehicle Parts and Accessories team

Writers Profile

Ian Faulkner's journey: Advocating for LGBTQ+ equality at eBay and beyond

From his formative years in an Irish Catholic family to his impactful role in the LGBTQ+ community and professional endeavors, Ian Faulkner from eBay reflects on his profound journey of advocacy for equality.

Growing up in an Irish Catholic family with traditional values, Ian came out as gay at the age of 17. Despite initial challenges, given the societal context of being LGBTQ+ in 90s Ireland, he was fortunate to have a supportive family who quickly embraced him during this pivotal moment. Reflecting on his past, Ian noted that he never felt any internal struggle about his sexuality, even amidst relationships with girls during school and college. The process of navigating his identity seemed to unfold naturally, with a strong support system in place to guide him along the way.

Towards the end of his university experience, Ian felt the need to connect with more queer friends. This, combined with his passion for music, led him to join and later lead Gloria, Dublin's LGBTQ+ choir for several years. Currently serving as deputy accompanist for the Pink Singers in London, Ian has been deeply involved with the choir since his move to London.

One remarkable project that stands out was a partnership with a choir in Mumbai – Rainbow Voices. At the time, they were the only LGBTQ+ choir in India as homosexuality was still a criminal offence. Back in 2017, in a show of solidarity, members of the Pink Singers travelled to India for a joint concert to raise awareness of LGBTQ+ rights in India, and to march in the Queer Azaadi March to support the repeal of discriminatory legislation.

Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code criminalised homosexuality, with a version of the same law which existed in the UK until 1967. It remains in the penal codes in Malaysia, Bangladesh, Myanmar, Pakistan and Sri Lanka.

Ian joined eBay during a UK expansion, when the customer service centre was established in Dublin, and has since enjoyed a dedicated 20-year career with the company.

His interest in cars has guided him towards his current role in the Vehicle Parts and Accessories team. Although he feels fortunate to work in a sector he is passionate about, Ian also recognises the need for wider representation within the vehicle parts industry. He describes the importance of challenging traditional beliefs and being visible as a gay man without conforming to stereotypes.

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“I’ve always felt that working in the parts industry, it’s sometimes easier to get into straight-washing yourself rather than challenging beliefs and representing as a gay man,” reflects Ian. “I’m conscious that that is something that I personally need to be better at.”

Despite a desire to represent himself more confidently, eBay has been an affirming business to work for. Ian was able to confidently address uncomfortable situations, including instances of homophobia or discrimination, with support from both his manager and the broader organisational structure.

Ian speaks proudly about the efforts made within his workplace to inspire an inclusive Pride community. He has been actively involved in initiatives promoting LGBTQ+ awareness , particularly through the company’s LGBTQ+ network, United in Pride. Demonstrating their support, eBay facilitated a charity donation to bring some members of Mumbai’s Rainbow Voices to London, offering them a glimpse into LGBTQ+ life in the city as part of the joint project with the Pink Singers. Through the many opportunities at eBay, Ian and his colleagues aim to educate on issues relevant to the LGBTQ+ community, both locally and globally. Notable awareness day events such as IDAHOBLIT are key highlights, with emphasis on the annual pride celebration.

Expressing his thoughts on the evolving landscape of gender identity awareness, Ian reflects on an experience he had in Norway. Recounting a gathering with a diverse group of people, Ian realised that many of them (notably younger than himself at 46) identified with various aspects of the LGBTQ+ spectrum outside traditional labels. He saw it as a glimpse into the future of what the community can and will look like.

“There was a bisexual drag king who didn’t necessarily identify with any gender identity that was thrown at them. And there was somebody else who said sometimes they might be bisexual, or they may be asexual, and people were saying ‘you must be this label’. And they’re saying, ‘No, I’m just who I am, I don’t have to be a label’. And that really resonated with me.” Inspired by these encounters, Ian highlights the importance of increasing awareness around gender diversity, including the significance of different Pride flags as symbols of self-expression. Despite his own familiarity with LGBTQ+ culture, Ian wishes to further educate himself on the growing diversity within the community, highlighting the important role of introducing these concepts to others.

Reflecting on society’s continual transformation, Ian appreciates eBay’s keen evolution towards acceptance and support for LGBTQ+ people. From the strides taken in promoting inclusivity, to the introduction of policies that cater to the diverse needs of employees, Ian views these initiatives as indicative of the company’s progressive outlook and ongoing commitment to inclusivity.

While eBay serves as a model in supporting the LGBTQ+ community, Ian emphasizes that there is still a wide gap between symbolic gestures and meaningful legal reforms worldwide, particularly in support of transgender people. He advocates for swift and resolute action to bridge this divide, ensuring that such inclusivity and safety extend beyond eBay and become a universal reality.

“There’s a lot of talk about trans awareness and how people can be supportive, but then from a legislative perspective, legislation needs to not only keep up, but be the change – very quickly.”

By Dylan Mann-Hazell

Article

Aster Nox
She/They
Technical Writer

Writers Profile

How LGBTQIA support at work helped me accept myself

myGwork sat down to talk to Aster Nox (she/they), Technical Writer at Finastra about their journey through growing up, accepting themselves, and finding critical LGBTQIA support through their work at the company.

Prior to working at Finastra, Aster Nox had dreamt of working in IT. “I’d never worked in IT. I’d been a project manager in a range of businesses, but I had always wanted to start a career in IT.” The opportunity came during the pandemic when Astor was laid off by a previous employer, and Finastra’s HR found their CV and offered her a role as a Technical Writer. It’s been a journey ever since.

Aster doesn’t disclose where they grew up but qualifies that it was a difficult period in a difficult place. “As a child, I was reserved and introverted,” they recall, “but I loved being out in nature. Although we didn’t have a car and a complex family situation left us with limited options for actually travelling.” Top of her list of interests however were cats and astronomy – and she now has a cat named Cassiopeia.

That environment however did not necessarily foster LGBTQIA inclusion. “I was raised with zero LGBTQIA representation, and so I’ve always consciously been trying to fit into heterosexual norms-- which has ended in a traumatic disaster for me every time,” Aster says. Whilst not specifying where they grew up, Aster discloses that it was dangerous to be LGBTQIA – a situation they escaped when they moved to Romania in 2023.

At the age of 33, Aster took the step to come out to friends, family, and colleagues as a lesbian. “I realised that my sexuality has been like this since early adolescence,” they tell us. “And so now I identify as a nonbinary femme lesbian, my pronouns are she/they, and I’m super comfortable with that!” It’s difficult not to see the glee Aster has with this: the journey that has gone from an underprivileged and closeted youth to this confident and successful person today. Whatever fears one has in life – relationships, work, personal struggle, Aster has one thing in mind: “I have the main component – being myself, and being happy and open about that.”

Focusing on their career, it has continued to open doors for Aster. “The standout moment in my career I think was my relocation to Romania, Bucharest in July 2023. It opened so many doors for me, not only in my career development but for my coming out and finally finding harmony with myself. And of course, not feeling endangered anymore, and finding that personal freedom.”

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The company prides itself on Diversity, Equality, and Inclusion, and pledges that people should be able to bring their whole selves to work without fear or risk of prejudice. Aster notes that DEI culture and the embrace of the LGBTQIA community by the business – particularly at this challenging time for LGBTQIA rights globally – has grown year after year and encourages them to get more involved to help build inclusive workplaces. It really makes the case for the importance of being in accepting and supportive spaces: the environment in which one finds oneself is so vital for personal development, acceptance, and success.

There's still much that needs to be done however, Aster notes. When asked what remains to be done for the LGBTQIA community, their rights, and equality in the future, the answer is almost instantaneous: "I think that the main impact should be directed toward transgender, nonbinary, and genderqueer people, as well as aromantic and asexual people. They definitely need more representation, acceptance, and validation, especially in overall corporate culture." With everything going on globally, it's difficult to disagree. Workplaces find themselves at the forefront of promoting this culture and change and representing voices that have otherwise been underprivileged – and Finastra really is leading the way.

By Dylan Mann-Hazell

Profile
Article

Lou Smith
She/Her
Global Digital Leader

Writers Profile

Lou Smith: Pioneering figital innovation and LGBTQ+ inclusivity in financial services

Lou Smith, Global Digital Leader at WTW and CEO of pioneering trading platform Neuron, delves into her story of self-discovery and resilience. Lou was recently presented with the esteemed 2023 LINK lifetime achievement award, as well as receiving recognition in the InspiringFifty network, and is known for driving positive change in the industry through forward-thinking initiatives.

Raised in the 70s, Lou Smith thinks back on the moments that led to the embrace of her lesbian identity. In an era of limited visibility and acceptance, Lou had to navigate a world where authenticity often took a backseat to societal expectations. She recalls a brief period in her 20s when she pretended to have a boyfriend, despite dating a woman at the time. Eventually, Lou felt comfortable revealing her truth, receiving an outpour of support from her loved ones. Despite these initial struggles with being open about her sexuality, Lou was always building inner strength, as well as a passion for inclusivity that would propel her forward later in life.

During a dynamic career in financial services, Lou found herself confronted with the challenge of balancing different personas – at work and in her personal life. Although she embraced her identity in the professional sphere, she still grappled with lingering insecurities that stifled authentic expression. Recognising the profound impact of fear on her professional performance, Lou is quick to highlight the importance of cultivating inclusive environments; Spaces where people can embrace their true selves without the burden of judgment.

“If you’re fearful at work, you cannot be brilliant at what you’re brilliant at. Feeling fear of anybody will stop people being their authentic self. You can’t be yourself if you’re fearful, in every sense of the word.”

Working as a Global Digital Leader at insurance company WTW, Lou is a vocal advocate for business environments where employees can freely express themselves across all platforms. She talks about the need for ongoing inclusivity efforts that transcend designated awareness months. Lou calls for an all-year response to improving standards for marginalised communities, rather than only on special occasions. Embracing a commitment to courage beyond symbolic celebrations, Lou also champions the transformative potential of everyday interactions infused with genuine dialogue.

“It comes down to ‘what are we doing every single day’? Not just on the awareness months, not just Pride – every day. That’s how you show you really care about it.”

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Diving deeper into Lou's professional journey, the conversation shifts to her groundbreaking role as a digital innovation trailblazer. Through her role as the CEO of advanced digital insurance platform Neuron, her vision is to revolutionise the insurance industry through cutting-edge data connectivity and empowering clients to utilise efficient decision-making processes. Neuron exists to enhance connections between underwriters and brokers, streamlining the trading processes through digitisation, automation, and improved data usage.

The diverse team at Neuron is reflective of Lou's inclusive leadership style, welcoming seasoned experts who bring a wide range of industry knowledge to the table – and equally important– a variety of perspectives.

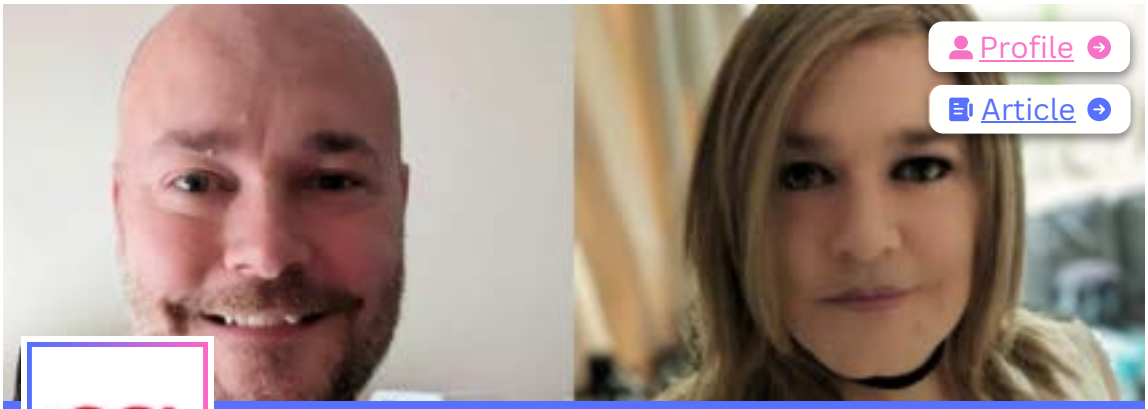
"We're all really excited about Neuron, and the feedback is great," revealed Lou. "We've got some fantastic people on the team who are diverse in its broadest and deepest sense. We've been really conscious about that – how do we keep diversity of thought in the conversation? Because if you don't, then you've left somebody out of the room."

Reflecting on talent acquisition within WTW, Lou is committed to embracing diverse perspectives, including generational thinking, in the cultivation of a professional community. She commends the organisation for embedding inclusive practices as core values, establishing a year-round culture of openness and understanding.

In a resounding call to action for contemporary businesses, Lou emphasises not only including diverse voices but empowering them to make a meaningful impact within the financial services realm and beyond. She highlights the need to work consistently on improving accessibility of services for all, and the importance of daily actions over occasional gestures.

Through her passion for innovation, dedication to enhancing customer experiences, and advocacy for accessibility, Lou Smith exemplifies authentic leadership.

By Dylan Mann-Hazell



Profile

Article

Callum Fraser
Pronouns vary
Senior Cyber Security Consultant

Writers Profile

Empowerment through diversity: A cybersecurity professional's perspective

Stepping into Callum Fraser's shoes is a glorious glimpse of a world where resilience and authenticity shine. From his humble roots in a small village in Oxfordshire to his current role as a cybersecurity consultant at IT and business consulting services company CGI, Callum tells the story of how he overcame significant hurdles to proudly embrace his gender identity and thrive in a new work setting.

Brought up in a village near Didcot, Callum's childhood aspirations included becoming a spy, a detective, and a superhero. Unable to gather a reference from Batman himself, he explored his options and eventually joined the police force, fuelled with a desire to contribute positively to society, fulfilling one of his childhood dreams and becoming a detective.

All the while, Callum was navigating his gender identity. He shared his experiences of discovering his identity on the trans/non-binary spectrum, leaning towards being bi-gender. Though primarily presenting as male, Callum also identifies under a female presentation, Abi. There's a profound and refreshing sense of self-awareness throughout the unfolding journey.

"I do not know what came first – the desire to dress and present as feminine and be seen as feminine, or the part of me, the persona, the aspect of me that I refer to as Abi. And after a long time, I've decided I really don't care. That's just me, that's who I am." In a pivotal life moment, Callum was outed while serving in the police force . Colleagues found videos of Abi winning a transgender beauty pageant, leading to a mixed response from her team at work. Whilst some colleagues were supportive of Abi, some were wary… a wariness that creeped into on occasion, uncomfortable discussions with people who had no understanding of trans/bi-gender identity. He was also subject to public hate when a British tabloid antagonistically reported on a 'Bring Yourself to Work' panel where Callum and Abi's identities were discussed.

During these challenging times, Callum found support and empowerment through initiatives including becoming the chairperson of the Transgender Staff Support Association. More acceptance and accommodation were also found within the cybercrime division where he would eventually work. This shift allowed Abi the space to express herself authentically without significant obstacles. During his time serving, Callum managed to positively change the way that his employer considered non-binary individuals, and even managed to get a commendation for her work as Abi in a serious investigation.

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By the time he was employed at CGI, Callum felt he could live authentically. Despite intending to take a break from diversity initiatives, Callum found himself quickly drawn back into such efforts within the organisation. He highlights the support he received from friends and family as crucial motivators to his continual advocacy for inclusivity and his desire to uplift those lacking the support system he had.

“I’m still one of the people that is lucky enough to have the love and support of friends and family outside of work,” said Callum. “If I can stick my head above the parapet and help people that don’t necessarily have the same support network outside that I do, then that’s what I’ve got to do.”

Though still acclimating to the new role, Callum is proud to report that experiences presenting as Abi at the organisation have been encouraging. She’s yet to encounter any issues, remarking upon CGI’s supportive environment. Initiatives such as staff associations, Pride events, and visible messages of inclusivity continue to promote the authenticity that drives CGI.

Reflecting on the evolving societal attitudes towards diversity and inclusion throughout his career, Callum observed a positive shift toward genuine progress rather than mere box-ticking. He attributed this change to a generational transition where younger people are bringing fresh, open-minded perspectives focused on equality. Despite this progress, Callum acknowledges ongoing challenges, particularly in the face of increased pushback against trans rights. He urges for the promotion of marginalised voices:

“I wish there were immediate improvements that I could trot out and suggest,” he said. “But it’s just to continue plugging away, ignoring those who are trying to use their voice for ill intent and promoting those people who want to promote equality, diversity, inclusivity, and all-round awesomeness.”

By Dylan Mann-Hazell

Profile

Article

Martyn Scott-Thomas

He/Him

Coach I Counsellor I Consultant I Careers Expert I D&I Educator

Writers Profile

Meet & Greet: Martyn Scott-Thomas, Accredited Coach and Counsellor, Careers Expert, Talent Leader and D&I Educator

Can you tell us a bit about your career journey to date?

I moved to London when I was 17. I went to an amazing drama school and studied musical theatre for four years and then started working professionally. I had to work many other jobs to get by during that time. I sold theatre tickets and ice cream, I did bar work, and call centres, I worked backstage at The Lion King and then behind the scenes on big television shows like Britain's Got Talent and the crazy Jeremy Kyle Show. Freelancing was hard, so I became a bar and hotel manager.

I started to crave stability and financial security. I got a temp job in the HR department at Sony PlayStation, and my corporate era began. I worked my way up the ladder, and I tried many things, working in payroll and learning and development before specialising in recruiting. I took risks and chances, which allowed me to work for many different organisations. The diverse experience enabled me to advance my career fast. I have been lucky to work for great brands. In my last role at Booking.com, I was the Global Head of Recruitment where I led big teams all over the world.

You never know how things will unfold, and I have often felt like an imposter. I love working in the talent space and also leading and developing people. I have always advocated for change and have led meaningful diversity and inclusion initiatives, which continue to be important for me.

Why did you choose to set up your coaching and counseling business?

I knew I wanted to help people, and I knew wanted to give back and be more involved within the LGBTQ+ community. I had struggled with my mental health in the past and learnt a lot about anxiety and how to manage it without really knowing where this was all going, and I started studying at the Dutch Academy of Counseling and Coaching. I did this on top of my job and throughout the pandemic, which was tough going.

During that time, I had to really hone in and prioritize the well-being of my team. I led big projects on well-being, belonging, diversity and inclusion. This gave me energy and it felt like it had more meaning and purpose than my job did, so I left my position and focussed on finishing my studies. I then took some time out to travel around Asia, where I learnt a lot and grew a lot, returning with with clarity. I had to package up everything I am, everything I can do and everything that I know and offer that out to help others. So here I am today, an Accredited Coach and Counsellor, Careers Expert, Talent Leader and D&I Educator.

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What services/areas does your new business focus on?

I offer coaching, counseling and consulting services where I support personal life, mental health and well-being challenges. I have particular experience helping people with Identity issues, building self-esteem and managing anxiety. I also provide a wide range of support to anyone in professional settings relating to people management, personal and career development, leadership, HR and diversity and inclusion. I do dedicate my time to the LGBTQ+ community, but I will support anyone who needs it.

Why is having access to role models and good advice so important as you climb up the career ladder, and why is it especially significant for the LGBTQ+ community?

A career can be very hard to navigate at various stages, and undoubtedly you'll need to make some challenging decisions about your circumstances and what you want to do. As you get older and progress in your career, you may want to advance or pivot or change completely, and that can all feel scary and confusing. Many people feel stuck or trapped within their careers altogether and find it hard to know how to change and have the confidence to do so. I have seen it overwhelm people, and this can lead to unhappiness and unfulfillment and can impact mental health significantly.

Getting good career advice matters and from credible and trusted sources. I suggest building and investing in a support network of people around you who you admire, look up to and trust. There are also various people working in support functions whose job it is to support employees and in confidence. Reach out to people, ask a question, organize a coffee or consider asking for mentorship. Try not to take it to heart, people are busy, but the likelihood is they will be able to offer some wisdom and, if not, find someone else who will.

From an LGBTQ+ perspective or from any underrepresented group perspective, we know that there is not yet equality in the workplace, and that bias is happening all the time, sadly, which must be called out. Having role models and representation really matters here because it helps us all believe in ourselves and it gives us strength. We also want and need those people in our support networks, as managers, mentors and coaches, to get that support, advice, confidence and encouragement.

What podcast series are you listening to right now? Are there any DE&I-related/wellbeing podcast series you would recommend?

I would recommend Diary of a CEO by Steven Bartlett and Getting Curious with Jonathan Van Ness. I have learnt a lot from both. Actually, the last podcast I listened to was Steven interviewing Jonathan on his podcast. It was interesting and helpful. In particular, some helpful and clarifying discussion about intersex people and what it means to be authentic. I highly recommend it.

What was the last book you read? Any interesting take aways, and would you recommend it to fellow leaders?

Well, I mentioned earlier about being self-employed and working from home. It has been a journey for me to adapt. A friend recommended a book called The Secrets of Productive People by Mark Forster. It helped him a lot, and so I'm keen to see what I can take from it. The last book I read, for the 20th time, was The Power of Now by Eckhard Tolle. I pick it up for perspective, and I know where to go in the book to find what I need to ground me. I think this quote supports why it is helpful and why I recommend it to anyone. "Wherever you are, be there totally. If you find your 'here and now' intolerable and it makes you unhappy, you have three options: remove yourself from the situation, change it, or accept it totally."

What was your last holiday destination, and where do you plan to visit next?

I went to Vietnam. It was incredible! Next I will be in Torremolinos. I love spending the day at the LGBTQ+ Beach Club, Eden Beach. There's nothing more relaxing than a day on a sunbed, tunes, a good book, with an Espresso Martini or two.

What do you do to relax at the end of a hard working day?

Usually it's being flat out on my sofa watching the TV. I'm a bit of a tele addict. I just finished the Real Housewives of Beverly Hills season 12 and am currently watching Succession.

By Pepi Sappal

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Julie Kirkham
She/Her
GM of Learning and Development
Writers Profile

The Trade Desk's Julie Kirkham on the power of allyship in a 'rainbow family'

myGwork sat down to talk to Julie Kirkham, GM of Learning and Development at The Trade Desk about allyship, supporting her family, and building inclusive workplaces.

Small-town America brings its limitations for representation, especially for the LGBTQ+ community. Growing up with an identical twin sister and a younger sister in Elk Mound, Wisconsin (population 700), Julie tells us: "I was surrounded by many outdated opinions about relationships, sexuality, and identity both at home and at school. Fortunately, my twin and I were voracious readers and were able to often travel much farther outside of our community and norms to different ways of living, working, and identifying thanks to many wonderful writers."

Today, Julie is the proud wife and mother of a rainbow family, with her husband and children all identifying as members of the LGBTQ+ community. Even their dog, Wellington, goes by they/them pronouns. "Who are we to say how they identify?" asks Julie. This decision is also to honour and support Julie's son, who is non-binary, as well as to enable the family to educate others in their community when walking Wellington.

