

It is tiring to be gay in the workplace

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Young people from the LGBT community feel their sexual orientation puts limits on the types of jobs they can comfortably pursue.

Work and identity are strongly intertwined in the Western world. That tight connection may help explain a Swedish researcher's recent findings on how different sexual orientations affect an individual's career choices.

Sara Ahlstedt has written a report that summarizes research conducted in the UK, Finland, Norway, Canada, the USA and Australia. She found that many young members of the LGBT community thrive at their jobs. But many are uncertain about whether they should be open about their sexual orientation or gender identity. Some have also experienced discrimination and harassment.

Affects career choices

Although the young people in Ahlstedt's study initially believed that they were free to choose whatever education and job they wanted, her research shows they were not completely free in their choice of profession.

A majority believed their identity or orientation influenced their career choices. They didn't just choose their education based on professions that they thought would work for them. They also thought it was important that they be accepted at the workplace.

Some avoided certain professions because they didn't think the jobs would fit with their sexual orientation or gender identity. For example, LGBT youths avoided occupations that involved working with children because they were worried they might be accused of being paedophiles.

Others tried to avoid occupations that they felt were intolerant to those who were not heterosexual. Two examples are occupations in the security industry or jobs related to religion.

A survey conducted by the Institute of Engineering and Technology (IET) in 2014 showed that 34 per cent of gay British engineers chose not to be open about their orientation at work, according to *Tekniske Ukeblad*, a Norwegian technology magazine.

Hetero is the norm

When young LGBT individuals join the workforce, they find that heterosexuality is the norm.

Then the internal negotiations begin. Should they be open about their sexuality or identity, or is it best to stay quiet?

In a press release from Linköping University, Ahlstedt describes this constant uncertainty as emotionally

difficult, especially if it's the individual's first job and they are learning how the workplace actually works.

She believes these individuals carry an extra burden that their colleagues don't have to carry.

Being able to talk openly during lunch about everyday things that concern a girlfriend or partner, for example, is important to thriving in the workplace.

Ahlstedt's research shows that people who are open about their identity and who work in jobs where sexual orientation is not an issue or concern feel better and thrive in the workplace.

However, in many cases, LGBT youths end up in situations at work where they feel compelled to laugh at jokes that they find uncomfortable. It's particularly discomfiting when the individual's manager participates in the "fun".

Little research in Norway

There is relatively little research on the workplace experiences of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people in Norway.

In 2013, researchers at