"My allyship doesn't just stop with my family," Julie says. She recalls a recent Uber ride where the driver asked how she planned to "correct" her daughter upon learning Julie's daughter identified as a lesbian. Julie took the opportunity to share that our job as parents is to support our children and show them what love looks like: we can't truly control or correct anything beyond that. "To be an ally isn't just to confront your own feelings or your own opinions, or even to just get comfortable with them. It's to welcome the rainbow in your life and to walk the world like a disco ball, amplifying, mirroring, and spreading that rainbow for all the people you love."

At The Trade Desk, Julie is the GM of Learning and Development, a role she cherishes. When asked to pick a stand-out moment in her career, she highlights work she's done with Diversity & Inclusion teams. In a previous organization, Julie partnered with a theatre group in Minneapolis called Breaking Ice, which performed pieces based on interviews with employees. "Seeing our own culture and examples come to life in a theatre piece was eye-opening. It made me laugh and cry and highlighted all the ways I've inadvertently made a mistake in my language, made an ignorant assumption, and so on. It opened my eyes to my privilege, whiteness, and identity in a way that no other class, course, or conversation had up until that point."

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At The Trade Desk, Julie says inclusion is embedded from day one. “Your preferences, your pronouns, your relationships, your identity—we see and value them all as a part of who you are. I’ve been able to share proudly about my family and talk with other allies about what and how they champion the people in their lives. It’s the trying that matters. Perfection is not the aim. Love and care are the goal.” It was that same culture that first drew Julie to The Trade Desk, and made it so easy to say yes when she was offered a role.

Reflecting on business in general, Julie believes that even as we’ve made substantial progress, we still have a lot of work to do. While pronouns in emails and on company channels may be ubiquitous now compared to a few years ago, educating and supporting the workforce is an ongoing job as we strive towards inclusion. “Those with privilege can still decide they don’t care. They don’t need to learn. They get to turn their acceptance switch on or off. Until we change that, we’re relying on the small minority to help shift the tide.” But the tide is shifting, according to Julie.

“Our children are future bosses, and they’re talking about their identities. We have to read up, listen up, and shut up. We need to really hear what our young people (and coworkers) are sharing with us. We need to ask questions and acknowledge differences. I have faith we’ll get there, no doubt.”

By Dylan Mann-Hazell

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Profile
Article

Kerri Keeney
She/Her
Sales

Writers Profile

Kerri Keeney's journey as an LGBTQ+ ally at Merck

Kerri Keeney, Membership Specialist at Merck, delves into her journey from schoolteacher to professional salesperson, discussing how the two intersect and inspired the path she's on now. Recently awarded Ally of the Year, she also describes why her firm and continuous allyship to the LGBTQ+ community is a vital part of her life.

All successful sales professionals need three essential skills – communication, empathy, and the art of persuasion. Not many can say they developed these skills by training to become a teacher, which is precisely where Kerri Keeney stands out. Her transition from teacher to a sales role was not just a career shift; it was a transformation that allowed her to blend her passion for educating with the demands of salesmanship. Kerri quickly found her stride at pharmaceutical company Merck, seeing sales as an extension of education, and an opportunity to inform and enlighten.

"Sales was always there in the back of my mind," she reflects. "I thought, if I could sell Shakespeare to ninth graders, I could sell anything!"

Her tenure at Merck as a vaccine sales representative marked a significant chapter in her professional life. With her background in education, Kerri excelled in this role by focusing on educating health care providers about the importance of vaccines. This period laid the foundation for her future endeavors in contracting, where she took on a specialist role overseeing a broader range of products. The exposure to Merck's diverse portfolio was both challenging and rewarding, enabling Kerri to expand her horizons and contribute meaningfully to the company's growth. "When I first started my career journey, I felt like I didn't belong. At Merck, I do. It's just really important to make sure everybody feels that they have a safe place where they can contribute."

Having been brought up in New York, where different cultures and accents are prevalent, Kerri learned to appreciate the richness of varied experiences and backgrounds from an early age. When she moved to Pennsylvania at the age of 12, the change from the bustling diversity of New York to a more rural setting was a pivotal moment in her life, prompting her to recognise the significance of inclusivity in culture. As a result, she now aspires to maintaining a workplace environment that celebrates and embraces differences while ensuring that every employee feels valued and included.

Growing up, when issues like the AIDS epidemic were at the forefront of public minds, Kerri witnessed firsthand the prejudices and challenges faced by her LGBTQ+ friends. Despite their struggles, they remained strong and supportive of her, inspiring Kerri to always repay the favor through avid allyship.

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“My LGBTQ+ friends have always seen the best in me, and oftentimes saw me when I couldn’t see myself. I’ve made it a priority and a promise to myself that I will always be a strong ally for this community.”

Kerri kept this promise through active engagement in employee business resource groups like the Women’s Network and the company’s LGBTQ+ network Rainbow Alliance. Her leadership during the challenging times of the pandemic is especially commendable, showing that nothing gets in the way of her firm support as an ally.

“Empathy is so important. You can have wonderful leadership skills, but if you are lacking empathy, then you just can’t be a great leader. We need to make sure empathy is at the forefront of our efforts, and lead with love.”

From forging deep friendships with LGBTQ+ people throughout her life, to actively leading initiatives promoting allyship, Kerri celebrates individuality every day. As one of the co-leads of the Global Rainbow Alliance Allyship team, and through her involvement in Pride events, mentorship programs, and educational campaigns, she continues to inspire others to cultivate empathy, understanding, and ongoing support for the LGBTQ+ community.

“Not only does the Rainbow Alliance inspire inclusivity and belonging, and all those great cultural things, but it also allows me to get my creative juices flowing. It shows that if you think it… if you have that idea… you can make it happen,” she says.

By Dylan Mann-Hazell

Profile

Article

DIAGEO

Jorgie Hunt
She/Her
Global Manufacturing Excellence Manager

Writers Profile

Jorgie Hunt talks to myGwork about how she has fostered LGBTQIA inclusivity at Diageo

Jorgie Hunt grew up in Warwick, a small town in the midlands of England, known for its famous castle and rich history. Despite the town's quaint charm, Jorgie always found herself longing for more vibrant experiences and new horizons – a fiery passion for exploration that inspires her even now. This yearning was further cemented through being raised in a household where Jorgie was encouraged to be whoever she wanted to be. "I was always supported to be whatever – and whoever – I wanted to be and that really made me, and my three siblings, feel like the world was our oyster."

Jorgie acknowledges the impact of 90s and 00s societal norms, such as homophobic notions, as a challenge in the embrace of her identity and individuality. Identifying as bisexual, Jorgie reflects on the internal conflict she struggled with at the time – her ambitious desire to live authentically versus the societal pressure to conform to heteronormative standards.

"Being bisexual, it can sometimes be easier to 'straight face', but this leads to a feeling of inauthenticity and emptiness – which as someone who wanted to take on the world, left me feeling at odds with myself and that something was missing."

Moving away to Manchester Metropolitan University was a significant moment in Jorgie's self-discovery journey, where she would meet down-to-earth and open-minded friends. Thriving in Manchester's hospitality scene, particularly through bartending, Jorgie developed a love for the drinks industry. She found herself drawn to Manchester's Gay Village, where she felt immediate acceptance and found a space to be herself without the need for explicit self-identification.

Jorgie later found a sense of belonging within the bisexual community, allowing her to realize her pansexual identity. Reflecting on this realization, Jorgie shared that she discovered comfortability within pansexuality in her twenties, a term she wasn't familiar with earlier in life.

"I probably didn't take enough time during this period of my life to self-identify, just seeing it as my own natural evolution, but I've since found my place in the bisexual community, distinctly pansexuality – a word I don't think I even heard until I was in my 20s!"

Jorgie began her journey at beverage company, Diageo, through their Graduate Scheme. It was the perfect opportunity for her to explore various roles and begin shaping her career in an industry she had grown to love. Jorgie's passion for working in a field she has a fondness for, with inspiring colleagues, has remained with her even after eight years in the industry.

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Entering her second year at Diageo, Jorgie joined the Rainbow Network, an employee resource group aimed at promoting LGBTQIA inclusion. A year later, alongside colleague Jack, Jorgie would take on a Co-Chair role for the Rainbow Network – leading to great DEI advancements. Jorgie attributes the success of the Network to a shared drive for progress over perfection and an eagerness for teamwork that resonates within the Rainbow Network year after year.

Reflecting on the early years of Rainbow Network, Jorgie expresses pride towards the growth of the ERG.

“It’s been a truly humbling experience to have seen both the Network grow, but more importantly the profound impact that the network has had both inside and outside of Diageo brought to life.”

Every year, Jorgie is blown away by the support garnered for Diageo’s Global Progress Pride Flag Raising event. Bringing together all global sites and communities to hoist the progress pride flag, the event showcases collective dedication to fostering a more inclusive workplace for the LGBTQIA community. This year, 94 sites and teams participated in raising the flag, uniting to kick off Pride Month. Thanks to initiatives such as this, Jorgie has noticed a growing respect for the continuous learning process, emphasizing the empowerment derived from ongoing growth, and the strength found in unity.

Beyond Diageo’s empowering inclusivity efforts, Jorgie expresses concern over the media narrative surrounding the trans community. She emphasizes the importance of using her platform to advocate for trans inclusion within Diageo and extend that positive impact beyond the organization.

“The media discourse around the Trans community is heartbreaking and as an LGBTQIA community, we need to stand on our historical morals of allyship more than ever and come together to support our Transgender and Non-binary family. Positive changes can start simply – Introduction to Trans Inclusion training to break down any stigma or fear of the unknown can be really powerful.”

Stressing the importance of positive LGBTQIA role models and open dialogue about their impact on the community, Jorgie shares her inspirational daily endeavour; “I try every day to be my own role model and continue to live by my values.”

By Dylan Mann-Hazell

Profile
Article

Robson Smith
He/Him
Business programme manager

Writers Profile

Microsoft's Robson Smith on how the company amplifies underrepresented voices

After completing his academic education, Robson Smith found himself caught in the same frustrating cycle that traps many job-seeking young people: he needed work experience to land a job but couldn't gain that experience without first securing employment. Initially unsure of the direction to take, he was soon intrigued by Microsoft's apprenticeship programme during a school visit by interns, and quickly became eager about the opportunity to earn while learning, and gain invaluable experience with a renowned tech giant.

After a nerve-wracking assessment centre experience, he received the exciting news of being offered a contract at Microsoft, which led to him relocating from Kent to Reading at only 16 years old. This transition into independence brought with it life lessons and responsibilities that helped Robson mature quickly.

During the 2020 lockdowns, Robson built invaluable skills in managing live events and virtual meetings, leading to increased responsibilities and direct involvement with senior leadership in organising key internal events. Completing his degree – the first to do so under this apprenticeship programme – he transitioned into a role as a business programme manager, and now focuses on internal projects and initiatives aimed at enhancing employee experiences.

Sharing his personal journey in discovering his sexuality, Robson reflects on his school experiences and challenges faced in coming to terms with his identity. Amid the lack of guidance and education around LGBTQ+ topics, his realisation and acceptance unfolded gradually. He naturally gravitated towards female groups, feeling more comfortable socialising with them, which consequently made him the target of bullying. However, looking back, he sees a silver lining in these unfortunate experiences. "It seems a shame to say, but I do think the bullying partly made me the person I am today," Robson says. "I have more understanding and empathy for people. I'm much more concerned about how others feel and how I can help them out. Everyone is different. Everyone can love whoever they want to love. There's no right or wrong answer."

Robson's attraction towards men became more evident as he grew older, until a pivotal moment when he confided in an older out gay student about his feelings, marking the first step towards accepting his identity. From school to work, Robson has consistently found solace and acceptance with other members of the community, including Microsoft's LGBTQ+ employee resource group (ERG), GLEAM.

As a communications manager for the ERG, Robson has focused on empowering inclusivity not only for LGBTQ+ employees but also for straight allies, recognising their significant role in advocating for human rights alongside the LGBTQ+ community. "We can only do so much as a community," he explains. "It's having straight and cis allies' support that's key. Everyone can get involved, regardless of their background, regardless of their religion or their beliefs."

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With a commitment to philanthropy and inclusivity, Microsoft's dedication to amplifying underrepresented voices and advocating for social justice across all communities is loud and clear. Reflecting on his nine-year tenure at Microsoft, Robson emphasises the mutual exchange of passion and opportunities between himself and the company. He stresses the importance of creating a workplace environment where everyone feels valued and respected, regardless of their identity.

"When something's not right, we speak up about it," says Robson. "There's an opportunity for everyone to get involved. A big cultural thing at Microsoft is growth mindset. It's all about inclusive thinking; it's reflecting on what you're saying, being curious, asking questions. We don't pretend to be a know-it-all company; we're learning all the time."

Looking ahead, Robson envisions Microsoft's future as a technology leader committed to advancing inclusivity and representation. From inclusive product design and diverse character options in gaming, to the continuous support of progressive legislation, Microsoft stands proudly in its efforts to drive positive change in the tech industry. Robson also encourages ongoing dialogue, empathy, and active participation from allies to create and maintain inclusive spaces both within the tech sector and society at large.

"As an ERG, not only are we here to support the LGBTQ+ community, but we're also here to support those parents or friends or managers who have questions about being allies to the community. Being curious is always a great place to start."

By Dylan Mann-Hazell

William Spencer
He/Him
Account Director, Agency

Writers Profile

JCDecaux's William Spencer on creating the company's Pride Matters network

Moving from Perth, to Melbourne, and eventually to the United Kingdom, William Spencer from JCDecaux has experienced a wide array of cultural and social interactions. Identifying as gay since a young age, he reflects on his journey from coming out in a "stifling" city to spearheading an LGBTQ+ resource group.

William came out to friends and family at just the age of 14, and it didn't take long for him to spread his wings and explore the full LGBTQ+ landscape. Though he created strong bonds and formed life-long relationships in Perth, he describes it as somewhat of a restricting place to grow up LGBTQ+. "One of the reasons why I left Perth at such a young age, I think I was 17 or 18, was that I felt it was a very stifling environment for queer people or people who identify under the LGBTQ+ umbrella."

Elaborating, he reveals how Perth has seemed to regress in terms of LGBTQ+ spaces over time, in particular noting the reduction in the number of gay clubs. Upon moving to Melbourne, William felt liberated, allowing him to finally explore aspects of himself that he couldn't fully embrace in Perth. Finding solace in Melbourne's vibrant queer community, his early 20s were a time of experimentation and opening his mind to other identities and ways of life.

"Melbourne was great for self-expression and finding yourself; meeting other like-minded individuals and exploring your sexuality." Looking back on this time, he humorously paints a picture of a rather camp fashion choice from his youth, describing a green velvet leprechaun jacket with bright orange stitched clovers, and a black briefcase that he thought looked "stylish".

With each passing year, William gained more confidence both personally and professionally, and eventually made the bold decision to shake things up once again by moving to the United Kingdom in his 30s. He set his sights on media company JCDecaux, which happened to have a promising opportunity that immediately piqued his interest. William recalls, "There was not any consideration to try a different path. JCDecaux had an opportunity opening up, it was one of the first jobs I applied for, and I got it."

Though he quickly found like-minded and progressive colleagues throughout JCDecaux, an early observation of the company as a whole led him to feel inspired to add a splash of colour to the company. He became motivated to give LGBTQ+ people in the company a platform from which to speak, and began his efforts to build Pride Matters, an LGBTQ+ inclusive network.

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Launching just recently, Pride Matters serves as a safe space for LGBTQ+ colleagues at JCDecaux to gather, share experiences, and embrace their authentic selves within the business environment. William emphasises the importance of psychological safety and community support, aiming to create an environment where everyone feels not only included, but safe and respected. The network's initiatives also include plans for events, educational sessions, and advocacy efforts to promote diverse and inclusive practices throughout the workplace.

Pride Matters has already garnered positive responses, with colleagues stepping forward and showing interest in participating, highlighting that initiatives just like these are a vital part of any inclusive organisation. As the chairman, William's efforts have been focused on building a strong foundation for the network in its first year, with future plans to expand advocacy and external partnerships in the following years.

"Our first-year plan is all about visibility and engagement," explains William. "In the second year, we want to lead into advocacy, get out there a bit more, particularly when it comes to our external partnerships. It's all about how we can we use our media channel around Pride Month and the rest of the year."

William's dedication to creating a more inclusive work environment extends beyond his personal experiences. He recognises the importance of celebrating diversity within all subgroups and building understanding and acceptance across different identities. By championing Pride Matters, William aims to promote unity within JCDecaux, the LGBTQ+ community and beyond, to help build a more accepting future.

By Dylan Mann-Hazell

Article

Rian Rosine
She/They
Senior Representative ACS Hire Monitoring

Writers Profile

What diversity and inclusion actually look like in the workplace

Rian Rosine (she/they), Senior Representative ACS Hire Monitoring at Enterprise Mobility™, spoke to myGworkabout her experience journeying into the professional world in a post-lockdown climate, and the notable efforts of Enterprise Mobility in diversity and inclusion.

Rian's first steps into the professional world took place shortly after the COVID-19 pandemic, at only 19 years old. Nervous but eager, she delved into various departments at Enterprise Mobility after a successful interview, gaining knowledge and experience throughout her company journey. Eventually, Rian advanced to a senior representative role within the recoveries department, dealing extensively with customer service matters. Having held this position for around a year and a half, they express pride in the path they have taken so far. Despite the initial uncertainty and chaos, Rian now feels more secure and in control of their surroundings than ever.

Reflecting back on her upbringing, musical theatre and martial arts were the primary hobbies that defined Rian's childhood. While one offered a creative outlet, the other provided physical and mental discipline through years of practising judo. Despite a rather idyllic childhood with her family and friends, Rian still holds a poignant memory – their first experience of shame.

"I remember very vividly, the first time I think I ever experienced homophobia, even though I didn't know what it was yet," Rian recalled. "I was very little. I had a best friend, and we used to kiss each other because we were four, and that was how we would say goodbye. We just gave each other a little peck, and then a teacher grabbed me by the back of my school uniform, yanked me away from her and started yelling at me, telling me that wasn't allowed and it was disgusting. I remember thinking 'I don't know what I've done wrong, but I suddenly feel shame'. For the first time, I felt shame."

Luckily, this encounter with homophobia didn't impact Rian's confidence later in life. In their teen years, they came to understand their bisexual identity, and to this day is embracing and learning their place within the queer spectrum of gender identity. Her parents had always been exceptionally supportive and understanding when it came to matters of sexuality and gender. Even before they suspected that either of their children might identify as LGBTQIA, they were the kind of people who simply said, "Do whatever you want, just as long as you're not in my way when I'm trying to go to Tesco." At 13 years old, she came out to her parents in a "surprisingly uneventful" conversation. Her parents were nonchalant about it and quickly shifted the conversation to what she wanted for dinner.

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The real challenges of coming out took place at school, where Rian faced bullying and discrimination. It was especially tough as a child coming from a supportive home environment to then be met with hostility from others. Despite the hardships faced early on, by the ages of 15 or 16, Rian began to find their footing and their community. From that pointon, they embraced their identity and found happiness in being true to themselves.

Rian considers Enterprise Mobility as one of the best places she knows of for championing diversity. As an employee, they feel a profound sense of security, safety and assurance that their interests are heard and prioritized. Actively involved in the LGBTQIA committee within the organization, they appreciate the authentic commitment to inclusivity. From commemorating Trans Day of Visibility to holding vigils on significant LGBTQIA history days and boldly celebrating Pride, they feel that Enterprise Mobility goes above and beyond to provide a supportive environment. A particular highlight for Rian is the company's offer of guidance for transgender employees. From open communication to assistance with transitioning, Enterprise Mobility have proven themselves as active allies to the trans community.

"Rather than just saying, 'we're inclusive', we're actually putting in the time to educate people to help the LGBTQIA community feel safe," they explained. "We have people that will support you on the committee, which I'm so proud of."

Beyond LGBTQIA initiatives, Enterprise Mobility's commitment to inclusivity extends to other cultural and religious observances. With projects like highlighting Ramadan and Hanukkah through the Diversity Committee, the overarching goal of Enterprise Mobility's DE&I efforts remains clear: ensuring that everyone feels secure and supported in their work environment.

Looking ahead to the future of LGBTQIA equality, Rian believes that the next frontier lies in championing non-binary identities and their place within the larger conversation on equality. Noting that society tends to gravitate towards binary classifications, making it easier for people to comprehend when presented with clear-cut options, they emphasize the importance of encouraging spaces where non-binary people feel empowered.

"Making non-binary people feel safe and valued requires a broader social movement. I hope to see meaningful changes in the next 10 years and hope to see the support of allies in this movement."

By Dylan Mann-Hazell

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Profile
Article

Ashleigh Evans
She/Her
Service Desk Analyst

Writers Profile

HCA Healthcare's Ashleigh Evans on trans inclusivity: 'I think the younger generations to come are going to fix it'

Ashleigh Evans, service desk team lead at HCA Healthcare UK (HCA UK), has always been a strong advocate for diversity and inclusion. She opens up about how this led to her desire to encourage education in the workplace, as well as personal advocacy, including the immense pride felt for her trans twin brother.

Growing up in a Welsh-speaking village and attending a primary school where speaking English was discouraged, Ashleigh developed a firm appreciation for Welsh culture and language. Despite new challenges presented by her transition to an English-speaking high school. Ashleigh characterises her childhood as one filled with love and support thanks to her tight-knit family relationships. She reminisces about a smooth coming out experience with her family, particularly her parents, who embraced her identity as a gay woman with warmth. "It really was just exactly how I would've wanted it to go. I just came home one day to my parents and said, 'I've met a girl. I've got a girlfriend now.' And it was fine, that was really it. There was no 'coming out' needed."

Describing her LGBTQ+ journey, Ashleigh recalls a gradual change from identifying as bisexual – as she has formed emotional attachments to men in the past – to now feeling more comfortable in her identity as a gay woman. Ashleigh also speaks fondly of her twin brother George, who is trans. Not only is she thankful for the shared experience of growing up LGBTQ+, but she also expresses pride towards George's impactful work in the community. George garners millions of views on social media, powerfully using his voice to advocate for the trans community.

"We all know how taboo being gay was in the 80s. Nowadays, the taboo is being trans and non-binary," she points out. "Now more than ever, we need to stand with them. Especially trans women of colour. These are the people who need our support now." After completing university, Ashleigh ventured into IT support, drawn to the intersection of healthcare and technology. Demonstrating a knack for resolving a diverse range of technical issues faced by healthcare professionals and corporate staff, she swiftly secured a role on the service desk at HCA UK. Five years into her career, Ashleigh was promoted to team lead, honouring her commitment to making a positive impact through supporting colleagues and technical expertise. "Being promoted to team lead was just so lovely. I really fell in love with my job, and I'd been waiting and waiting for more responsibility."

Sharing standout moments in her role at HCA UK so far, Ashleigh was the proud receiver of the Runner-Up accolade for the 365 Hero Awards in 2021. Another career highlight was her involvement in representing HCA UK at the National Diversity Awards, where the company was nominated for 'Diverse Company of the Year'.

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As a key figure in HCA UK 's Pride group, Ashleigh spoke passionately about the importance of education within the workplace. She emphasises the positive impact of awareness for the LGBTQ+ community through means of empathy and understanding. Ashleigh attributes the evolution of the Pride group to increased education around LGBTQ+ issues.

Acknowledging the pivotal role of community-driven initiatives like the Pride group, she highlights grassroots efforts as key to driving positive change and aims to fiercely advocate for more inclusive language and understanding of the LGBTQ+ community within the workplace.

A matter close to her heart, Ashleigh draws attention to the need for gender-affirming care and other resources specifically for the trans community. She expresses her hopes for the future of the well-being of the trans community and aims to advocate for enhanced recognition, education, and policy implementation to ensure the safety of trans people everywhere. Ashleigh believes that the younger generation will act with more empathy, education and understanding in their hearts, and holds out hope for a better world.

"I've got no worries about the future," she ponders. "I think the younger generations to come are going to fix it. It's really just about educating the people in work now, which I think, and hope is going well. We just need to keep pushing it."

By Dylan Mann-Hazell

Profile

Article

Nick Burger
He/Him
Quality system manager

Writers Profile

From Midwest to Rolls-Royce, Nick Burger's journey in LGBTQ+ leadership

Nick Burger, quality system manager at Rolls-Royce Corporation, spoke to myGwork about his experience growing up as a gay man in the Midwest, and how that informed his passion for inclusivity and value for authentic leadership.

Could you tell us a bit about your background and career journey leading up to your current position at Rolls-Royce?

I was born west of Indianapolis where I grew up with a love of science and technology. After earning a mechanical engineering degree from Rose-Hulman Institute of Technology, I went on to work for Lockheed Martin across both their Orlando and Denver facilities, with increasing responsibility from production quality engineer to strategic quality leader.

After my dad passed away in 2022, I decided to move home to Indianapolis. I've known about Rolls-Royce gas turbine engine manufacturing here in Indianapolis my whole life, and it was the first place I looked for a job. I started as a supplier quality manager, and I am currently responsible for our FAA compliance. As I was researching jobs here, I was happy to see that Rolls-Royce scored high on the HRC Corporate Equality Index.

Can you tell us about your childhood – where did you grow up; did you have any hobbies?

I was a quiet kid. Built Legos and model airplanes, played trumpet, was a "mathlete" in Quiz Bowl and Spell Bowl, and earned an Eagle Scout rank in Boy Scouts. Generally, I kept to myself and stuck with my core group of friends.

Can you share your personal journey with the LGBTQ+ community?

I think my experience as a gay man in the Midwest was pretty common. I stayed closeted through high school, then found a community of support in college and came out to my family and friends at 19. Coming out to my family was a bit of a rocky road but ultimately everyone came around.

Since then, living in Orlando was great fun with that community, though we suffered the tragedy of the Pulse shooting. When I moved to Denver, I was inspired by the half a million people that attend the parade and festival every year. And upon moving back to Indianapolis, I found a more supportive city than the one I had left 11 years before. Seeing pride flags at all, let alone all over the city, made me feel a lot more comfortable about being openly gay in the Midwest.

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How does Rolls-Royce strive for inclusivity and provide an open space for LGBTQ+ employees?

At Rolls-Royce, we take a holistic approach towards hardwiring diversity, inclusion, and belonging (DI&B) right into the fabric of our organisation. We strive for an environment where every voice is valued, and we understand that this work is a constant reach towards excellence. Rolls-Royce is currently focused on promoting an open and psychologically safe environment, increasing diverse representation in leadership and critical roles, strengthening leadership's capability and engagement around DI&B, and ensuring equitable opportunities through fairness and transparency.

Rolls-Royce specifically hosts several Inclusion Networks aligned across diversity elements. Propel with Pride, Rolls-Royce North America's LGBTQ+ inclusion network, holds internal learning and social events throughout the year, as well as participating in the Indianapolis Pride Parade annually. We've partnered with other major corporations and nonprofits in the area to build community, raise funds, and promote causes that our allies might not otherwise hear about.

Could you share any valuable lessons or insights you've gained throughout your career that have shaped your approach to leadership and teamwork?

People want to be heard. Not just listened to, but actually considered and to influence the final decision. With how easy it is to change roles and jobs, treating employees just as cogs in the machine and not actual people is self-defeating as a leader.

Personally, I have a lot of faith in my own logic, so I would just make decisions myself, even though they impacted the team. I noticed that this often caught people off guard and caused emotion. I started consulting my team on decisions that affected them, and I explained my logic and took their feedback. Ultimately, it resulted in a more cohesive team where our processes and rhythms matched their needs, not just my perceptions.

Throughout your career, have you noticed any developments in attitudes towards the importance of diversity and inclusion?

LGBTQ+ equality and D&I initiatives overall made great strides in the workplace through the 2000s. It felt like major corporations employing millions of people started to understand the importance of a diverse workforce that felt like they belonged at work.

Unfortunately, it feels like we're in the "one step back" phase of this progress. There are recent stories about major corporations rolling back some of their D&I initiatives or investors seeing it as less of a priority than it previously had been.

I hope that, even against such headwinds, enough leaders have seen the value in creating diverse and inclusive workforces to continue the momentum towards equality both in and out of the workplace.

What immediate improvements would you like to see being made for LGBTQ+ equality in the future – both in the workplace, and wider society?

Though we've experienced growing LGBTQ+ acceptance in general, we're still missing visible and open LGBTQ+ leaders in both business and government. I'd like to see continued improvement at those high levels to create safe spaces for figures of authority to come out, or for those already out to be promoted into those roles

By Dylan Mann-Hazell

Profile

Article

Alex Henderson
She/Her
Global Delivery Head of People Transformation

Writers Profile

Here's how inclusion can be achieved in any workplace

myGwork sat down to talk to Alex Henderson, Global Delivery Head of People Transformation at State Street about the importance of inclusion at work, her journey navigating the financial services industry, and how businesses can build inclusive cultures.

Alex Henderson grew up on the Essex-Suffolk border and could be found as a child swinging from trees, playing football, or building dens with the neighbour kids. "School was interesting, mostly upon reflection rather than realising at the time, as I didn't fit in with the girl's group, nor did I fit in with the boys. However, I also truly got on with everyone, so I didn't see it as an issue or anything negative, in fact, today I feel that people do not put me in a group automatically and it enabled me to connect with a broader network." She recalls the power of this network as well as allyship when she was not allowed to join the school football team despite the boys' belief that she was one of the best players. The boys caused a fuss, the school board was convened, and the rules were changed to allow girls to play on the team.

Coming out to family was a straightforward affair – after a few teenage boyfriends, Alex found herself attracted to a girl on her cricket team. One night after a drink together at the local pub, her mother asked her if she was falling for the girl. The support was unanimous and provided her a base at home with which to grow in confidence and progress in her career.

Early on in her career, however, issues of patriarchy and heteronormativity had stifled this. "I have been notably excluded, or even ignored, simply for being female before my sexuality even came into play. I experienced senior male leaders actively refusing to speak to me directly and vocalising their preference to engage with my more junior male colleagues, as they did not like women on the trading floor."

Even when such prejudice became unacceptable in the workplace, the atmosphere evolved to a more subtle, passive aggressive form of discrimination. Inferences that Alex's identity was the reason for any progress she made in the workplace, rather than her ability and expertise, began to follow her around. Comments like this understandably affect one's confidence and play on your mind; never being quite sure if you are progressing because you're capable or because you're "ticking the right boxes."

She persevered however to become senior in her field, and to succeed despite the negative attitudes she had encountered. In 2021, she was interviewed at State Street and another organisation. The deciding factor for her when it came to choosing between them was the culture of inclusivity.

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“Across State Street, it’s a priority to ensure that every employee feels that their identity and experience are represented, embraced, and celebrated. We keep the DEI conversation going through frequent, open employee discussion forums and global training opportunities. By educating, inspiring, and empowering our employees at every level, we cultivate a global force of leaders that represents the diverse markets we serve,” she tells me. The business operates over 24 different employee networks with 110 chapters globally, enabling employees to access mentorship, career development, and training as well as helping to embed the culture of diversity, inclusion and equity.

These cultures are vital to promoting LGBTQIA inclusion, Alex believes. “Diverse teams doesn’t mean inclusive teams – they’re not interchangeable terms. Interlinked, yes, but one

doesn’t guarantee the other. To shape a diverse business, we must first have a welcoming, inclusive culture.” Alex’s favourite, well-known, example that sums up how culture should be is. “Diversity is where everyone is invited to the party. Inclusion means that everyone gets to contribute to the playlist. Equity means that everyone has the opportunity todance/experience the music.” Despite historic stereotypes and pervasive cultures in the financial services industry, it is the work of employees and teams at State Street to overcome that and build an inclusive culture that is what made the bank stand out to Alex in the first place.

Anyone can build these cultures into their own business, Alex thinks, if they’re prepared to take the right steps. “We are all on a learning journey since the day we were born. It is the role of every organisation to continue to provide those opportunities for continuous learning – helping to move society forward by opening minds to new ways of thinking, being, and doing. I often hear leaders show nervousness around having deep conversations on inclusivity for reasons such as ‘worried about using incorrect terminology’. Every organisation needs to put the human at the core of their business and people strategies.” It starts with small steps but snowballs into building businesses where everyone is welcome and able to bring their authentic selves to work.

By Dylan Mann-Hazell

Profile

Article

Daniel Docherty
He/Him
Senior Vice President | Business Controls Manager

Writers Profile

Bank of America senior VP on LGBTQ+ ally program and how neurodiversity has shaped his perspective

Daniel Docherty describes his journey from a young boy who didn't understand what made him different, to a professional co-designer of Bank of America's LGBTQ+ employee resource group's global ally program. He also offers a perspective on how his identity as a gay man intersects with being neurodivergent, and how both are ultimately strengths of his character.

Can you share your experience of growing up in a large Irish and Scottish Catholic family?

Growing up in such a large family with 11 uncles/aunties and 40+ cousins, means I have always felt part of a community. It's a little crazy and people squabble, but ultimately someone is always there when you need them. Family gatherings are always huge, and we all have a great time. It's very matriarchal and was always centered around my grandparents who made sure we were all okay. I love family life and can't imagine not being a part of such a large one.

What was your journey like from recognising your identity to coming out to your family and friends?

Growing up I always knew I was different from others, but I did not understand why. Around the age of 12, my friends were looking at girls and I was just not interested – I had many girl friends, but never in a romantic way. I left school at 16 and went straight into work, working at the English National Opera as an usher, and found myself surrounded by people who were so open about being LGBTQ+ that it made me realise it was okay to like boys.

I was given a film called Beautiful Thing about a boy on a council estate with a mother who runs pubs – this was exactly my story. While watching the film my mum asked why I was crying, I said "I am like this boy in the film". She sat down, watched the rest, and at the end just said, "I know you are, and tomorrow we can talk to your dad". The next day we had an open conversation and they both just said they wanted me to be happy. I started telling my friends and people at work and everyone was so supportive. I have a saying that friends are the family ('framily') we choose, and I am so lucky to have the ones I do.

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Looking back on your career, what moments stand out as particularly defining for you?

At 18, I joined Bank of America and vowed to never go back in the closet again. One year later, I and other gay people at the bank contacted the D&I Leader for our region asking if we could start an LGBTQ+ network chapter in Europe Middle East and Africa, which she supported. We already had an active LGBTQ+ Network in the US, with several chapters, reflecting the Bank's commitment to progressing LGBTQ+ inclusion. I sat on the committee for a few years and when I was 22, I was asked to co-lead the network as well as the LGBTQ+ Interbank Network,which was a huge and exciting step. I was assigned a mentor who was the executive sponsor of the LGBTQ+ Network and who taught me you don't need seniority to lead – having drive, passion and empathy gives you the power to inspire inclusion.

At 33, I co-designed a global ally program at the bank, now with over 40,000 members across 1000+ cities, 30+ countries and all US states. Working with the global allies, senior leaders, HR and D&I, we achieved a lot. For example, we were able to collaborate with our private healthcare provider to include lower surgery for anyone eligible to transition, working for us. It was one of the highlights of my career when I was able to call one of my colleagues, informing them they can now be seen privately, taking 7 years of their current wait.

At 41, I secured my senior vice president role, this was a significant achievement and a proud moment in my career journey to date.

You co-led and co-designed the Global LGBTQA+ Pride Ally program. What inspired you to take on this role, and what are its areas of success?

In 2012, I went to an LGBTQ+ conference in the US called The Out and Equal Summit, led by our long-standing Bank of America diversity partner Out & Equal, and met an amazing human called Aimee Broadhurst. We hit it off and went to all the Ally Program sessions because we knew we needed a program like that at Bank of America. I wanted to ensure our program was global in scope but local in nature, to allow the people on the ground to take part all over the world, in a way that suited them – even in places where being LGBTQA+ is unsafe.

We gathered the data we needed along with the support of a global leader and started to build our program, reaching out to key stakeholders to ensure we were covering all angles. Our main aim was to create an environment for people to bring their whole selves to work – this did not mean outing people, but having a safe visible environment when they were ready. We now have the data to show that we are having a positive impact.

How does Bank of America strive towards a more diverse and inclusive work environment?

Bank of America values everyone, from all walks of life. There's a truly inclusive environment and culture here. It's a place to get involved and be inspired, from volunteer opportunities to D&I events and initiatives, the company offers new ways to learn and grow, and make a difference for our clients and in our communities.

There are always opportunities to engage with a range of different people across the bank and I believe it's the personal connections our employees make with each other that help build our strong and inclusive work culture. Through employee networks, ongoing activities and annual events friendships develop and are nurtured. We appreciate the value of these relationships and are proud to facilitate opportunities for employees to grow, learn and connect through shared interests.

We all want a job with purpose, to know that our time spent working contributes to greater good. At Bank of America, we're proud of our investment in social and environmental causes, philanthropic partnerships, commitment to volunteering and daily focus on helping clients achieve their financial goals. Our employees really do have the power to make a difference.

Could you describe how being neurodiverse and dyslexic has influenced your perspective on leadership and inclusion in the workplace?

I live in a world that has not been designed for neurodiverse individuals. This means I must come up with ways to learn, develop and adapt, which makes me resilient and problem-solving focused. There is a growing understanding of what being neurodiverse broadly means and how individuals can be supported. We need to keep the dialogue around this going. Leaders have an important, positive role to play, to continue to understand what challenges neurodiverse individuals face, the mental strength required and then understand the support they can provide. They need to understand being neurodiverse is a superpower and to enhance this you need to create a culture of belonging in all its forms and foster diverse teams.

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Bank of America has recently announced a new training programme for all employees, developed with our external partners, Neurodiversity in the Workplace. The program focuses on understanding neurodiversity and building inclusive workplace practices.

How do you see the future of diversity and inclusion evolving in the business landscape, particularly with emerging leaders?

It is hugely positive to see the topic included in leadership conversations, more and more people are aware of it and understand why it is important. We have come such a long way since I started in the working world. However, there's always more that can be done. I see the future of D&Iat organisations evolving to increase focus on developing a culture of belonging, based on the intersectionality of its staff, clients, and the customers it serves.

Businesses need to continue to have open conversations, listen to employees and evolve their offering to meet the needs of today's workforce. Consideration around creating programs, benefits, and objectives that ensure teams are not only diverse in nature but also in thought. All leaders need to understand this – this will help them survive the storms, support teams, retain talent, and get the most productivity and innovation from their employees.

By Dylan Mann-Hazell

Microsoft

Olivia Tobin
She/Her
Business Programme Manager

Writers Profile

How Microsoft is striving for inclusivity in the workplace

Olivia Tobin was initially uncertain about her path into the corporate world. While she prioritised hands-on experience, she also wanted to attend university and continue her education. So, she sought an apprenticeship at Microsoft, ultimately landing in the Chartered Management Degree Apprenticeship program. Here, she pursued a degree in professional management, but that isn't all – Olivia remains passionate towards inspiring diversity and inclusion throughout the company and beyond.

From a young age, Olivia was aware of her attraction to women. While she recognised her feelings around the young age of eight, it wasn't something that she could openly discuss with her family. Although she knew gay family friends – including a godparent's sister who was lesbian – Olivia wrestled with her own sexuality. In secondary school, she was open about her sexuality at school, but not at home. When her mother found out about the girlfriend she had from ages 14 to 16, she was sadly not supportive, straining Olivia's relationship with her parents.

During her teenage years, Olivia faced societal pressures that led to suppressing her identity. She would insist she was straight and dated men until early adulthood. It was only then that Olivia began a period of rediscovery – questioning whether she might be bisexual. After moving to Reading for her Microsoft apprenticeship, she had many eye-opening experiences, including meeting new people who embraced their identities openly. Olivia would eventually realise that she found dating men to be unfulfilling and that she needed to embrace her lesbian identity. A loving result of this realisation is the rekindling of Olivia's relationship with her high school girlfriend, with the couple recently purchasing their first home together.

"I think I struggled a lot with internalised homophobia," Olivia reflects. "I didn't want to embrace it. Lots of people don't really like using the word lesbian, but I feel like I've really embraced that. I am a lesbian."

Reflecting on many standout moments in her career at Microsoft, Olivia recalls her first experience organising Pride – a memorable success. Olivia notes that this year was unique as previously there had been no dedicated event manager for GLEAM (Global LGBTQIA+ Employees and Allies at Microsoft), and the primary focus had been on marching in Pride in London. Upon taking over event organisation, Olivia and her team began highlighting multiple awareness days throughout the year, including a full range of activities for LGBT+ History Month. Her ambition upon entering the role was to openly support the community all year round. Olivia is proud to work towards this goal, and doesn't forget the many wonderful connections made among the community.

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“That is a big standout for me, just bringing people together. Whether it’s within my day job where I create and deliver partner events within Microsoft, or from GLEAM, where I’m bringing together our communities and forming those connections, that’s the highlight of it all.”

At Microsoft, diversity and inclusion (D&I) initiatives are now integrated into performance reviews, measuring involvement in employee resource groups and allyship. Olivia found it refreshing to join an organisation that values D&I so highly, while acknowledging the importance of personally addressing unconscious bias and the certain privileges she holds.

“We’ve been looking at the importance of intersectionality. There are active steps to make sure all people and all perspectives are heard.”

She praised Microsoft for genuinely aiming to create the most inclusive spaces possible. One example Olivia mentions is the support provided by executive sponsors, who have actively been involved in activations throughout the year. Since joining Microsoft, Olivia has observed a noticeable increase in vocal workplace allies. However, she believes there is a need to continue building on current efforts. She advocates for increased visibility and empowerment of leaders from minority communities, which is crucial in supporting minority groups to excel in their fields. In particular, Olivia insists on amplifying trans voices in both the workplace and the media. She reasserts that while the LGBTQIA community has come a long way, there is still more work to be done.

Another focus for Olivia is ongoing education throughout the workplace and beyond. She believes that people misunderstand the true nature of Pride, viewing it as merely an excuse to party rather than recognising its roots as a protest and a cause for change. Given the current media rhetoric surrounding the trans community, Olivia stresses the importance of protesting, promoting active acceptance, and spreading the correct information on these topics.

By Dylan Mann-Hazell

Profile
Article

Fabio Peyer
He/Him
Director, Marketing Indexes, Europe

Writers Profile

Morningstar's Fabio Peyer's journey from Swiss countryside to LGBTQ+ Index pioneer

In conversation with myGwork, Fabio Peyer, director of indexes marketing Europe at Morningstar, discussed the integral role he played in establishing the first LGBTQ+ Index. He explains the importance of this commitment, how they address the multiple dimensions of diversity, and what it means for the future of DEI at Morningstar and beyond.

Could you tell us about your background and career journey leading up to your current position at Morningstar?

My career has been shaped by my professional ambitions and personal commitment to advancing inclusivity, particularly within the financial services sector. I am originally from Switzerland, a country with deep roots in the financial services sector. I joined Morningstar in 2017 as Marketing Manager, responsible for the company's brand across the German, Swiss and Austrian markets. My hard work was recognised, leading to new opportunities including building the demand generation strategy for the business across the EMEA region. I also led and supported initiatives focused on building a more inclusive workforce. I was determined to excel in my career while driving positive change.

Tell us a bit about your childhood – where did you grow up; did you have any hobbies?

I grew up in the Swiss countryside with my mother and two younger brothers. I was a quiet child but always diligent, dreaming of becoming a teacher. Despite my dislike for football, my mother insisted I play, hoping I might become a famous footballer. Looking back, I can see that football taught me valuable lessons about teamwork and persistence. At school, I faced some bullying, and while I tried ignoring it, I can't hide the fact it hurt. However, I believe these experiences can make a person stronger.

Can you share your personal journey with the LGBTQ+ community?

Leaving home at 18 to move to a big Swiss city for my first job was a significant change. For the first time, I felt accepted for who I am. I made new friends who embraced my personality, and this newfound acceptance gave me the confidence to come out at work.

Relocating to London from Switzerland sometime later was a pivotal moment. The transition introduced me to a diverse and dynamic culture. Since then, I have been actively involved in various diversity, equity and inclusion programmes, including Global ERG lead for OUT@Morningstar, an initiative aimed at breaking down barriers and contributing to a culture where colleagues feel empowered to bring their authentic selves to work.

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While I have been fortunate to avoid discrimination at work, I recognise this isn't the case for everyone. I am proud to be part of our beautiful community, but I appreciate there is still much work to be done before everyone feels truly accepted.

What has been a standout moment in your career so far?

I believe this standout moment just happened. A year ago, when I began thinking about topics for my MBA thesis, I was keen to combine my passion for DEI with my role on the indexes team at Morningstar. Through extensive research on socially focused investment opportunities, I discovered a significant gap. While a few market indexes focus on aspects like gender equality and ethnicity, there wasn't a single index aligned with the values of the LGBTQ community. As I delved deeper into this topic, I developed strong arguments for why Morningstar should commit to building the first LGBTQ index.

The case was compelling; our community is no longer niche, especially with Gen-Z driving much of the change. Recent studies show that 16% of Gen-Z no longer identify as heterosexual, and 6% as not cis-gender. This growing community is also shifting financial assets toward the LGBTQ+ community, referred by some as 'pink-money'. When I presented the case to leadership, I received immediate commitment for Morningstar to build such an index. I am proud to say that it launched during Pride month this year: the Morningstar Developed Markets LGBTQ+ Leaders Index.

How does Morningstar strive for inclusivity and provide an open space for LGBTQ+ employees?

DEI is a key priority at Morningstar, and we recently demonstrated this commitment by hiring our first-ever Global Head of DEI. The LGBTQ+ community, along with all minority groups at Morningstar, is given a strong voice within the organisation. Out@Morningstar, the employee-resource-group for the LGBTQ+ community, is one of the most established and largest in the company.

Along with great leadership support and a powerful ERG leadership globally, we build powerful partnerships with organisations like myGwork, LGBT Great, and the Human Rights Campaign to expand our reach and strengthen the voice of our community.

Throughout your career, have you noticed any developments in attitudes towards the importance of diversity and inclusion?

Throughout my career, I've seen significant positive shifts in attitudes towards diversity and inclusion. Once treated as checkbox exercise, it is now recognised as both ethical standards and a driver of innovation. Morningstar's LGBTQ index is a perfect example of how D&I can inform a company's product strategy. Companies are increasingly addressing multiple dimensions of diversity, extending beyond just gender and ethnicity.

While progress varies across industries and challenges remain, I'm encouraged by more education, open dialogue and proactive leadership at all levels. The most notable change is the shift from viewing D&I as compliance issues to embracing them as core values that enhance our work and expand our market reach.

What immediate improvements would you like to see being made for LGBTQ+ equality in the future – both in the workplace, and wider society?

In the workplace, we need to move beyond surface-level inclusion efforts that can veer into pink-washing – the superficial support of LGBTQ+ rights. One goal of the Morningstar LGBTQ index is to identify and promote companies with truly inclusive cultures, encouraging them to advance their DEI efforts The index serves as a guide for companies on their equity journeys.

Comprehensive policies protecting LGBTQ+ employees are essential, including non-discrimination clauses, inclusive healthcare, and support for transitioning employees. Representation in leadership is also crucial for diverse perspectives in decision-making, enabling initiatives such as the Morningstar LGBTQ+ Index.

In society, the most pressing issue is the protection and advancement of transgender rights amid a concerning backlash and erosion of trans rights in many areas, such as access to healthcare. Stronger legal protections for trans individuals, better access to gender-affirming care, and education to combat misinformation and prejudice are vital.

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Addressing the intersectionality of LGBTQ+ issues with race, gender, class, and disability is crucial to ensuring progress benefits everyone, not just the privileged. It's important to consider the whole person not just single aspects of diversity.

Is there anything we haven't discussed already that you would like to include?

As I reflect on my journey, I am filled with a sense of purpose and hope for the future. The LGBTQ Index wasn't just a professional project; it was a personal mission. I envisioned a world where financial empowerment and our community's values could intertwine, and I'm truly grateful that Morningstar embraced this vision through my advocacy.

This index is more than just a benchmark; it's a tool that I believe will empower our community to make informed financial decisions that align with our principles. Our community, with its significant economic influence and growing visibility, deserves investment options that reflect our values.

I am proud to have played a part in making this a reality, but I know this is just the beginning. I hope it serves as a steppingstone toward a more inclusive financial future, and that through informed financial decisions, we can drive positive change – not just for our community, but for society.

By Dylan Mann-Hazell

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Sean Marion
He/Him
Managing Director
Writers Profile

Moody's executive Sean Marion on driving LGBTQ+ inclusivity in business

Sean Marion, managing director at Moody's, shares insights from his career journey and his commitment to inspiring a culture of inclusion at Moody's. With a rich background that began in international development and transitioned through various roles in economic and financial analysis, Sean has leveraged his diverse experiences to champion LGBTQ+ advocacy in the business landscape and beyond.

Tell us about your background and career journey leading up to your current position at Moody's?

Before Moody's, I started out my career in the international development field. First, working with a not-for-profit human rights organisation in Burkina Faso and then working on a United Nations economic development programme in Mali. These experiences were foundational in fueling a passion for social justice and building awareness of the need to support underprivileged communities.

Following a transition period, I worked as a country risk analyst for the Economist Intelligence Unit, covering West African economics and politics. At Moody's, where I have been for nearly two decades, the company's global reach has allowed me to work in Toronto, Mexico City and London, and cover a variety of market segments, ranging from dealing with governments in South America to banks in Africa to structured finance issuers in Europe.

Describe your childhood – where did you grow up; did you have any hobbies?

I grew up in a small town in Ontario (Canada). Very idyllic and peaceful. A lot of farms, orchards and near a lake. As a small child I played outside all the time and was a bit feral. At around 9 years old I started skateboarding and quickly became obsessed! My world became skateboarding, and I spent all my time searching out new urban landscapes. I was lucky to get sponsored for skateboarding when I was around 12 and visited a lot of different cities. Given that the prospect of falling on concrete is a bit too daunting at my age, I have since eased up on the skateboarding, but I am still an avid surfer.

Can you share your personal journey with the LGBTQ+ community?

My personal journey as an ally with the LGBTQ+ community really started at university when one of my best friends, who had always been out socially, came out to his very traditional family. This caused a damaging rupture with his family and accompanying him on this painful journey triggered an awareness of the hurt caused by a lack of acceptance.

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What has been a standout moment in your career so far?

Being recognised as a Top 50 Executive Ally by LGBT Great in 2023 was definitely a standout moment for me in my career. I felt a deep sense of pride to be recognised by LGBT Great in such way and to embody the progressive culture of acceptance and inclusion that defines Moody's.

How does Moody's strive for inclusivity and provide an open space for LGBTQ+ employees?

For Moody's creating an open space for LGBTQ+ employees is a business imperative. We understand that inclusion and diversity supports successful business outcomes and is ultimately a competitive advantage. There are a few ways in which Moody's does this. First, the voices of LGBTQ+ employees are given an organic platform to advocate, celebrate and engage via our regional Pride Business Resource Groups (BRGs). These are well-respected, dynamic and influential groups.

Second, the tone from the top of company matches this drive for inclusivity through both direct and indirect signaling. Three, a culture of inclusion and LGBTQ+ inclusion are ingrained at every stage of employee's lifecycle, from recruiting to onboarding to talent development, and we also take time to celebrate this culture.

Throughout your career, have you noticed any developments in attitudes towards the importance of diversity and inclusion?

Over the course of my career, I have definitely seen a shift towards the importance of diversity and inclusion as a competitive advantage. Within that context, Moody's stands out as a leader and the company's commitment is steadfast. Inclusion is a strategic orientation for Moody's and there is a concerted, authentic, effort to champion inclusive policies and behaviors in all aspects of how we do business.

What immediate improvements would you like to see being made for LGBTQ+ equality in the future – both in the workplace, and wider society?

In wider society, what concerns me the most is the weakening of civility and humanistic values in political discourse, coupled with the rise of discriminatory views vehemently voiced on social media platforms. These dynamics are insidious and coalesce to legitimize hate and ultimately facilitate the dismantling of rights already won.

The remedy is to ensure that the voices of the LGBTQ+ community are both heard and amplified. As part of this, boosting the voices of younger generations, such as Gen Z and Gen Alpha, which display an innate openness, is also a key.

By Dylan Mann-Hazell

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Profile
Article

Matthew E
He/Him
Cyber Security Software Engineer

Writers Profile

Raytheon engineer Matthew on embracing and creating queer spaces

Matthew E, software engineer at Raytheon, spoke to myGwork about the opportunities the company's ERG has granted him. From inspiring confidence in expanding his social circles to the wider LGBTQ+ community, to proudly empowering these voices throughout his leadership journey, he delves into his role as the group's figurehead.

Could you tell us a bit about yourself and your journey leading up to your current position at Raytheon UK?

I have had quite a strange working history. I've been a lifeguard since I was 16 and have been a water sports instructor in the US and Isle of Jersey helping get kids into water sports until I was about 20. I studied software engineering at university and thought I'd marry the two things I enjoy doing together – computer science and teaching children. I became a computer science teacher through Teach First, and during my training the opportunity came to join Raytheon UK's Cyber Team as a Software Engineer, and it was too good to turn down. I've been here for two years now, and I love it. I also became leader of the ERG (Employee Resource Group) shortly after joining around February 2023 which has become something I never thought I'd do but love that as well.

Can you share your personal journey with the LGBTQ+ community?

I have had a very relaxed journey with the LGBTQ+ community. I figured out I was gay whilst watching The Dark Knight Rises when I realised I wasn't looking at Anne Hathaway anymore, but rather Christian Bale and Joseph Gordon-Levitt. I didn't really have any internal struggle with it, more just 'okay, this is interesting'. I told my best friend's girlfriend first, weirdly, and then within two weeks my entire friendship circle knew. It took me a few more years to tell my family. Those two years were probably the hardest, having some people know but not everyone. I also always had a difficult relationship with being gay at work. In my first jobs, I never told a soul and hid it there too. When I worked in America, it was the first time I went in as openly gay from the start, which was a real turning point for me. From then on, I gained so much confidence to be who I am. Fast-forward to now and I literally represent LGBTQ+ employees at my work which is mad to think about!

What has been a standout moment in your career so far?

Without sounding cringey, it's being the lead of our ERG. When I started at Raytheon UK, I had no intention of doing anything like this, but an opportunity came up to be my office's representative for RTX PRIDE, and I thought why not?

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I never had as much interaction with the wider LGBTQ+ community before being the lead. I didn't have queer friends, I didn't go to the gay bars or queer spaces – not because I didn't want to but because I'd never had the confidence to. So, putting myself forward to be the office rep was me dipping my toe into the water, and at some point I must've tripped and fallen headfirst, because six months later I became lead. Now I am frequently in queer people spaces, and I love it.

Another major highlight was when I got to speak on a panel for myGwork's WorkPride conference where I got to address age bias in the workplace, getting to speak about it from the point of view of a young person who sometimes gets ignored as I'm only 24 and deemed to not have enough experience.

How does Raytheon UK strive for inclusivity and provide an open space for LGBTQ+ employees?

Raytheon UK is how I want all companies to be. They provide all their ERGs, not just the PRIDE one, with the space to do what they think is best for their employees. I've never been denied anything that I've requested the ERG to do, whether that be to host a day in an office to allow for all the members to be in one place, or go to a conference I think would be good for our members to attend. We've been nominated for ERG awards and Raytheon UK sponsor the PRIDE of Britain awards (LGBTQ+), specifically the Lifetime Achievement Award.

Raytheon UK has partnerships with both Stonewall and myGwork, enabling training and mentorship through these relationships. Recently as an ERG we conducted a policy review to see how inclusive they were to queer employees and anything we found we wanted to change, they were happy and willing to implement it. They really do want their employees to be happy and cared for at work no matter their background.

As the lead of Raytheon UK's LGBTQ+ network, how do you define effective leadership within an employee network?

My priority as lead is making everyone in my ERG feel as comfortable as possible. I really want a space where they can be their most authentic self. As any of the members will probably agree, our meetings are not business meetings; I turn up as myself and hold a culture of being and saying what you want. Besides finding any excuse to come to meetings in my PJs, the main things I strive to deliver as lead is support, empowerment and visibility. I want it to be a place for people to feel comfortable enough to come to with problems and get support for anything they may be struggling with in or outside of work, and I hope through my leadership they feel empowered to be themselves at work.

What immediate improvements would you like to see being made for LGBTQ+ equality in the future – both in the workplace, and wider society?

Progress is slowly going backwards. This ongoing war on the trans community by the media and politicians of all sides is an uncomfortable feeling. I recently found out about the 'LGB' movement, and it really upset me, the idea that part of our community has been manipulated into separating themselves is just sad. It all ties in with the idea that as governments and the media attack trans people, they become the target. These people are probably scared themselves, but nothing has ever happened from people not supporting each other. I want to see the reunification of our community and to protest and fight for our rights. It's what Pride has always been about.

By Dylan Mann-Hazell

Richard Jefferies
He/Him
Senior Director

Writers Profile

Fitch Group's Richard Jefferies on championing LGBTQ+ inclusion in the workplace

Classmates and colleagues taught Richard Jefferies a lot about empathy, and what it means to be an ally of action. As the emeritus global co-chair of the Fitch Pride Network at the Fitch Group, Richard believes relationships throughout his life have moved him to champion a more supportive environment for LGBTQ+ employees in the workplace.
Growing up, Richard had a close friend from boarding school who was bullied for being gay. Witnessing homophobic bullying, along with the openness of his parents (who were in a creative industry with many openly gay people), planted the seeds for the work Richard would spearhead later in his professional life.

Throughout his career, Richard encountered LGBTQ+ colleagues who felt the need to hide their identities. "One of my former managers was gay. He never really came out or talked about it during my time there; he hid this entire part of his life. It must have been exhausting and it wasn't even that long ago." Richard never wanted these kinds of experiences for anyone, making it his personal mission to facilitate more inclusive workplaces. So, when the opportunity arose to join Fitch's Pride network, he jumped at the chance.

With an impressive background spanning technology, finance, and consulting, Richard's unique skillset has proven invaluable in his work with Fitch Group, a leading, global financial information services provider focused on creating more efficient, transparent financial markets.

Originally a member of the network, Richard's involvement quickly evolved. He soon found himself offered the role of EMEA Chair of the Fitch Pride Network. As someone who doesn't identify as LGBTQ+, Richard was initially hesitant, worried that taking such a role would mean talking over voices within the community. Upon reassurance from his LGBTQ+ colleagues, who expressed confidence in his ability to stand for and represent the community, he proudly took on the task.

Under Richard's leadership, the Fitch Pride Network has achieved remarkable success. In 2021, the team's Stonewall submission earned them a silver award. In 2023, Fitch was awarded gold – a testament to the hard work and dedication of the network. "I was just hoping to get something, anything," Richard remembers. "Then we got that silver award in 2021, and the gold for 2023, and it was all so amazing."

Richard's impact extends beyond the walls of Fitch Group. He recounts a poignant moment during a trip to their Tokyo office, where he witnessed the tangible impact of the Fitch Pride Network's efforts.

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“I was in the Tokyo office last year, and we were about to run a roundtable with a number of investors who came in, and then somebody walked in wearing one of our Pride lanyards. Nine months ago, I was sitting at my desk working out how many of these we needed to order, how many to put in the Tokyo box, and then I saw someone wearing it. It seems like such a small, simple thing, but in reality, it’s such a visible way to signal to everyone that we are a place that welcomes people. We are a place that accepts people for who they are.”

While Richard acknowledges the progression being made, he also recognises the long path to equality ahead, particularly in countries with more restrictive anti-LGBTQ+ laws and attitudes. This awareness has shaped Richard’s approach to the Fitch Pride Network, placing a strong emphasis on continuous education and open conversation. He has facilitated honest dialogues within the network, allowing members to both share their stories and ask the tough questions. This openness has brought about a deeper understanding among Fitch employees and serves as a powerful tool for Richard’s personal growth.

As Richard looks to the future, he remains steadfast in his commitment to driving positive change. He believes that sometimes the “little things can make the biggest difference”, such as simply using someone’s correct pronouns or creating a safe space for LGBTQ+ employees to be themselves.

He urges fellow LGBTQ+ allies to be vocal in their support, and to provide an environment built on understanding. It’s this attention to the small but impactful gestures that has earned Richard’s efforts the recognition of Stonewall, the respect and admiration of his colleagues, and the rightful label of an authentic ally to the LGBTQ+ community.

By Dylan Mann-Hazell

Tashan Nicholas
He/They
Life & Leadership Coach/ DEI Advocate

Writers Profile

Meet & Greet: RELYTE's D&I Advocate Tashan Nicholas

myGwork's rainbow role model Tashan Nicholas shares why he is on a mission to empower and enable underserved professionals and communities through his coaching and D&I business RELYTE.

myGwork: Can you tell us a bit about your career journey to date?

Tashan: I kind of landed in the world of working. I graduated with a degree in Economics and had been on a path that was chosen for me. So, I focused numbers and data and so found a relatively numeric job that wasn't in finance. I started out as an econometrician at a global media agency. It was okay… the place and people were awesome, but I just wasn't my most awesome self. I've always prided myself in my ability to connect with others. So I felt flat as most of my time was spent on spreadsheets (no shade, I LOVE excel, trust me), but I wanted to spend more time with people too. I didn't realize this at the time and coupled that with what was crippling self-doubt, I got a job in the same thing somewhere else. I gradually got more confidence and realized where my strengths were, and I was able to shape my career based on that rather than my weaknesses. So I continued in the world of analytics, marketing effectiveness and modelling.

I think the murder of George Floyd was a turning point for the world. It was instrumental to who I am today, as I pivoted during the pandemic. I started engaging in D&I practices at my workplace and also did my diploma in life and performance coaching. That's where my mindset shifted. I would argue the decision to do my coaching qualification may have been the first decision I had ever made that wasn't set out for me. I also got one of current roles at the7stars as an analytics director, focusing on my unique skills as a storytelling and people-centered analyst. I also built up the courage to start my business RELYTE. I now find myself blending all walks of life where in a single week I can find myself conducting statistical modeling, talking about marketing effectiveness, coaching one on one, leading talks on allyship, co-facilitating leadership workshops and anything else that comes up in the mix.

myGwork: Why did you choose to set up your coaching and D&I business?

Tashan: I had spent so much time just existing and being unconfident in my formative and early years. When I first started working is when I became conscious of my other and my confidence dropped. I hadn't realized that I spent so much time modeling what good looked like; which was easy growing up in multicultural London, where in school, good looked like me doing well. But in the workplace, there weren't loads of people like me – being both Black and Queer is amazing, which also makes you a unicorn.

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I didn't know what it meant to create your own blueprint at the time I had never seen that script. I think being the first in my immediate family to go to university meant there weren't loads of examples of "This is what I did when...". This is not to say I lacked, more that I needed to create something brand new, but didn't know how. As my work life continued, I started to build up my understanding of how to do this, and my coaching training accelerated this. I finally felt that I had not only the language but the skills and tools to advocate for myself and create and enable my vision. The magic was that I was learning how to do this for others and doing it for myself.

Also with my immersion into the D&I space, I noticed that some of the feelings I was feeling in my early career, were not unique to me. It is clear to me there is underinvestment in diverse and underrepresented communities and professionals. But now that I have the skills, I'm on a mission to empower and enable underserved professionals and communities because I can't ignore the disparity. Also because I care and I've been gifted ith wthese strengths and learnt these skills and tools for a reason.

myGwork: What services/areas does your new business focus on?

Tashan: At the heart of my business is the desire to enable and empower underserved leaders and this is achieved in three ways: Powerful and transformational conversations with leaders; equipping them with the knowledge to advocate for themselves democratizing access to leadership and DEI expertise; and lastly working with companies to understand how to create inclusive leadership.

Our first priority at RELYTE is the underserved professional or community themselves and so the solutions seek to enable them and then enable their companies to create environments where they can thrive too.

myGwork: Why is having access to tools and coaching so important as you climb up the career ladder, and why is it especially significant for the LGBTQ+ community?

Tashan: I think there are two forces; helping yourself and help from others. I genuinely believe that each human is their best resource and that when we can access our most resourceful self when we can solve all of our problems. This is not to say we will do this alone, just that that journey must start with self-inquiry.

I think this is especially important for the LGBTQ+ community where lack of representation, lack on investment and competition for our mental resources in the wider world can rob us of this opportunity to reflect on how can I grow? How can I grow in accordance with my values?

When we think of how intersectional our community is there is another layer of how much we area carrying on our backs. With the appropriate tools and incisive techniques we can take back control of our progress and time.

myGwork: Why is diversity and inclusion so important right now and what can business leaders do to support this in the workplace?

Tashan: I think the cat is fully out the bag now. We cannot continue to treat people unfairly. There's a lot of power in people, and we know how amazing networks such as myGwork can provide networks and resources. I think we live in an age of "mass-minority" – where through the ability to connect in networks we can understand the patterns of minoritized experiences. With this, we can see more clearly what is systemic and structural, and what is personal. I don't think a workplace can be sustainable without a deep understanding of their diverse workforces and that D&I knowledge is a business essential now. With that said, I don't know how common the knowledge is, however I do see a lot of appetite to learn and grow.

I believe it starts with conversations with your communities. Business leaders must start open-ended communications with their employees about what their workplace needs are. This must be done in a safe way. You must be able to cut this insight by diverse identities. With that data comes time for commitment and goals. What does the roadmap look like with five or ten years of D&I commitment? What knowledge do you need gain? What data do you have on diverse communities and how can this be sense checked for equity? This is the work. Just like with any job, the beauty is it's ever evolving and changing.

myGwork: How do you encourage people to choose what they want to do, especially in an age of telling and not asking?

Tashan: We have to be having a conversation with ourselves around what our dreams are. What are our values and how is this showing up in my life (or not)?

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When we realize the gap between where want to be and where we are, we can change it. It all starts with a conversation though; with yourself, a coach, a mentor, a boss, a friend, a family member etc. It's important, however, that the right questions are being asked and that we begin practices that build up our ability to advocate for ourselves.

myGwork: What was the last book you read? Any interesting take-aways?

Tashan: I'm an audio book kind of person and a recent one I listened to was The Courage to BE Disliked. There is so much to unpack here, but essentially it presents a refreshing perspective on psychology inspired by Adler. The author opened my mind up to think about my past in a different way – a way that allows you to disconnect from perhaps the harmful aspect of being attached to it and reconnect to the present in a way that is helpful for progress and change. I really enjoyed it.

myGwork: What was your last holiday destination and where do you plan to visit next?

Tashan: Costa Rica, it was awesome and I had never travelled that far before. I want to be in nature again with some sun.

myGwork: What do you do to relax at the end of a hard-working day?

Tashan: I am a TV queen and hobbyist and so streaming whatever takes me that evening or writing a poem. I LOVE creativity and so to relax I love consuming and creating creative things.

By Pepi Sappal

Profile
Article
Profile
Article

sanofi

Christelle Foucault
She/Her
External Engagement director

Yann-Joël Beyer
He/Him
Global Medical Buyer

Writers Profile

Sanofi's partnership with Paris 2024 goes beyond sports and corporate visibility—it signals a commitment to diversity and inclusion

In the wake of the remarkable Paris 2024 Olympic and Paralympic Games, one of the triumphs was the impactful involvement of partners such as Sanofi. As a prominent global healthcare leader, Sanofi showcased its dedication to diversity, inclusion, and community throughout this monumental event.

In this insightful Q&A, ***myGwork*** speaks with Christelle Foucault, Diversity External Engagement Director, Corporate Public Affairs, and Yann-Joël Beyer, Global Medical Buyer & Pride+ France ERG Leader, from Sanofi to reflect on the company's significant role during the Games.

Congratulations on being a premium partner of Paris 2024! Can you tell us about Sanofi's role and involvement in the Olympics and Paralympics this summer?

Sanofi's partnership with Paris 2024 has involved more than 8,000 Sanofians (~10% of our organisation): 2,024 volunteers (1,012 for Olympics and 1,012 for Paralympics), 300 torch bearers, 80 marathonists, 2,800 Igniters … All these Sanofians were invited to Paris and came from over 60 countries, with a gender balanced and a representativeness in terms of generations, levels, sites, etc.

In addition, two years ago we selected exceptional athletes, coaches, or ambassadors to be part of the "Team Sanofi". We selected them based on their commitment to society, including their commitment to LGBTQIA topics for two of them: Amandine Buchard (France, judo) and Lauren Rowles (UK, para rowing).

Athletes and coaches represented 14 people, seven countries and 10 sports: judo, gymnastics, wheelchair basketball, swimming, athletics, rowing, tennis, basketball, football and breakdance, one of the new disciplines at the Paris 2024 Games, half of them being athletes with a disability. Finally, 10 of them qualified for the Olympics or Paralympics.

Sanofi also partnered with the Pride House Paris 2024, in alignment with our Diversity, Equity & Inclusion values and commitments.

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What specific goals did you aim to achieve through your involvement with the Paris 2024 Olympics?

The Paris 2024 Olympic and Paralympic Games weren't just about sport: they were also about courage, resilience, teamwork and making an impact in the world. Leveraging sport and the momentum from the Paris 2024 Games, we wanted to show that we have the ability to make science more inclusive, available, and meaningful to all, building a true legacy in line with our purpose.

In alignment with the Olympic spirit, Sanofi's motto, "Never Settle," encourages employees to continuously strive for improvement, never becoming complacent. This mindset is crucial in a world of rapid change, particularly in the pharmaceutical industry, where innovation and progress are key. By leveraging its Olympic partnership, Sanofi is sending a strong message to its employees: always aim higher, push boundaries, and keep evolving.

Through this partnership, Sanofi demonstrates its belief that success is not just about reaching the finish line but about the journey and the drive to be better every day. By adopting this "Never Settle" attitude, Sanofi hopes to inspire its teams to consistently seek innovation, both in their work and personal lives.

How does this partnership align with Sanofi's values regarding diversity and inclusion, particularly in relation to the athletes and communities represented at Paris 2024?

Beyond performance and ambition, the Paris 2024 Olympics embody values of unity, inclusion, and diversity, all of which resonate strongly with Sanofi's corporate ethos. As part of its Olympic engagement, Sanofi is committed to fostering a more inclusive workplace, where diverse talents can thrive and contribute to a shared vision of excellence: by selecting athletes from different backgrounds, abilities, and experiences, Sanofi underscores its belief that diversity fuels innovation and success. This approach not only mirrors the diverse nature of the communities Sanofi serves worldwide but also promotes an environment where different perspectives are valued and celebrated.

Furthermore, by encouraging employees to take part in activities related to the Games, from local sports initiatives to international collaborations, Sanofi hopes to create a sense of belonging and pride. The Olympic values of respect, excellence, and friendship align perfectly with the company's aim of nurturing a positive, supportive environment where everyone feels empowered to contribute and succeed.

How does the Olympic partnership resonate with you personally? Do you feel a sense of pride in your company's involvement in such a significant global event?

Yann-Joël : As a passionate rugby and martial arts enthusiast, I've always been drawn to sports that embody teamwork, discipline, and resilience. These values resonate with me not only in my personal life but also in my professional one. That's why the partnership between Sanofi and the Paris 2024 Olympic & Paralympic Games has made me incredibly proud to work for this company. I am even prouder that Sanofi has chosen to support openly LGBTQIA athletes and promote an inclusive environment through its backing of Pride House, a safe and visible space for the LGBTQIA community during the Games. This initiative demonstrates Sanofi's dedication to diversity, equality, and respect—values that I hold close to my heart, both as a sports fan and as an employee. Knowing that the company I work for stands firmly behind such initiatives fills me with immense pride and a renewed sense of purpose.

I can also confirm that this sentiment of pride is shared not just by my French colleagues, but by Sanofi employees around the world. There's a particularly strong connection for those who have had the opportunity to actively contribute to this partnership, such as the dedicated volunteers.

Can you talk about the role Sanofi had in supporting Pride House earlier this summer, and the main objectives of this initiative?

As part of Sanofi's commitments to DE&I, particularly for LGBTQIA people in the company, it seemed natural to support the Pride House organisation, which aims to raise awareness, educate, and make visible the diversity of emotional orientations and gender identities for athletes, but also for the general public. Pride House is also about providing a safe space for athletes from countries that discriminate against members of the LGBTQIA community.

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By supporting financially FIER-PLAY, the organisers of the Pride House in Paris, we provided sufficient resources for them to run their program through the entire time of the Olympics and Paralympics: offering exhibitions, concerts, a safe fan-zone showcasing out athletes whatever their identity and nationality, holding booths in different spots around Paris, organising inclusive sport demonstrations, etc.

We offered also to our employees the opportunity to be a volunteer at the Pride House during the Olympics and Paralympics. And finally, we invited our Pride+ members and allies to come to the Pride House for a celebration of inclusion on the barge "Le Rosa Bonheur sur Seine", which was the main venue of this Paris 2024 Pride House during the Olympics.

In your opinion, how important is it for companies like Sanofi to support initiatives like Pride House, which promote inclusivity and safe spaces for the LGBTQIA community?

Supporting initiatives like Pride House is crucial for Sanofi as it aligns with the company's commitment to inclusivity, diversity, and social responsibility. Pride House provides a safe space for the LGBTQIA community, fostering acceptance and understanding, values that are core to Sanofi's mission of improving health and well-being for all individuals. By championing such initiatives, Sanofi helps promote equality and combat discrimination, both within the company and in the wider society. This not only enhances employee morale and inclusiveness but also strengthens Sanofi's reputation as a leader in corporate responsibility and human rights advocacy.

What are your hopes for Sanofi's ongoing commitment to LGBTQIA initiatives beyond the support of Pride House?

At Sanofi, I hope that our engagement with the LGBTQIA community, exemplified through our support of the Pride House, will extend further, and deepen over time. Beyond this visible show of support, I look forward to seeing a sustained commitment to our LGBTQIA patients and employees, ensuring that diversity, inclusivity, and equity are at the heart of everything we do.

Moreover, this dedication should also encompass our suppliers and business partners. By fostering an environment where all stakeholders are respected, regardless of their gender identity or affective/sexual orientation, we can set a positive example across the industry.

I also believe there is great potential for Sanofi to collaborate with intersectional LGBTQIA associations that address the specific needs of diverse groups within the community. These could include partnerships with organisations supporting LGBTQIA youth, seniors, people of colour, or those living with disabilities. Such efforts would not only reinforce Sanofi's commitment to equality but also help address the unique challenges faced by many marginalised individuals within the LGBTQIA community.

Together, these actions will ensure that Sanofi remains a true ally, championing the rights and well-being of all members of the LGBTQIA community.

The Paris 2024 partnership has already contributed to a long-term legacy for Sanofi. What lasting impact do you hope it will have on the company overall?

Sanofi's partnership with Paris 2024 goes beyond sports and corporate visibility—it signals a commitment to diversity and inclusion, particularly for the LGBTQIA community.

One key highlight of this collaboration was a recent event at the Pride House, which hosted 150 attendees, including numerous allies and two members of Sanofi's Executive Committee. This significant turnout underscores the company's active engagement in fostering an inclusive environment within and beyond its walls.

By supporting such initiatives, Sanofi is helping to break barriers and promote acceptance, not only during the Olympic Games but also for the long term. The presence of high-level executives at the Pride House demonstrates that this commitment comes from the top, reinforcing the importance of LGBT+ inclusion in the corporate culture.

This partnership, amplified by the visibility of Paris 2024, sends a strong message: inclusivity is a key value for Sanofi, and they are determined to lead by example. Such actions will likely inspire other organisations to embrace diversity, potentially influencing policies and societal attitudes on a larger scale, thus leaving a lasting impact on the LGBTQIA community.

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Is there anything else you would like to add?

The Paris 2024 Olympics set a historic record for LGBTQIA representation, with 199 openly LGBTQIA athletes participating; as a comparison, only 23 openly gay and lesbian athletes competed at 2012 London Summer Olympics. These athletes performed exceptionally well, winning enough medals to place them sixth in the overall ranking if they were counted as a nation. This significant visibility is something that Sanofi hopes will continue in the future. In fact, Sanofi is already looking ahead and exploring a potential partnership with Eurogames Lyon 2025, a major LGBTQIA sporting event, to further support inclusion and diversity in sports. I also hope that Sanofi will renew this partnership for Los Angeles 2028 Summer Games!

By Dylan Mann-Hazell

avanade

Fredrick Douglas Williams
He/Him
UX Design

Writers Profile

Avanade's Fredrick Douglas William on authenticity and inclusion in the workplace

Fredrick Douglas Williams' personal and professional journey is one of resilience, boldness, and pride. From an early career spent feeling out of place and in the way, to finding an environment where he could freely express his authentic self, Fredrick describes how Avanade has inclusivity "baked into the culture".

Fredrick grew up in a small town in North Carolina in a family of five: his mother, father, and two brothers, one of whom is his twin. With a childhood marked by a strong inclination towards creative pursuits, Fredrick often drew comic books and played within his own imagination. As he got older, he proudly continued that creative streak through participation in a marching band, where he enjoyed playing instruments and bonding with friends.

"I didn't know how flamboyant I was until the world pointed it out. They told me about the colours of my hues, before I even dared to name it."

From an early age, Fredrick expressed a powerfully feminine and extravagant personality. Though he was not fully aware of these traits until others mentioned them. At the age of 13, Fredrick's life took a pivotal turn when he realised he was gay. "I just knew early on of how the world worked," he reflects, "I knew that I had to figure out a way to create connections, because I knew that I was different." This realisation sparked the lifelong navigation of self-acceptance and societal perceptions. Fredrick's journey aligned with the discovery of a small community of older LGBTQ+ folk who embraced him and offered guidance. It was within this supportive environment that Fredrick first felt the warmth of belonging and the empowerment that can hold. As a result, he embodied his identity as an openly gay teenager, even making bold fashion choices influenced by pop culture icons such as TLC and Dennis Rodman.

Despite the pride he took in his identity, Fredrick acknowledged a painful journey throughout his personal and professional life. His career has spanned diverse industries, from sales and marketing to hospitality. However, his LGBTQ+ identity has not always been welcomed with open arms in these spaces.

"I've been at companies before where the diversity handbook had to be rewritten just to fit me into the culture," Fredrick shares, "And I've been at companies where I am supposed to be the one that is supposed to find a way to find a way to carve a lane for myself."

The burden of constantly needing to adapt his authentic self to fit in took a toll, leading to experiences of harassment, objectification, and even job loss.

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“Tough times don’t last forever, but tough people do,” he pushes on, reflecting the mantra that has guided him through difficult moments. It is this perseverance that ultimately led him to Avanade, a company that accepted and encouraged his complete, uncompromised self.

“Avanade is the first place that I’ve ever worked that I’ve had the opportunity to come to work fully expressed,” Fredrick shares, his voice brimming with gratitude. The IT consulting company’s inclusive culture, employee networks, and recognition of Fredrick’s contributions as a community builder have provided him with a sense of belonging that was once impossible.

As Fredrick looks to the future, his vision extends beyond his own personal journey. He desires a coming together of generations within the LGBTQ+ community, where the experiences of elders can be shared with the younger generation, paving the way for a more inclusive path forward. Just as he looked to older generations as a gay teenager, Fredrick hopes to be that same role model for LGBTQ+ youth.

“I would like to see the merging of more of the generations of LGBTQ+ people, because I want to see us fly and then reach back and lift others in that process,” Fredrick explains. He firmly believes this intergenerational exchange, along with consistent education and prominent allyship, can bring about positive, effective change. Fredrick ends our interview with an urge to LGBTQ+ allies. He asks them to listen carefully to the LGBTQ+ community, to empathise with the courage it takes to live authentically, and to make those initial coming out experiences as positive as possible.

“If you’re ever on the receiving end of hearing someone’s journey, about the way in which they access their sexuality, listen to it and be open minded,” Fredrick implores. “It takes a lot of boldness and fear to do that. Those first initial conversations, the way that you respond to it as the listener can make or break what that person feels for the rest of their life, until they find the next positive experience. It’s all about being positive.”

By Dylan Mann-Hazell

Andreas Oberholzer
He/Him
Consultant

Writers Profile

Accenture's Andreas Oberholzer on being consultant by day, drag queen Betty Business by night

Andreas Oberholzer is not one to let society define him. Instead, he forges his own path. He works as a marketing consultant at Accenture while also being a firm advocate for the LGBTIQ+ community. While some individuals prefer to keep their professional lives separate from their personal passions, he has made it his advocacy to harmoniously blend both aspects. Thus "Betty Business" was born – a drag queen on a mission to bring laughter to the community and inclusivity to the corporate landscape. His journey from a small Swiss town to the corporate corridors of Accenture is one guided by self-confidence and a testament to the power of living authentically.

Growing up in a small rural village in Switzerland posed difficulties for him, and it took him a while to learn to accept himself as he did not have any role models to look up to. Seeking validation and support, he turned to a peer-to-peer coaching platform, where he for the first time was able to get answers to his burning questions. "Exchanging with someone my age who is also gay and learning about his coming-out experience was very reassuring. It helped me accept my own identity and become confident in it. I came out soon after the exchange." he shares. This experience soon later ignited his passion for helping others navigate their identities.

While studying at the University of St. Gallen (HSG), Andreas developed a strong commitment to LGBTIQ+ advocacy. Andreas founded the "Pride Month @HSG" initiative on campus, focused on raising awareness and encouraging open dialogue about LGBTIQ+ inclusion among students, staff and in the city of St. Gallen. He remembers: "The morning started with the local radio station covering the start of Pride Month. It feels so rewarding to have established an annual queer tradition at this rather traditional business school." Andreas' success further fueled his passion for positive change. This was only the beginning of his efforts in forging his own path.

While completing his studies in business administration and innovation, Andreas found himself in various marketing roles. However, rather than pursuing the traditional agency route he felt a strong inclination toward consulting for marketing departments. Despite initial insecurities stemming from his perception of the industry as a heteronormative culture, Andreas persevered and found kinship. "Through recruiting events, and especially one LGBTIQ+ focused event, I met several people from Accenture, and I could really see myself among them." Andreas believes that workplaces can and should embrace people bringing their full self to work. "My friend told me about Accenture's inclusive work environment. I got curious and did some research and found out about their great programs for inclusion and diversity. They are even top ranked in LGBTIQ+ metrics. Learning all this made me want to join the company."

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Upon his first year at Accenture, he became involved with the LGBTIQ+ Employee Resource Group (ERG). “One of my first steps in the first weeks in the company was to contact our Accenture Switzerland LGBTIQ+ ERG leaders to ask how I could support them,” Andreas explains. Andreas emphasises the importance of allies in promoting LGBTIQ+ equality. He calls on allies to speak up against discrimination, stating, ” when LGBTIQ+ people are physically or verbally attacked, I count on allies to oppose.” He shares that he confidently attended the company’s Christmas party in drag without worrying about his colleagues’ reactions and expresses, “It feels amazing to be in an environment where you feel completely accepted and supported for who you are.” His goal is a world where acceptance and respect are the norm, not the exception. He emphasises, “I want more kindness in society.” Now co-leading the LGBTIQ+ Employee Network in Accenture Switzerland, his main objective is to establish inclusive environments and programs that empower fellow employees.

In his ongoing mission to make the world a kinder place, he also pursues another endeavor where he blends the typically reserved corporate environment with the vibrant world of drag through his alter ego, Betty Business. His drag performances challenge traditionality, bringing creative expression into the everyday work landscape. He believes that “Drag can serve as a powerful tool to challenge conventional notions of professionalism and promote a more diverse and inclusive work environment.” and encourages us all to question established conventions. As Betty Business he shares his vision to encourage more people and companies to infuse more “pink and glitter,” in their workplaces metaphorically representing inclusivity, diversity, being human and having fun. “Employers should be invested in fostering an inclusive workplace that embraces everyone the way they are,” he asserts. “In times of generative AI, being super polished, adapted, and reserved is something that machines will excel at. What will differentiate us from AI is our authentic human personality.” Andreas believes that companies that embrace such values will not only enhance employee satisfaction but also improve performance.

Despite Accenture’s supportive LGBTIQ+ inclusion programs, Andreas understands the need for continued progress in broader societal contexts. “While some years ago, I had the perception that it’s more and more the norm to accept LGBTIQ+ people, I now feel that it’s again becoming okay to be openly against LGBTIQ+ people.” His concern is palpable, particularly considering rising anti-queer sentiment in the media and violence against community members.

At the heart of Andreas’s advocacy is a desire for understanding within the community and beyond. “There is an infinite number of identities, orientations, beliefs, values,” he explains. “What is important for me is that people become open and curious to learn more.”

Follow Betty Business on Instagram @betty.business.ooo

By Dylan Mann-Hazell

Profile

Article

Yasmin Benoit
She/Her
Model, Activist, Writer

Writers Profile

Meet and greet: Yasmin Benoit, model and award-winning asexual activist

Can you share a little about yourself? Why did you want to be a writer, model, activist and speaker?

I started my career as a model because I wanted to increase diversity in that area and provide representation for Black women with alternative styles. The first topic I wrote about was my experiences as an alternative Black woman in the industry, but I noticed a lack of asexual representation the more time I spent on social media. That was when I decided to use my platform to raise awareness about asexuality and also aromanticism. Things snowballed from there, and I've had the opportunity to speak at incredible institutions, write for amazing publications, appear in documentaries and magazines like Vogue and Cosmopolitan, and speak at a range of different corporations, events and conferences – even at TEDx.

What are your topics of interest as a writer? Do you have a particular niche?

I largely write about asexuality and aromanticism, interweaving discussions about Blackness, feminism and injustice from my own perspective. So I go into compulsory sexuality, the concept of romance and amatonormativity, racism, public image and hypersexualisation in context to my experiences - and other aces' experiences. I cover it because not a lot of people are. It's true to my own experience, and it's a deep area with so much to discuss.

On what type of social problems do you write/speak about? Why do you think these problems exist?

My work concerns asexuality and aromanticism, as I've already mentioned. I aim to raise awareness around those orientations and issues facing those communities. These issues largely come from the way we're taught to conceptualise 'normal' sexuality and romantic relationships, which lead to a hierarchal structure, a lack of awareness and also the stigmatisation of asexual and aromantic people.

How important is LGBTQ+ inclusion in the workplace for you personally?

I don't have a fixed workplace, so it doesn't make an impact on my work experiences personally. But I know that it makes a big difference for many others who spend a large amount of their time in the workplace, particularly members of my community. So it impacts me in that sense, and I do whatever I can to make workplaces inclusive environments, especially for asexual people who are less likely than other orientations to be out in the workplace.

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myGwork: What's the biggest highlight of your career to date and why?

Yasmin: Launching the UK's first asexual rights initiative was my biggest career highlight. I've teamed up with Stonewall to produce a report on asexual discrimination in the UK, which will be used to inform legislation, policy-makers, organisations, businesses and charities on how to better support asexual people.

myGwork: What was the last book you read? Any interesting take-aways and would you recommend it to fellow leaders?

Yasmin: The last book I read was Catch-22 by Joseph Heller. I have a preference for more classic literature and historical fiction. Everything I read is either set almost a hundred years ago or was written around a hundred years ago! This one was quite a challenging read because I don't usually read books that are so non-linear, but I'm glad I stuck it out because it was worth it in the end.

I wouldn't just recommend it because it's a still-relevant classic, but also because Heller really found a way to communicate absurdity and a dark subject matter in a character-centred, humorous and almost surreal way. It's a great example of how you can get creative when communicating a serious narrative and use humour to emphasise the ridiculousness of certain aspects, which can actually make them easier to empathise with.

What was your last holiday destination, and where do you plan to visit next?

My last holiday destination was Rasnov in Romania for a Christening, with a few stops to Brasov to go skiing and to speak at a university, and Bucharest for some sightseeing. It was my first trip since the pandemic started and my second time there. It's one of my favourite places to visit. I love the atmosphere in Romania. The hospitable people and the food is incredible. I have recently, returned from Serbia, as I was invited to speak at International Human Rights Conference in Belgrade.

What do you do to relax at the end of a hard-working day?

The most relaxing thing for me is some escapism. If I want the more thoughtful type of escapism, I'll probably read another historical book and become someone in a completely different era, living a completely different life. If I want the brainless, entertaining type of escapism, I'm probably playing Sims 4... and I've racked up a lot of hours playing that game!

By Pepi Sappal

Profile

Article

Fernando Apeztegiua
He/Him
CEO

Writers Profile

NTT Data's Fernando Apeztegiua on two decades of growth and LGBTQ+ inclusion

For many, the idea of staying with the same company for over two decades may seem daunting, but thanks to the ongoing inclusive culture and varying opportunities at NTT Data, Fernando Apezteguia values the experience. With a career path that has taken him around the world, from Spain to Brazil and now the UK, he currently serves as the head of business development for NTT Data in the UK&I, France and Benelux.

As he looks back upon his career to date, Fernando explains how it has been a journey of perseverance and adaptability. "It's been an adventure. An adventure of growth, of ambition, of learning, of growing along with the clients, of risks, of achievement, success, and fear at the same time," he reflects. After an unfulfilling stint in the consumer banking sector, Fernando found his calling at a small consulting startup in Spain – a business that would grow to become part of the renowned NTT Data.

The company's startup mentality has been a driving force for Fernando, who has embraced a diverse range of roles and responsibilities over his 24 years with NTT Data. "Every three, four years, in general, you are faced with a new challenge. And it's like changing companies within the same company," he explains.

Fernando's international experience has been a significant part of his journey, as he has lived and worked in various countries, including setting up local operations for clients in Latin America. His most recent move to the UK was driven by the company's desire to integrate two entities within the UK and Ireland, a challenge Fernando was well-equipped to handle.

Fernando's personal journey has also been marked by his identity as a gay man, a journey he has navigated with openness and authenticity. Growing up in a conservative and religious family in Northern Spain, Fernando found solace in his exposure to the LGBTQ+ community during several summer trips to San Francisco in the 1980s.
"It opened up my mind. So that helped me a lot in understanding who I was and trying to understand what kind of abnormality I would like to have in my life, but also in society as a whole," he reflects.

Remarkably, in his 24 years at the company, Fernando's experience of inclusivity at NTT Data has been nothing short of perfect. "I've never had an issue. I've never heard a negative comment. It's true that sometimes in meetings with other people outside of the company, sometimes I hear some comments, but within the company, I have always felt respected and supported."

This ongoing sense of inclusion has inspired Fernando to become more proactive in the LGBTQ+ community in recent years, recognising the impact of his visibility. "Somebody once came and told me, 'Thank you for being an example,' because I never hid that I am gay. And that drew me to be more proactive in the LGBTQ+ community.

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Since then, Fernando has been instrumental in championing diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts at NTT Data. The company's approach to these initiatives sets it apart, with the Head of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion being a member of the leadership team. "We think that we need to have inclusion and diversity in all of our processes across he company, in all of our decisions," Fernando explains.

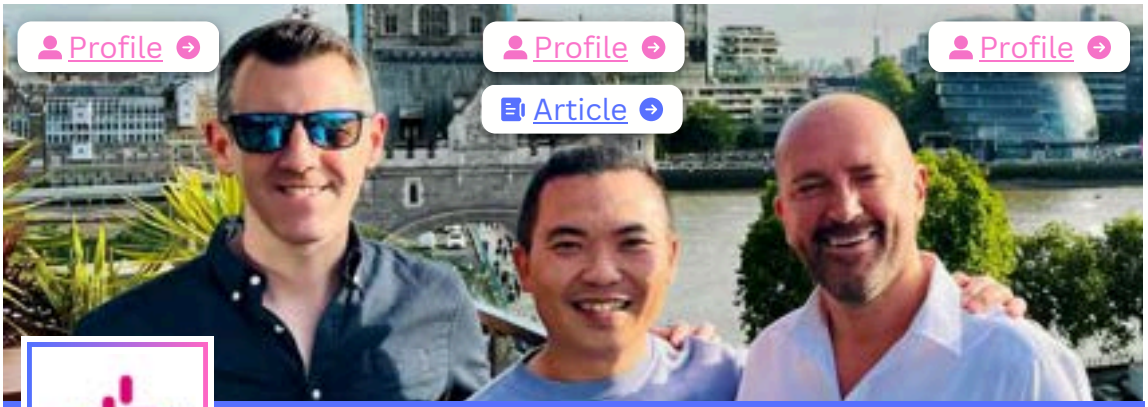
As Fernando looks to the future, his focus remains on continuing to be a visible and authentic role model, while also emphasising the importance of education within the LGBTQ+ community.

"For me, it's very important to continue with visibility, as well as ongoing, year-round education," he says. "Sometimes we don't thinkabout the impact that can have.And the fact that someone came and said, 'thank you'... I wasn't aware I was doing anything other than being myself!"

Fernando's commitment to visibility and education extends beyond his work at NTT Data, or indeed his own personal experience. He recognises the importance of these efforts for the broader LGBTQ+ community, particularly in addressing challenges that may be overlooked or stigmatised.

As Fernando looks to the future, he remains steadfast in his belief that the path forward lies in maintaining a strong, united voice, no matter how much time it takes. "It's going to take a long time," he concludes, referring to the ongoing campaign for equality. "It's an ongoing and continuous fight, which will take time to achieve."

By Dylan Mann-Hazell



Andrew Brown, David Burten & Edison Chen
Employees at Organon
Writers Profile

Organon Pride Network leaders share insights on ERG leadership and workplace inclusion

Andrew Brown, David Burten and Edison Chen have all led the Organon Pride network at some point during their career at the company. Here, they share their unique perspectives as leaders of an ERG, how leadership skills must develop in an increasingly diverse business landscape, and what the future of Pride in the workplace could look like.

Could you introduce yourself and your current role at Organon?

David Burten: My name is David Burten (he/him); I'm the global continuous improvement lead for Organon, based in the UK, and I'm also co-lead of the Organon Pride Network.

Andrew Brown: I'm Andrew Brown (he/him); I've worked for Organon since its inception and the legacy company that it was formed from. I'm currently a product release coordinator, and I founded the LGBTQ+ network three years ago for Organon and recently handed it over to David and Edison.

Edison Chen: I'm Edison Chen (he/him), and my role is global commercial capability lead. I work in commercial, supporting the commercial operations including learning and development, and have been with the company for seven years.

What do you believe makes an effective leader of an ERG?

Edison: Apart from the basics of strong communicator, leadership skills and understanding diversity and inclusion – I believe what makes an effective ERG leader is the ability to be thoughtful yet strategic, advocate and influence change that meets the interests of the ERG community and influencing company policies and practices. All ERG leaders, including the three of us, are working voluntarily on top of our day job. They must have the skills to prioritise, organise and network effectively, to be a completely effective leader.

Andrew: I think you need the passion to make a difference, to value diversity, equity and inclusion of the communities that you're from. I find that it is important for leaders of an ERG to be part of the community as they bring a unique perspective that is critical to it. You also need to appreciate the paradox of how being different doesn't matter, but it does matter! You can pick up leadership and other business skills as you go along the ERG leadership journey, but if you don't have the passion to make a difference in the beginning, then really, what's your drive for being in that role?

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Throughout your careers, have you noticed any developments in attitudes towards the importance of diversity and inclusion?

Andrew: In the early days of my career, I was a victim of homophobia in the language and behavior from people working next to me through to senior managers. As I began to see people in the business be more confident in being who they are through, particular in the younger generations, you then begin to see people stand up for themselves and who the groups they belong to. If you can see other people who are similar to you behaving in a certain way, you think okay, they're safe doing that, I'm going to join them and speak up for myself too. Since becoming an ERG lead, I've worked more closely with our Belonging team and other inclusioneers and become more switched on and aware of what is going on in our business and other companies. I see and firmly believe that Organon are committed to their DEI statements – Organon wants equity for everyone and wants you to feel like you belong at the company, regardless of the characteristics that make you who you are. And if you don't feel safe here, we have policies, guidelines and of course our ERGs to help to address that.

David: I've worked for five different organisations in the last 18 years, and I've seen a huge variation. When I first started my career, I wouldn't dare to come out. It was simply not a safe space for LGBTQ+ employees to be themselves. When I came out later, it went okay, but I was the only 'out' employee on a site with 400 people and I received a lot of comments and jokes. Compare that to today at Organon, who fully embraced the ERGs and created the safe space to have a network in place and have policies and procedures to support employee development. Thankfully, there has been a huge shift, and in Organon many people also practice inclusive language when interacting with new employees (e.g. 'Do you have a partner?' instead of 'Do you have a wife?'), but there's still a long way to go. Looking across the globe you can see just how much variation we have in inclusivity today, even within one company.

Edison: We are very fortunate that Organon embraces the strategy of diversity, equity, inclusion and belonging. "We all belong" is a big part of our company culture. But let's not forget that there is still work to be done so that our community has a voice they deserve. We must find creative ways to do things differently and explore ideas to try and engage with those communities so we can protect their safety, but also to offer help.

What does the future of Organon Pride look like – what's the next focus?

Andrew: I'd like to see more diversity across leadership teams – at Organon our ERG Global lead roles are rotated every two years – so that helps to change perspectives and increase opportunities for diversity. We also mentioned that these are volunteer roles, so I would like to see more commitment from companies in general to enable people to get more involved in ERGs and not have to find time to fit it into a 'day job'. This will encourage more active engagement and make running these groups much, much more effective.

Edison: I have had a few conversations now with ERGs looking specifically at intersectionality. How do we reach employees beyond our own membership? How do we drive new membership to our Pride network, enabling more education around allyship? Thanks to all the work that Andrew, David and other pride leaders have contributed, we recently launched a global transgender guideline, as we truly believe in creating inclusive policies that are positive for everyone. We want to be seen as a progressive and equitable company, but it's work in progress. We are constantly evolving and learning as we go.

David: The main thing is to continue pushing to make sure that we are a safe space for everyone under the LGBTQ+ spectrum, to make sure it's not just the policies and procedures in place to support them, but also open dialogue and conversation to raise awareness and educate. It's about continually pushing the boundaries to create safety and improve inclusivity.

By Dylan Mann-Hazell

Profile

Profile

Article

Arch Co
He/Him
Learning & Development Manager

John Bernard Tabuzo
He/Him
Brand Manager

Writers Profile

Growing with PRIDE: How the LGBTIQ+ community is built at JTI

At the forefront of JTI's commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion is the PRIDE Employee Resource Group (ERG), where employees come together to support queer colleagues across the company. Established to foster connections and promote growth, the PRIDE ERG has been instrumental in creating safe spaces and advocating for the LGBTIQ+ community within JTI.

The PRIDE ERG has been organising summits across the globe to strengthen networks, share best practices, and enhance visibility for the LGBTIQ+ community inside the organisation. These summits have taken place over the past year in the Americas, Western Europe, and most recently in Japan and the Asia-Pacific region. They serve as platforms for connection and growth, uniting employees across different regions in a shared mission of inclusion and support.

In June, the beautiful city of Manila played host to the PRIDE ERG's third summit for LGBTIQ+ inclusion. This two-day event brought together queer employees, allies, advocates, and ambassadors from various markets across the Asia-Pacific region.

myGwork spoke with PRIDE ERG's global team members, Arch Co and JB Tabuzo, whose contributions extend beyond their corporate responsibilities into event leadership, data policy research, and advocacy. Both Arch and JB are dedicated to championing LGBTIQ+ representation and shared valuable insights from the summit.

Arch Co, from the people and culture team in the Philippines, and JB Tabuzo, brand manager at JTI HQ in Geneva, are clearly committed to fostering togetherness and visibility for the LGBTIQ+ community. Arch took the lead in organising the summit for Japan and the Asia-Pacific region. Reflecting on the event, both highlighted the alignment between JTI's values and its support for LGBTIQ+ initiatives, reinforcing the company's dedication to diversity and inclusion.

"This year, our theme is to 'Grow with PRIDE.' We want to grow our connections, our awareness, and our footprint of chapters. We have two chapters so far in the Asia- Pacific, and more on the horizon. Of course, we want to ensure that people are increasingly aware of the support we offer—a community of advocates, allies, and just friends. Besides, every new member is a celebration for us here at PRIDE," Arch explains. "ERGs like PRIDE provide visibility and representation for the LGBTIQ+ community. These elements are critical because, personally, I feel that I can bring my authentic self to work when there is a recognised community in the office.

After all, we spend many hours in the office, and we all deserve a working environment that empowers us to bring our human best, allowing us to show up just as we do in our personal lives!"

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Arch elaborates: "'Grow with PRIDE' means two things to me. Firstly, since most of the summit attendees have yet to establish their chapters, we wanted them to find comfort in the bond and community we were able to build during these days. Secondly, we aim to expand the community across the region by encouraging the establishment of chapters in their respective countries."

Networking was a crucial element of the summit, allowing participants to forge meaningful connections, share best practices, and collaborate on initiatives. These interactions are vital for building a supportive network that transcends geographical boundaries, fostering a sense of unity and shared purpose.

JB echoes this sentiment, revealing how his time working in an inclusive environment has helped him grow, both personally and professionally. He remarks on the value of his role in nurturing team members throughout the organisation: "There is a very meaningful feeling when you are able to make a professional and personal impact in the lives of the people you work with," JB reflects. "At the summit, it was incredible to see the enthusiasm and hope in people—their dedication to helping colleagues and their commitment to driving positive change. Witnessing this collective energy highlighted the importance of creating safe spaces for our community. That's why PRIDE ERG adopted the 'embassy model,' which ensures that, regardless of local regulations and laws, we strive to create a safe environment within our offices everywhere we operate."

Leadership support was pivotal in the success of the summit. Arch highlights the importance of the welcome messages from JTI's DEI Director and the Philippines' General Manager: "This sent a clear signal of strong backing, not just for the event, but for the causes championed by our community." He emphasises that these messages played a crucial role in boosting the confidence of attendees from countries with legal restrictions on LGBTIQ+ representation. The summit acted to reinforce that, despite challenges, initiatives are being undertaken for their community, whether big or small.

However, organising such a transformative event wasn't without its challenges. From securing venues to communicating with participants from different countries worldwide, the logistical hurdles faced in executing the summit were significant. "I definitely encountered challenges... just like any other event," Arch admits. "One thing that saved me was humility—humility to accept that, though we hope the event will be perfect, there will inevitably be bumps along the way. Humility to ask for help."

Looking ahead, both JB and Arch are optimistic about the lasting impact of the summit on JTI's culture and the LGBTIQ+ community. "Having this PRIDE Summit in the region, we do not expect every country to instantly establish their own chapters. Step by step, we hope our peers in the region will create small-scale initiatives to raise awareness about the community, helping our LGBTIQ+ members feel that there is an international effort to support them," reflects JB.

The next PRIDE Summit is set to take place in Eastern Europe. This move aims to strengthen the region's commitment to LGBTIQ+ inclusion and continue the momentum generated by previous summits. These summits are perfect platforms for reflection, learning, and growth, fostering a sense of community and representing JTI's dedication to inclusion. They set a powerful example for organisations worldwide.

By Dylan Mann-Hazell

Black Transwomen Inc

Diamond Collier
She/Her
Executive Director

Writers Profile

The Black Trans Experience: Insights from Diamond Stylz

Hi Diamond, can you tell us why you created Marsha's Plate?

Martia's Plate started back in 2017. Last October was our fourth anniversary. In 2016, during the election of Donald Trump, I only saw White trans women in conversations about trans people. It was the first time we were having a national political discussion about trans people, but there was a blind spot that no one was taking into account. So I created my own platform to be able to share trans experiences, stories and opinions from a Black woman's perspective.

Can you tell us a bit about your journey with your identity and how your experience led you to become a trans activist?

I'm 40 now, but I actually transitioned when I was 13, coming out in 1994/95. Back then, the political and cultural conversation around trans people was very different. The only trans representation I found was on the Jerry Springer show. We certainly didn't have the kind of discourse and beautiful trans representation that we now have in media. As a high schooler, I successfully sued Indianapolis Public Schools for the right to wear a gown to my prom rather than a tuxedo. Then I went on to become the first openly trans woman to attend Jackson State University, an HBCU in Mississippi. So, it was kind of ground-breaking to do the things that I was doing, although it wasn't intentional back then. I was just trying to live my life and be the woman that I wanted to be.

But at college, I suffered and experienced harm at the hands of other students for being trans. For example, students would try to throw boiling hot water on me. Being put in a boy's dorm didn't help. It was the first time that I literally had no allies. Even the queer people were scared to be around me because I had such a high profile. I wasn't a celebrity, but I was the first trans person to even go to this school and just attracted too much attention. So I didn't even have my normal cisgender women, gay and lesbian allies, and it was a tough time for me. But I got through it and survived. Slowly the culture shifted in that school.

Today that school has so many queer and trans people that even the professors still talk about me, saying that I laid the foundation for other trans students. Having gone through the fire, I'm literally now seeing the fruits of my labour. When I go back to the school, and hear people tell me that although they were scared to come out, I was giving them the hope and courage to come out of the closet.

So I started to be more intentional and used social media as a tool to share Black trans experiences and archive trans stories and initiatives. I've been very intentional about it for the past 12 years, creating space for trans people both politically and socially, helping to uplift their social and economic status.

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What are some of the biggest challenges that trans people of colour and black trans women are facing right now?

Black trans women undoubtedly suffer more than other trans women of colour based on the numbers and the research that's at our fingertips. If you look at the pictures of trans women who have been murdered in the United States, it's dominated by Black trans women, particularly dark-skinned, Black trans women. We need to do more to reduce the barriers for trans women and help diminish the violence and discrimination against them so they, too, can flourish just like everyone else. That means providing safe public spaces, as well as equal access to health care, housing and secure jobs.

Do you think US governments and businesses are doing enough to protect the trans community and keep them safe?

No they're not doing enough. They can do so much more to put us in a position of success. When we think about the ramifications of a Trump presidency, one of which was not being included in the census. This is important because that is how they determine who gets funding. So we want the government to put us on the census, because if we know how many trans people are in the country, then this group will be able to access help and government support.

We also need better policies to protect our new gender identity, not just in the workforce, but housing and health care, with procedures and policies to stamp out discrimination and harassment that the trans community still faces. The healthcare industry also needs to ensure better education and compliance in terms of providing information about trans people for both young and older people considering a transition. The government must also ease up on bureaucracy to help make it easier for us to change our name, gender markers, etc., that will help us to live a more normal life; because it's those things that can lead to trans people being discriminated against when it comes to restrooms and locker rooms etc. Organizations also need to remove any policies that allow discriminatory healthcare practices and ensure that all medical needs are covered for anyone considering a transition (both physical and mental support). So, although we're moving in the right, there's a lot more work to do in terms of policies and education.

What kind of influence has the Black Lives Matter movement had on the Black trans community?

It has had a powerful influence right from the beginning. One of the pillars of the Black Lives Matter movement was to include trans people when they talked about Black lives to ensure that the conversation was not just limited to Black men killed by police. So, when we're talking about Black lives mattering, they are talking about all Black lives. The very beginnings of the movement back in 2015 included a black trans person in the leadership team, which gave us a voice in discussions. It empowered us, and it definitely had an impact on my life and our community.

What's your vision for the future for Black trans women and trans women of color?

I want the number of trans deaths to be reduced. I also really want our contributions to our culture, joy, and the amazing work that we're doing put out there. There are so many trans people doing great work and involved in innovative projects across all sectors. I want the public to see how powerful and resilient we are by showcasing that work, joy and creativity.

What advice do you have for someone who is considering or going through a transition that would be useful to them?

Community is so important. Build a community of people who love you and affirm you and are going to support you during the dark times. That means surrounding yourself with people who love you and want you to be happy and understand that transition makes you happy. Sometimes that includes people who are related to you, and sometimes it doesn't. Sometimes it's your chosen family that are the ones that will be your rock, and not necessarily your blood family. But sometimes your blood people will also be amazing like my mom was.

Secondly, don't rush it. Understand that you don't have to look like anybody else. You don't have to fit into any specific beauty standards. You can be whoever you want to be. So, take life by the horns and create your own lane. Be steadfast and stable in the idea that you deserve to be here. You deserve love, peace of mind, and all the great things that all humans do.

By Pepi Sappal

Profile

Article

Marcella Vasconcelos
She/Her
Training Specialist

Writers Profile

myGwork speaks to Marcella Vasconcelos about creating safe spaces for the queer community at Wise

Marcella Vasconcelos, Training Specialist at ***Wise***, spoke to myGwork about her experience navigating bisexuality in the 00s, and the role of education in progressing LGBTQIA rights.

Could you tell us a bit about your background and career journey leading up to your current position at Wise?

I have a Bachelor's in Psychology, specializing in child development. I focused on pop culture and gender politics – my thesis explored Disney Princesses and the importance of non-conformative gender representation for young girls. I've also worked as an English teacher. Seeking better opportunities abroad, I applied to Wise and moved to Tallinn, Estonia. I started in our Customer Support Team and after a year in this role, I transitioned to become a Training Specialist.

Can you tell me a bit about your childhood – where did you grow up; did you have any hobbies?

I was born and raised in Aracaju, Sergipe, Brazil. From childhood, my mom would call me "protector of the weak and oppressed", because I'd embrace those rejected by most and felt strongly towards injustice. I was very into creative writing, movies and cartoons – the start of my close relationship with pop culture and finding representation in it. I struggled with family issues and my mental health – undiagnosed ADHD and depression symptoms. I'd find comfort in identifying with fictional characters that were flawed but admirable, who went through somewhat similar struggles.

Can you share your personal journey with the LGBTQIA community?

It was very confusing as a kid, because I was not aware of bisexuality. I knew I liked boys, so I didn't consider that I might be into girls. That was helped by the fact that I didn't get along well with girls during childhood. I was tomboyish and didn't share the same interests which was deemed weird. In the 90s, in a small Brazilian city, feminism was a few years away from becoming mainstream. My environment would compare me with other girls, and I'd get caught up in classic, normalized female rivalries. That created an emotional block. When I'd really like a girl, I'd think that I wanted to be them instead of being attracted to them. As a pre-teen, with internet access, I was not limited to what was available on TV or the local bookstore. With much more to explore, I started consuming queer content and deconstructing ideas I had about same-sex relationships. I also connected with queer and queer-knowledgeable people.

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At 15, I admitted I'm bisexual and allowed myself to explore that. It was very messy, as admitting it didn't neutralize my problematic feelings. I'd still compare myself to other women, I'd still antagonize them to fight my own insecurities. I still couldn't get emotionally involved with them. I was questioned by family and friends, suggesting it was just a phase and I was trying to be different, when I was just being my authentic self. Most men would fetishize me, most women wouldn't take me seriously. I became terrified of being in a relationship with a woman, closing myself off anytime I'd be pursued as a romantic interest. I had no idea how to be with them. In turn, I started to question myself: was I really bisexual? I'm currently in my first serious relationship with a woman, which started when I was 28! We've been together for almost two years. I jokingly compliment her persistence, because she had to break many of my emotional walls for us to be together. All jokes aside, I am very thankful for it. Otherwise, I would have missed the opportunity of being with the amazing, loving, funny, beautiful person that she is.

What has been a standout moment in your career so far?

The Trans And Nonbinary Inclusion Project is a cross-team initiative at Wise, focused on raising awareness and fostering inclusion for trans and non-binary individuals, both within the company and among our customers. We educate on common terms, gender identifies, pronoun usage, inclusive communication, and internal guidelines for customer interactions. I am very passionate about this project and continually seek ways to enhance and expand its impact.

How does Wise strive for inclusivity and provide an open space for LGBTQIA employees?

We have a global QueerWise community, a safe space for our LGBTQIA community. We discuss everything from important worldwide events to local events for the QueerWise community. Wise's DEI team focuses on inclusion initiatives to educate employees, such as Cultivating LGBTQIA Allyship training for all. They also support celebratory events. Twice a year, there's a global QueerWise event, where QueerWisers can meet up and share a good time. I've helped organize two of these alongside queer colleagues. In 2023, Wise sponsored Baltic Pride and we attended as a group, proudly wearing our Love Without Borders t-shirts.

Throughout your career, have you noticed any developments in attitudes towards the importance of diversity and inclusion?

More companies are adopting inclusion policies, which is welcomed and appreciated. I give credit to the multiple communities for speaking up about their rights. They've voiced the need to be acknowledged and respected, and having the prejudices and struggles they face in the job taken into consideration.

What immediate improvements would you like to see being made for LGBTQIA equality in the future – both in the workplace, and wider society?

I believe in educating those who consider themselves "neutral". While they're not actively opposed to the LGBTQIA community, they may have misconceptions about it. Remaining neutral in the face of inequality can contribute to maintaining the status quo, so I see great potential in engaging and turning these individuals into conscious allies. By offering education and fostering understanding, we can encourage them to actively support equality, creating a more inclusive workplace and society.

Is there anything we haven't discussed already that you would like to include?

I'm grateful to work at a company that champions inclusion and empowers Queer voices to live in a world where being queer is not that strange anymore. It's easier to explore your identity, find your community, be who you are. While things aren't perfect, I'm comfortable with who I am, and that's incredibly powerful.

By Dylan Mann-Hazell

Roxanne Gates
She/Her
RISE Delegate

Writers Profile

Visual Merchandiser Roxanne Gates talks about her experience as a pansexual woman working in fashion

Roxanne Gates spoke to ***myGwork*** about how her passion for fashion led her to the supportive network provided by Marks & Spencer. She describes her journey from Visual Merchandiser to the Marketing team at M&S, and finding peace with her identity as a proud, pansexual woman.

Could you tell us about your background and career journey leading up to your current position at Marks and Spencer?

It always sounds cliché when people say “for as long as I can remember” but in this case it’s true: I’ve always wanted to work in the fashion industry. My challenge was that I didn’t know where in the industry I wanted to work or how to get there. I thought I wanted to be a fashion designer, so I went to my local college to study pattern cutting and garment construction part-time while working. It was there that I learned about the role of the Stylist. I was told that the Stylist puts all of the designer’s looks together to tell a story. The idea of doing this as a job really lit something up inside of me and I knew that was what I wanted to do.

Eventually, after moving home from London, my Dad convinced me to apply for a fashion role at home. I started applying for jobs and came across a role at my local M&S as a Visual Merchandiser. This role screamed at me to apply, and I put my heart and soul into the application and interviews (even visually merchandising my kitchen to prove that if I was given a mannequin, I could do something even better!). I was so pleased when I was offered the job!

I spent 18 months in that role, learning all about visual merchandising and as much as I could about M&S. I absolutely loved creating visuals that enticed customers to shop with us and inspired them to try new things in their wardrobe. Then came the opportunity that brought me to exactly where I am today, the RISE (Recognising Internal Store Experience) Programme. The programme has allowed me to expand my knowledge and network across the business and discover where I’d like to develop my career and how to do that. After completing placements in buying, sustainability and marketing, I have combined the latter two to now work in the Clothing & Home marketing team to play a key role in showcasing the work we do as part of our Plan A, sustainability roadmap. To do this at M&S also feels like such a privilege because I grew up going on days out with my family to the store that I started working at and now my work goes into that store and others across the country – a real pinch-me moment!

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Can you share your personal journey within the LGBTQIA community?

Like everyone else, I have grown up in a heteronormative world. So, when I started to question my sexuality, I thought the feelings I was having as a cis female, for other females, were wrong. Every time I saw media like a lesbian relationship on TV or heard Katy Perry's I Kissed a Girl on the radio, I instantly felt guilty!

I kept my thoughts to myself as I grew up because of this guilty feeling that was attached to them and eventually found an amazing group of friends in Secondary School, many of whom I am still friends with today. We all navigated being in the LGBTQIA community together and I feel very fortunate to have had such supportive friends then and to still have them today.

I contemplated being bisexual from the ages of 11-14 and at 14 decided I was a lesbian. I came out to my parents when I was about 16 and had been in my first relationship with another girl for some time. I was extremely nervous, but they were very supportive of me which naturally, was a huge relief. At the time when I was living with my parents in Spain, I realised that I was actually bisexual and more specifically, pansexual. This came with some humour as I had to come out to my parents again which isn't something I thought I'd do twice in my life. Ever since that realisation, anyone I have dated, regardless of where they find themselves on the gender spectrum, I have always made my sexuality clear to them in the initial dating stages as I don't feel comfortable hiding that part of myself from them. Now, I'm dating a wonderful cis, straight man and it's interesting how on the surface I am in a straight presenting relationship except I'm not straight!

What has been a standout moment in your career so far?

I'd have to say getting onto the RISE Programme two years ago, and the incredible opportunities that have come with it. I was one of 18 colleagues chosen across the country from over hundreds of applicants. Whilst being on the programme, I have met some of the most influential people in the business, seen my work published for the business and even visited colleagues in our Sourcing Office in Istanbul to learn more about ethical trading. It is amazing when I reflect on what I have achieved in the last two years, and I feel extremely proud about it.

How does Marks and Spencer strive for inclusivity and provide an open space for LGBTQIA employees?

At M&S, we strive for inclusivity at every opportunity. For example, as I work in marketing, we are always asking ourselves how we can make our work more inclusive, from the models we cast to the accessibility of our content. Specifically for colleagues, M&S do so much to promote inclusivity. We have an LGBTQIA network which is available to all M&S colleagues to join. The network is incredible and hosts events, Q&As and community gatherings to discuss different topics across the community. M&S also sponsors multiple Pride events across the country and local colleagues are allowed to sign up and join the M&S Pride float and celebrate the LGBTQIA community. On a smaller but still significant scale, every colleague has the option to add their preferred pronouns to their name badge, along with the LGBTQIA flag too. Colleagues have asked me about the flag on my badge and I've always had supportive conversations with colleagues as a result.

Throughout your career, have you noticed any developments in attitudes towards the importance of diversity and inclusion?

As I hope for my career to be a few decades longer, I feel like I'm only getting started so I can only make a few comments!
I would say that M&S is the most inclusive employer I've worked for so far and that's because all that they do to encourage diversity and inclusion is consistently promoted across the business. As colleagues, we have the opportunity to join a range of inclusion & diversity networks and their events. The networks feel like a place where you can make positive change happen for the business, share stories and support each other. I do feel like the attitudes towards the importance of diversity and inclusion is a loudening voice and one that cannot be ignored. There is importance in empowering everyone around us and I feel proud to work for a business that is so inclusive and diverse.

What immediate improvements would you like to see being made for LGBTQIA equality in the future – both in the workplace, and wider society?

I think it would be great for us to let go of the unconscious bias many of us have about assuming someone's gender and sexuality based on their appearance. That's something I've experienced in the past and it's frustrating to be judged in this way. Another improvement I'd like to see would be improved access and outcomes to mental and physical health support for people within the trans community.

By Dylan Mann-Hazell

Profile

Article

Zander Murray
He/Him
Footballer

Writers Profile

Zander Murray: Winning hearts and minds on and off the pitch to combat homophobia

***Z**ander Murray made history in 2022 as the first male Scottish senior footballer to come out as gay. After retiring last year, he shifted his focus to LGBTQ+ education and advocacy. He talks to myGwork's Pepi Sappal about his decision to come out during his professional footballing career and shares how his ongoing efforts to combat homophobia are inspiring change both on and off the pitch.*

He also shares his views on why there are still so few openly LGBTQ+ professional footballers, why more straight elite football players need to step up as allies, and how the football industry overall can better support LGBTQ+ players and fans worldwide.

Interviewer: Hello Zander. Last year, you hung up your boots and retired from playing football, completely changing your career. Can you tell us what you're currently doing?

Zander: So in December 2023, I officially retired. Though I did briefly return to semi-professional football in February 2024, I've now completely stepped away from playing. My focus has shifted to advocacy, and it has certainly become a central part of my life. When I came out in September 2022, I didn't realize just how many people were struggling. I received so many letters and messages from people sharing their own experiences, and it became clear to me that I needed to use my voice both on and off the pitch.

Given my background in working with government organizations and as a career coach, I felt I had the skills to empower others. It's been incredible, really. I've been getting involved with schools and football academies, speaking to young boys especially, because I know how much I struggled at their age. I wanted to reach out to them and say, "Look, you're not alone." But it wasn't just young people; people from all walks of life and various organizations have reached out.

I spoke to a charity here in Scotland called Inclusive Education, and I told them, "We need to get this done." Since then, the charity has conducted over 50 workshops with six professional football clubs. Recently, we secured funding from the Scottish Football Association for a year-long project to conduct workshops challenging homophobia in football. This is a dream come true for me.

Apart from that, I've been going into various organizations to do the same. I've found that workplace cultures, especially in male-dominated fields like engineering, construction, and finance, can be quite similar to locker room environments.

It's been an amazing experience to share my story. Having a background in football helps to attract audiences who might not normally engage with LGBTQ+ issues. I've also been doing some media work, hosting events, and more. It's been a busy, but incredibly fulfilling year.

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Interviewer: You're working hard to dispel myths about the LGBTQ+ community not just in sports and education, but also in male-dominated industries like construction. Can you share a bit more about this?

Zander: Initially, I wanted to focus mainly on educational workshops, but then I was asked to do sessions in the corporate world, back in late 2022. I was blown away by the response. Normally, there'd be questions at the end from allies, but after almost every session, someone from the organization would reach out to me privately, sharing their struggles and thanking me for the session.

Sometimes, I don't fully grasp the impact of my campaigns until moments like that. Just by being visible and authentic, people are encouraged to come forward. For example, one woman reached out, saying my talk gave her the courage to come out at her workplace. It means a lot to know that I'm making a difference.

In my sessions, I tell my story and share where my own internalized homophobia began. Growing up in the East End of Glasgow, which is a very stereotypical working-class area, and being right next to Celtic Park – a big football club – my earliest understanding of what it meant to be gay was very negative. My dad would take me to matches, and I remember him pointing out a pub across the street [popular with the LGBTQ+ community], saying, "You never want to drink there, son."

When you combine that upbringing with the culture in professional football, my internalized homophobia only grew stronger. Sharing these stories in professional settings has shown me just how many others have gone through similar experiences. I'm not just helping people who are struggling; I'm also trying to change perceptions. I hope that when I share my story, it resonates with people, even those who might have homophobic friends but aren't fully convinced themselves. I want them to see how the direct impact of their words and actions can have on others.

Interviewer: You're truly changing hearts and minds. What inspired you to come out publicly as a gay footballer, despite the challenges?

Zander: There were many factors that inspired me. Visibility was crucial. Seeing others in the game, like the amazing work of players like Thomas Hitzlsperger [a professional German footballer who played as mid-fielder for Aston Villa], who came out before me, really made a difference. I also had the support of allies in my own football environment, which was invaluable.

My former manager, for example, was a great ally. I'll never forget how he used to tell the team after a win, "Go home, relax and chill with your girlfriends or boyfriends, or whoever." At first, it got a few laughs, but he kept saying it. Eventually, our captain stepped up and said, "If anyone's got a boyfriend, that's not an issue." That was a turning point for me.

In April 2021, I came out to my friends and family, but I was still hesitant to be open in the football community. It wasn't until September 2022 that I felt ready to come out publicly. It actually happened during a Pride event in Benidorm. My partner wanted to take a photo of us, but he hesitated, saying he couldn't post it because of my football career. At that moment, I realized I didn't want to hide anymore.

I sat on the balcony of our hotel, and as the sun was setting, I thought to myself, "You've carried this burden for 16 years, it's time to let it go." I posted the photo on my private Facebook, where my teammates were also connected, and went to sleep. When I woke up, my world had changed. Lorraine Kelly from Good Morning GB reached out, asking me to come on her show. That's when it really hit me – this was bigger than just me.

Coming out publicly was one of the best decisions I ever made. It's allowed me to live authentically and help others do the same.

Interviewer: Many LGBTQ+ athletes often say that they actually played their best game ever after coming out. Was that the case for you?

Zander: Definitely. I remember I was on the verge of scoring my 100th career goal, and I had a really badly sprained ankle. It was so bad that I wasn't supposed to play. But I knew this was my first game back since coming out, and there was a lot of media attention on the game. It was the Scottish Cup, which is like the FA Cup there, and I ended up scoring my 100th goal in my first game as an openly gay player. That's something that can never be taken away from me.

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I even have a photo from a few games after that, where I'm celebrating with a group of young kids, maybe 15 to 20 of them. They had started coming to my matches after hearing my story, and many of them had come out to their parents as part of the LGBTQ+ community. It was incredible to engage with their parents on social media and see these young fans so inspired. There was one game where a player on the opposing team was borderline homophobic, but he got sent off, and I ended up scoring the winning goal. I celebrated with those kids, and it was such a powerful moment.

Not everything has been easy, though. I've had my share of hate, but the love and support have been overwhelming. That football I scored the 100th goal with is now in the National Football Museum. If a young kid comes across that, I hope it helps them as much as it would have helped me when I was younger.

Interviewer: Did you face any personal challenges after coming out as a footballer last year? How did you overcome those challenges, particularly when dealing with homophobia?

Zander: I always call myself an unintentional trailblazer. I never really understood the impact I was making. I wasn't the first professional footballer to come out – young English footballer Jake Daniels set the tone – but I was different because I had lived 16 years in the closet. My advice to anyone, especially in hyper-masculine environments, is to build up that armour. You have to accept that some hate might come your way. But once you're able to brush it off, it becomes easier.

Of course, it was overwhelming at first, especially when I moved up to professional football again. I had so many opportunities in the past, but I turned them down because I was in the closet. That's my one regret, and it's why I'm such an advocate now for being true to yourself. When I came back to the game, I did see hatred online, which wasn't easy to deal with. I remember someone commenting that I was only getting opportunities because I was gay. But that wasn't true. I had scored over 100 goals, and the managers who signed me did so because of my abilities, not my sexuality.

What was encouraging, though, was seeing other fans, not just LGBTQ+ supporters, but general football fans, stand up against that nonsense. Even when I was filming a documentary, the only time I faced abuse on the pitch, it was immediately called out by other fans, and the person responsible was banned for life.

Yes, I've faced hate, but I know that the work I'm doing, and the visibility of people like me, is changing hearts and minds. That's something I'm incredibly passionate about. I'm always tweaking the way I do my work because I want to influence decision-makers and policymakers. We're in the limelight for the right reasons now, and that's what I'm focused on.

Interviewer: As you mentioned, there are still only a handful of openly LGBTQ+ professional footballers. Why do you think that is?

Zander: It's true, even now there are very few openly LGBTQ+ footballers. Recently, there's been some discussion in the media about this topic, with reports suggesting that several players might be preparing to come out. I've been in touch with an organization in Germany that's been working on this issue, and while I think it's important, I'm concerned about the way it's being handled. There's been a lot of hype, with headlines suggesting that a big "reveal" is imminent. But this approach can be harmful. We've seen it before—rumors spread, and the players who are supposedly going to come out don't, leaving a vacuum that can be damaging.

For me, it's crucial that players come out when they feel ready, and not because they're being pressured by the media. The reality is that coming out as an elite athlete can attract both support and hatred. The social media backlash, in particular, can be harsh, and it's something that players and their advisors need to be prepared for. Unfortunately, some people believe that coming out might negatively impact a player's career, whether through sponsorships or team dynamics, which might discourage them.

My hope is that in the future, we won't need these media spectacles. Players should be able to come out when they're comfortable, in their own time, and it should be a normal part of their lives, not something that makes headlines. I believe that when someone does take that step, they'll find that while there will be challenges, they'll also receive overwhelming support. Their bravery will inspire others and have a profound, positive impact on many lives.

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Interviewer: What advice would you give to LGBTQ+ football players, especially those in elite clubs, who are struggling with their identity and considering coming out?

Zander: The most important thing is to make sure you've fully accepted yourself. You need to build up your resilience because there will be challenges. Prepare yourself mentally for the fact that you might face criticism, but also know that there is a lot of support out there. If you're doing this for the right reasons – because you want to be true to yourself and be part of this community – then you'll be seen as a hero by many.
People often focus on the negatives, but there has been so much positive progress. We've seen many people being celebrated for their courage, and it's incredible. For example, some individuals have won awards and received recognition for their advocacy and bravery.

If a high-profile Premier League player were to come out, they could become a huge role model, someone who might even be celebrated with statues. They need to remember that their actions could literally save lives; young people struggling with their identity could be inspired and reassured by their bravery.

In my own experience, even though I'm still relatively new to this work, I know that my efforts – whether through workshops, documentaries, or speaking out – have made a difference. I've received messages from people saying that what I've done has saved their lives. The same could be true for any footballer who comes out; they could open the door for others and create a ripple effect of acceptance and support.

Interviewer: How do you think the football industry can better support and include LGBTQ+ players and fans?

Zander: It requires a multifaceted, holistic approach. Education is key. Re-educating people to win over hearts and minds is crucial. Visibility, such as displaying pride flags in workplaces and stadiums helps too, but we need to evolve our strategies in the men's game. Over the past decade, initiatives have raised awareness, and that's been great, but now we need to be more mindful of how we use symbols like the pride flag. We should focus on genuine inclusion rather than just symbolic gestures.

The "Football vs. Homophobia" campaign has been effective because they understand the importance of winning over hearts and minds. As someone who knows the football culture, I've heard players and fans talk about these issues, and I believe the next step is ongoing education. It's not enough to do one-off workshops; we need a sustained 5- to 10-year plan to truly change attitudes, especially within football academies. This is something we've tried to implement in Scotland, ensuring that education is embedded at every level – coaches, fans, referees – everyone.

We need to make people understand why certain behaviors and attitudes are unfair. Real-life examples and case studies can be powerful tools in these discussions. It's essential to create environments where people can have face-to-face conversations, rather than just arguing on social media, which often accomplishes nothing. In my experience, workshops in various football clubs and schools have been effective, and no one in a leadership position has ever denied their importance.

Interviewer: Many people believe organizations like FIFA could do more to combat not just LGBTQ+ discrimination, but discrimination in general, and promote fairness on and off the pitch globally. What are your thoughts on this? What more can these organizations do to make a real difference?

Zander: FIFA's approach has been to host World Cups in countries with poor human rights records, hoping that it would lead to relaxed laws and more inclusive attitudes. But has that really happened? The legacy of these decisions is questionable. Activists like Nasser Al-Khelaifi [President of Paris Saint-Germain Football Club (PSG) and Chairman of Qatar Sports Investments] have done incredible work calling out transphobic and homophobic laws in the Middle East, but the situation remains challenging for many LGBTQ+ people in those regions.

A recent study during the FIFA Women's World Cup, found that homophobic incidents were more prevalent than any other form of discrimination. I'm glad to see that UEFA has now funded initiatives to challenge homophobia, and organizations like Kick It Out are applying for grants to support educational workshops. These are positive steps, but at the higher levels of the sport, money still talks. Unfortunately, financial interests often overshadow efforts to promote inclusion.

That said, we must continue to chip away at these issues through protests and advocacy, but also through education. For example, LGBTQ+ fans are often told they'll be safe if they attend events in countries with discriminatory laws, but that assurance rings hollow when those fans can't even share a hotel room without fear of persecution. We need to keep explaining why these situations are unfair and push for change.

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Visibility is also important. Players like Czech professional footballer Jakub Jankto [who plays who plays for Serie A club Cagliari] are setting a powerful example. However, we need more high-profile football players, especially in leagues like the English Premier League or La Liga, to come out and be visible. When that happens, it will send a strong message that football is a game for everyone, regardless of their sexual orientation or gender identity. At the end of the day, football is a beautiful game, and it should be beautiful for everyone.

Interviewer: Do you think there's enough allyship in sports? What more can allies do to level the playing field?

Zander: Allyship is crucial, but it's more than just claiming to be an ally; it's about being genuinely engaged and open to learning. A true ally needs to be willing to broaden their horizons, get out there, and meet people from different backgrounds. It's not enough to simply have an LGBTQ+ friend in your circle – although, of course, it does help. For others, it's about having an open mind and being willing to listen and learn. I've been fortunate to meet allies who really embody this, and it's been encouraging.

For me, allyship often starts with the basics – like making eye contact and showing respectful body language. I've been in situations, especially when speaking at football academies, where you can just feel when someone isn't accepting of you. I've walked into clubs, shaken hands, and instantly sensed that some people weren't willing to accept me as a person. That can be tough. But on the flip side, there are others who are just naturally respectful and kind, regardless of their personal beliefs.

Recently, I shared a post about a Christian group from Scotland who sent me some hateful letters when I first came out. Instead of reacting with anger, I reached out to them and asked if we could meet for coffee to talk things through. While we may never agree on everything, I believe we can still find common ground through conversation. This approach is something I try to apply even in challenging situations, like when Jehovah's Witnesses came to my door. Instead of shutting them down, I decided to have a respectful discussion, which was surprisingly positive.

The key is to get people in front of each other, talking face-to-face, rather than relying on the noise of social media. This personal connection can help break down misconceptions. I've seen it with my own friends and family who initially had negative views about the trans community until they met a trans person in real life. Those personal experiences can be transformative.

Interviewer: Why aren't we seeing more straight elite football players stepping up as allies? What could they do to make a difference for LGBTQ+ players, especially those who are closeted?

Zander: There's a lot of pressure from certain groups – like the Andrew Tate brigade or others who push toxic narratives – to conform to outdated ideas about masculinity. But here's the thing: we need to remember why we're advocating for change in the first place. It's about creating a safer, more inclusive environment for everyone. If a straight player has a platform, even doing something small, like speaking up in support of LGBTQ+ rights, can make a massive difference.

We can't underestimate the impact of positive role models in the game. For instance, Joey Barton [an English professional football manager and former midfielder], who's known for being a bit controversial, once supported a Stonewall campaign back in 2013. If more players, especially those in the spotlight, took similar stands, it could help shift the culture within the sport.

We need to continue explaining why this fight matters – why it's essential for people to feel safe and accepted in football, regardless of their sexual orientation. I share my own story to illustrate the struggles many LGBTQ+ people face, like the loneliness and torment of growing up without visibility or support. When I came out, I was overwhelmed by both positive and negative reactions. Some of the letters I received were heartbreaking, from people who were struggling just to accept themselves. That's why I'm so passionate about this cause because I know what's at stake.

If straight players understood this and used their influence to promote understanding and acceptance, it could pave the way for more authentic allyship. It's about helping people be their true selves, without fear or shame. And if being an advocate for that is seen as a bad thing, so be it; I'll keep doing it because it's the right thing to do.

I've had some success in winning people over, even those who initially seemed resistant. It's all about getting them to understand the "why" behind what we do. The more people understand that, the more authentic our allies will be.

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I was recently on a popular Scottish sports podcast, which has a big following among straight, football-loving guys – the kind of audience I was nervous to address. But the response was amazing. People were surprised to see a gay man just having a laugh with two straight guys, breaking down stereotypes about what it means to be gay. It showed that we're just like everyone else – we enjoy banter, we love football, and we're normal people. It's moments like that which help change perceptions and build real allyship.

Interviewer: What changes would you like to see in the future regarding inclusivity and acceptance within football?

Zander: Moving forward, I hope to see a greater emphasis on understanding the "why" behind inclusivity. It's essential for people to be brave and put themselves out there to support this cause. Media plays a significant role in shaping perceptions, so it's crucial to be mindful of how LGBTQ+ issues are portrayed and ensure that the messages are supportive and accurate.

I envision a future where tolerance grows, where the rough and ready attitudes in football become more accepting. While there is already some acceptance among straight males, there is still a lot of work to be done. We need to address the impact of homophobic abuse and its effects on individuals. The more we can educate people and raise awareness about how their actions affect others, the better.
For example, we have a variety of resources and workshops available that can help educate and challenge homophobic behavior. It's not just about avoiding harmful slurs; it's about fostering a culture of respect and understanding. Even seemingly minor changes in language can make a big difference in creating a more inclusive environment.

I hope that our collective efforts will lead to greater acceptance and understanding within football and beyond. It would mean the world to me if we could create an environment where everyone feels valued and respected.

Question: You're making significant strides not only in sports but also in the business world. What's next for you? What are your future plans?

Zander: I'm currently juggling a lot of projects, and I feel like I'm in a good place, doing work that I love. Over the next couple of years, I plan to focus on refining my approach and finding ways to make a lasting impact.
Hosting events and engaging with the media are important aspects of my work, and I'm excited about the opportunities to continue in these areas. I also enjoy speaking about LGBTQ+ issues and using my platform to raise awareness.

In terms of future plans, I'm considering how to create more long-term value, both in the sporting and corporate worlds. I've been involved in challenging homophobia workshops and various initiatives, but I'm thinking about how I can build on these experiences and offer something new and impactful.

By the end of the year, I hope to have a clearer vision of how I can continue to contribute effectively and create lasting change. For now, I'm focused on balancing my current projects and exploring new opportunities to make a difference.

By Pepi Sappal

Profile

Article

Nicolas Nicaise-Guion
He/Him
Sr Key Account Manager

Writers Profile

Nicolas Nicaise-Guion of Thermo Fisher Scientific on LGBTQ+ advocacy and career milestones

Nicolas Nicaise-Guion, leader of Thermo Fisher Scientific's Pride+ BRG, spoke to myGwork about his journey from a closeted boy growing up in the AIDS epidemic, to a confident advocate for the LGBTQ+ community on a global scale.

Hi Nico! Could you tell me a bit about your background and career journey leading up to your current position at Thermo Fisher Scientific?

I joined Thermo Fisher Scientific in December 2020 in a commercial role and have been told about the existence of ERGs, now BRGs, very early during my onboarding. I immediately expressed my wish to join a chapter in France and was told that none were existing: this is how I've started with my BRG Pride+ engagement, by creating a chapter in France, that I led for three years. At the end of last year, I was honored to be asked to lead the BRG Pride+, on a global level from January 2024.

Can you tell me a bit about your childhood – where did you grow up; did you have any hobbies?

I was born in 1983, the year of HIV identification, in the French Northeastern countryside, 150km away from Paris (which is far in France!). I grew up there, without any relatives or contact from the LGBTQ+ community, in a family that was not LGBTQ+-phobic, but just without any knowledge or awareness about it besides the "noise" about the AIDS pandemic in the LGBTQ+ community. I was a "normal" kid, with friends, happy, with no trouble.

Until the age of 17, I knew I had no physical attraction to women, but did not know that I could be attracted to men. I was curious about that, and my first serious self-questioning happened when I watched the TV show Queer as Folk. I was kind of envious. Not disgusted, but excited, with a lot of intense feelings.

A few weeks before moving to university, my best girlfriend's boyfriend (a gay boy in the closet) kissed me, and my mind was blown away. I immediately knew that I was gay, and this was who I am. I moved to Montpellier for university, without knowing anything about this city, and finally found out that it was the first LGBTQ+ community of France. I haven't moved a lot since.

Actually, I've not hidden my sexuality for a long time – and never in Montpellier. I was openly gay there and never considered that there was anything to hide or to fear. That was just who I was. Four months after I moved to Montpellier, during my first relationship with a man, I came out as gay to all my family and childhood relatives. It was hard for some of them, my mother mostly, but I was quite radical: this was who I am, and I was not looking for any approval, there was no choice. If you don't accept that, sorry, bye!

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In parallel, during my studies but also in my early romantic life, I've crossed the topics of HIV/AIDS. My first sexual experience was with a seropositive man (he told me afterward, and had become my best friend, and is still, in the meantime), and I focused my scientific studies on this topic.

Can you share your personal journey within the LGBTQ+ community?

So, first step in Montpellier. I was gay, openly, and I can say I've immerged in the community, with passion and intensity. I loved all the aspects: freedom, beauty, colors, mindset, and of course people: lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, queers, queens, I embraced all the identities of the community and was thirsty for knowledge and awareness. And naturally, quickly, I've engaged in all fights for LGBTQ+ rights, starting at university, but also early in my professional life. My first fight was for the blood donation right for gay men, considering I was myself a phlebotomist. I started to work in 2004, and it took until 2022 for blood donation rights to be given to gay people, or just opened to everyone regardless of sexual orientation.

What has been a standout moment in your career so far?

Without hesitation when I joined Thermo Fisher Scientific and heard about BRGs. My career as a salesperson has positively and significantly changed, and my engagement for the LGBTQ+ community has taken another direction, business orientated, but with clear and measurable goals.

Throughout your career, have you noticed any developments in attitudes towards the importance of diversity and inclusion?

Not throughout my career, or not specifically in the workplace. I've noticed developments in attitudes, in the civil and political space, that have of course impacted workspaces. Between 2004 and 2024, many milestones happened in France, for LGBTQ+ rights but also for equality in general.

What immediate improvements would you like to see being made for LGBTQ+ equality in the future – both in the workplace, and wider society?

The most critical gap that we must improve is the inclusion of trans and gender non-conforming colleagues. The awareness is poor, and the education is non-existent. I work with the BRG leadership to improve it at Thermo Fisher Scientific, mostly for the attention of HR people and people managers.

Is there anything we haven't discussed already that you would like to include?

I would like to recognise and thank two people: Kat Bellamy for co-leading the Global Pride+ BRG with me, and François Desmartin, the best ally I've met, and executive sponsor of the French chapter when I created it in 2021.

By Dylan Mann-Hazell

Profile

Article

Ulises Diaz
He/Him
Customs Inventory Specialist

Writers Profile

ABB's Ulises Diaz on becoming a leader at his company's LGBTQ+ Employee Resource Group

"What I want to see in everyone is the feeling of freedom — freedom to be who they really are. It is not about benefits; it is about what we deserve as humans." Ulises Diaz is a passionate advocate for the LGBTQ+ community and a dedicated professional at ABB – a global technology company known for its commitment to innovation and inclusivity. Ulises' journey from a young boy in Sonora, Mexico, to a leader in an LGBTQ+ Employee Resources Group (ERG) at ABB is as refreshing as it is inspiring.

Ulises began his ABB career on the customs team, starting as a temporary employee and later working his way to an outsource position. Three years of dedication later, an entirely new role was created for Ulises within inventory control. This position allowed him the space for continual growth within the company and has been a pivotal part of his career for the past five years.

Ulises' connection with the LGBTQ+ community has evolved in parallel with his career, and significantly, throughout his life. It wasn't until college that he found the courage to embrace his identity as a gay man. This journey was not without challenges. When Ulises came out, his parents initially struggled to accept him. However, thanks to ABB's ERG inclusive programs, Ulises found a supportive network that resonated with his experiences.

For three years, Ulises has been an active member of ABB's ERG Pride. In the past year, he has also taken on the role of ERG Pride leader for ABB's plants in Mexico. In this capacity, Ulises not only represents the LGBTQ+ community within the company but also helps foster an inclusive workplace culture. This active leadership has engaged colleagues globally and promoted a safer, more inclusive environment for all employees.

At ABB, Ulises has witnessed a profound commitment to inclusivity. "We have a zero-tolerance code of conduct against discrimination based on gender identity and sexual orientation," he explains. The company fosters an atmosphere where employees can "come as you are," as reflected in its global ERG outreach campaigns. ABB offers a robust suite of benefits for LGBTQ+ employees, including parental leave, life insurance, and support through the Employee Assistance Program.

Ulises is optimistic about the future, noting, "for ABB, diversity is welcomed and celebrated as part of a culture of inclusion and equity". The company continually strengthens its policies and programmes to ensure that every employee, regardless of their background, is valued. Despite the progress made at ABB, Ulises recognises that challenges remain both within the workplace and society at large. He recalls moments of anxiety, such as taking a cab to work, when he would worry about judgment based on his identity and expression. Experiences such as this mean Ulises' aspirations extend beyond organisational policies. He wishes to see a world where every single person can embrace their authentic selves without fear of judgment or harm.

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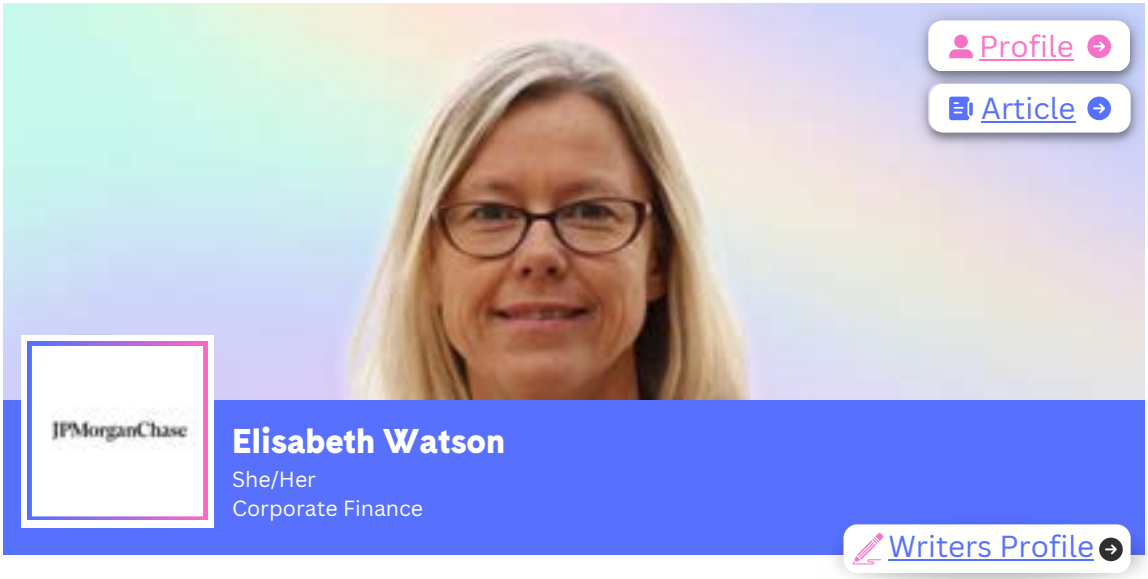
“What I want to see in everyone is the feeling of freedom — freedom to be who they really are,” he declares. “It is not about benefits; it is about what we deserve as humans.”

Ulises attributes much of his personal success to the constant support he has received from family and friends, as well as the sense of community he has found at ABB. Reflecting on his journey, he emphasizes the importance of being conscious of how we treat each other. “Everyone deserves to be treated with love and respect,” he affirms.

Ulises’ unique path from a boy with a passion for dance to a leader advocating for LGBTQ+ rights shows the true impact of self-acceptance and community support. With several incredible achievements under his belt (including completing a marathon!), Ulises is a powerful example of finding your voice and using it to positively influence others. By sharing his experiences and standing in solidarity with his peers, he hopes to inspire others to embrace their true selves and advocate for a more inclusive world.

By Dylan Mann-Hazell



“They respect that authenticity and see you as a leader because of it”

Over the course of her 30-year career in banking, Elisabeth Watson has worn many hats – from financial controller, to data specialist, to her current role in corporate finance at **JPMorganChase**. But throughout her life, two aspects of her personal identity have been central to her professional journey: being a lesbian, and being neurodivergent. In this candid interview, Elisabeth talks to myGwork about grappling with aspects of her identity later in life, and how these identities intersect with each other.

Elisabeth came to terms with her sexuality in her early 20s, finding this realisation challenging at first. She had always felt different from other people and wasn’t sure she wanted to confirm that feeling. However, meeting her now-wife soon after coming out helped Elisabeth embrace her identity, and she now proudly identifies as a lesbian.

Elisabeth’s experience of being open about her sexuality at work has generally been a positive one. The banking industry, traditionally dominated by men, has progressively uplifted women and LGBTQIA employees over the course of Elisabeth’s career. Rather unexpectedly, she found that many people appreciate her openness and respect her unapologetic attitude. Elisabeth believes that rather than being a disadvantage, her authenticity actually serves as an advantage.

“A lot of people like the fact that you’re open with them. They respect that authenticity and see you as a leader because of it,” she explains.

The other aspect of Elisabeth’s identity that has been key in her personal and professional journey is being neurodivergent. Elisabeth was diagnosed as Autistic in 2021, after already spending over two decades in her career. Prior to this, Elisabeth felt she lacked true understanding of her multifaceted identity, even through her LGBTQIA advocacy work.

The diagnosis has been a life-changing experience for Elisabeth, allowing her to better comprehend her intricacies and move forward with even greater authenticity. Elisabeth remarks upon how being a lesbian while also being neurodivergent positively intersected in her life. “There are a lot of parallels in the journeys of the LGBTQIA and neurodivergent communities,” Elisabeth observes. “The neurodivergent path is further behind though, and I want to apply the lessons learned from LGBTQIA advocacy to help advance that acceptance and understanding.”

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At her current place of work, JPMorganChase, Elisabeth has found an environment that genuinely embraces diversity and inclusion for all its employees – including the LGBTQIA community and individuals who are neurodivergent. She describes the organisation as one that instils these concepts in a very "business-as-usual" way, rather than treating them as passing trends.

The Global Neurodiversity strategy at JPMorganChase was devised to position the firm as a sought-after employer and a global industry leader in advancing disability and neuro inclusion in the workplace, by removing barriers and closing the equity gap. The firm works closely with senior leaders across the firm to ensure all roles are available and supported in a neuro inclusive environment. In 2022, JPMorganChase named its first Global Head of Neurodiversity to further enhance this commitment.

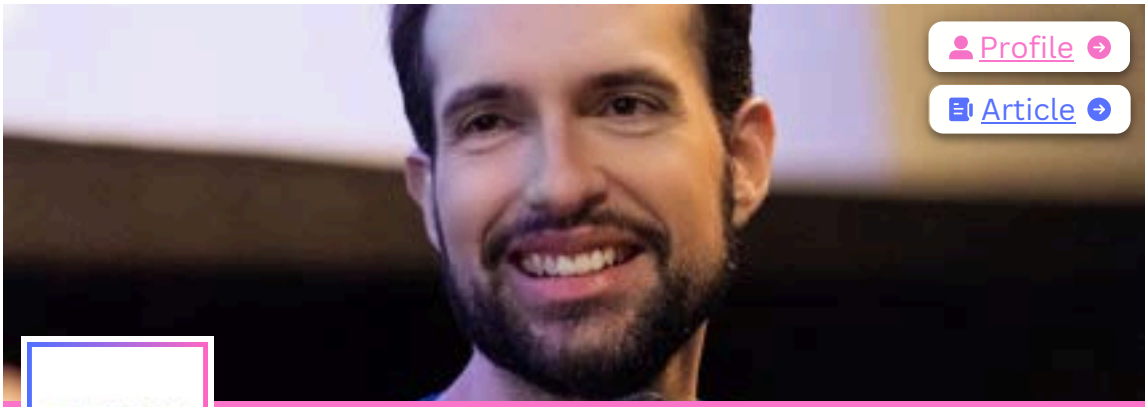
JPMorganChase's focus on visibility and representation have been particularly meaningful to Elisabeth. "There are people in senior roles here who are out and proud, which is something I haven't experienced at other organisations. It's been really encouraging to see that level of representation." The firm's LGBTQ+ Executive Forum is a consortium of over 500 out senior leaders, serving as role models and mentors to talent across the organisation.

Beyond structural changes, Elisabeth has been given the latitude to play a first-hand role in advocacy work for both the LGBTQIA and neurodivergent communities. She appreciates the firm's openness and willingness to use honest dialogue to enact change. "I can say, 'look, this is my lived experience,' and that forms part of the dialogue".

This support and engagement has been crucial for Elisabeth, allowing her an emotional connection to her work. Looking ahead, she emphasises the importance of continuing the momentum in support of diversity and inclusion, both within JPMorganChase and society at large. Elisabeth urges businesses and ERG leaders to remain steady in the fight for equity and inclusion and the promotion of education and awareness to further increase understanding of diverse communities.

"We'll always have to remind people that the privilege of not experiencing that they are different means they don't know what it's like. Unless someone points that out, they're unaware. So, there will always be work for us to do, and those of us with more privilege within the community need to hold the door open for others."

By Dylan Mann-Hazell



Profile
Article

Eduardo Teixeira
He/Him
Director, Creative Brand Solutions

Writers Profile

Warner Bros. Discovery's Eduardo Teixeira on diversity and inclusion in the workplace

Eduardo's professional career began in marketing, taking on an internship at the Chemists Union in Guarulhos. Here, he oversaw social projects aimed at supporting workers and their families — a foundational experience that built upon his passion for community engagement. Eduardo would later land a position at Discovery Networks as an operations assistant in advertising sales, accelerating his entry into the corporate world. His keen understanding of the industry propelled him to his current role as the director of Creative Brand Solutions at Warner Bros. Discovery.

At Warner Bros. Discovery, a pivotal chapter in Eduardo's life unfolded, as he had the opportunity to explore and embrace his identity as a publicly gay man. Despite the challenges faced while growing up, work became Eduardo's sanctuary for self-discovery. He describes this as the most important phase of his coming out process.

Eduardo found the presence of employee resource groups in the workplace perplexing initially, explaining, "I remember I used to read news and articles about employee resource groups at the company's portal and did not understand a word — why were they discussing LGBTQ+ people at the workplace?" However, after education on the topic and seeing the hard work completed within these ERGs, his perspective changed significantly. "Now, 12 years later, I completely understand why they started it back then," he proudly acknowledges, noting the ongoing need to fight for LGBTQ+ rights.

As Director of Creative Brand Solutions, Eduardo champions safe spaces within the company through initiatives spearheaded by the Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) team. "Ever since the first days of the new company, we could feel DEI was front and center in the strategy of the business,". He insists on creating safe and supportive environments within the workplace, reflecting his belief that inclusivity is not merely a mission statement; it is a fundamental right.

"I see inclusivity being taken seriously in the company, especially for the LGBTQ+ community, as entertainment breathes queer culture."

Reflecting on the changes witnessed throughout his years at Warner Bros. Discovery, Eduardo notes a positive evolution in attitudes toward diversity and inclusion. This transformation is poignant for Eduardo, who recalls the early struggles of the LGBTQ+ community in gaining visibility and understanding. "I do not get why we still have to fight so much for rights," he admits, expressing frustration with the societal barriers that persist despite growing acceptance.

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When asked to envision the future for workplace equality, Eduardo speaks passionately about advancing inclusion for diverse gender identities both in the workplace and society at large. “I would love to see non-binary and transgender people being seen, given opportunities, and thriving.” He also reflects on the broader challenges faced by the LGBTQ+ community in recent years. “Society seems to be moving backwards in every single way. Going back to basics and understanding we are all human beings seems to be impossible these days.”

As he continues his impactful work at Warner Bros. Discovery, Eduardo remains committed to creating inclusive environments for all employees, regardless of background and identity. While acknowledging that challenges remain, Eduardo’s heart is set on change, and he firmly believes that his vision for a society that values every individual can and will be achieved. “I believe that by sharing our stories, we can create a more accepting world,” he says.

By Dylan Mann-Hazell

Profile

Article

Krystal Lake
She/Her
CEO

Writers Profile

Meet & Greet: Krystal Lake, CEO of CBK (Cut By Krystal)

In this week's Meet & Greet interview, CBK's CEO and myGwork member Krystal Lake shares why she created a channel focusing on Black, LGBTQ+, women and mental health matters. The New York-born, London-based DJ, radio host, filmmaker and social influencer explains why organizations need to take homophobic remarks and labels seriously, and do more to promote LGBTQ+ inclusion. She also provides great insights into her 'uplifting' work and life hacks.

myGwork: Why did you start your social tech channel business?

Krystal: I started my social media channel because I wish I had this growing up. I teach "the stuff schools don't teach" on TikTok, YouTube and Snapchat and it's my way of educating people on important topics that are often missed in school. These topics are typically focused on Black, LGBTQ+ Women, and mental health subjects.

myGwork: Have you always wanted to lead a company and why?

Krystal: Yes, because I felt like media was lacking the topics that I wanted to speak about. I knew that at my old jobs I wouldn't be allowed to focus on the topics that I personally want to bring into the media realm, so I knew I had to do it myself.

myGwork: How would you describe your leadership style?

Krystal: Uplifting. Everyone has a skill that they are drawn to, or an interest that will lead them to enjoy their work. I want to help people find that and be there to give them the extra push they need to achieve their goals.

myGwork: What attributes do you look for when promoting/hiring employees leaders in your company?

Krystal: That they have the same vision and have aligned values. If I hire a mid-level worker that is interested in fighting for equality versus a senior-level worker who doesn't care, I know that mid-level worker will work much harder and outperform the senior worker who probably doesn't want to do this type of work in the first place.

myGwork: How do you successfully motivate your employees?

Krystal: I get them to focus on the end goal and remind them of the impact their work can make, all because of their creative skill.

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myGwork: How important is LGBTQ+ inclusion in the workplace to you?

Krystal: Very important. I've felt uncomfortable at a few jobs because they didn't take homophobic remarks seriously, or LGBTQ+ people seriously. No workplace should ever allow a worker to feel lesser or weird because of their sexual preference.

myGwork: Why do you think there are so few out leaders in the workplace, and what more can organizations do to ensure more leaders who identify with LGBTQ+ are promoted into leadership roles?

Krystal: There are so many labels that get attached to what your sexual preference is. If you're a gay man you might get stuck with a "he's not tough or strong enough to lead a team." If you're a lesbian woman you might get stuck with a "she's aggressive" or "she hates men" label, and if you're bi you might get stuck with a "she wants to sleep with everyone in the office" label. People need to realise that sexual preference has nothing to do with the person you are, we are all humans. So many people are scared to be out at work because there's a huge chance that they might be sexualized and labelled.

myGwork: In your opinion, how important are LGBTQ+ allies at work?

Krystal: Allies are so important. They are the ones that uplift minorities when they feel down, and defend them when they are attacked. A great ally might be the person that'll call for a meeting about educating the workplace on LGBTQ+ topics. They also might create a safe space for that LGBTQ+ worker.

myGwork: How are you personally promoting inclusion in the workplace? What more can organisations do to promote LGBTQ+ inclusion.

Krystal: I educate the world about LGBTQ+ topics and issues. I let people know there is nothing wrong with being a part of the rainbow mafia, and most importantly I teach people how to love themselves. My platform is a safe space and I let that be known to anyone whether they're LGBTQ+ or straight.

myGwork: What was the last book you read? Any interesting take-aways and would you recommend it to fellow leaders?

Krystal: The Sun and Her Flowers by Rupi Kaur. It made me so proud to be a woman and so proud to know that there are so many other strong women out there that go through ups and downs. I know that those ups and downs are ok because it's what makes us who we are and there's a whole community that exists to uplift us. I would recommend it, it's a reminder that we don't have to be perfect all the time and we're allowed to feel feelings. A lot of times as a leader you might feel nervous to expose the imperfect parts of you, but that's what makes us unique and relatable.

myGwork: What's your all-time favorite movie/show – and how many times have you watched it?

Krystal: Insecure. I'm so addicted to that show. It focuses on being a Black woman in society, but it leaves out all those annoying stereotypes that many shows put on Black characters. I was able to relate and see myself in the characters of that show because of how authentic and natural the characters and situations are. I binge-watched the whole season in 3 days, help me.

myGwork: What's your most favorite holiday destination to date and why?

Krystal: Bali. It was so freeing. It was a reminder that the world is full of beautiful nature, people and moments. It was also a reminder to put away my phone and enjoy those moments. I felt so present and so grateful to be surrounded by so much positivity and beauty.

myGwork: What do you do to unwind? Which drink/cocktail helps you unwind most?

Krystal: I DJ or I watch Friends haha. I set aside some time where it's just my own time, this means no email notifications, no work-related tasks and no Instagram scrolling. I'm either DJing in my room, producing a song or watching Friends to get a good laugh in. I also love getting a brunch date in with my friends. Adding a few espresso martinis to the brunch is a life hack that I'll always cherish.

You can find out more about Krystal and connect with her here.

By Pepi Sappal

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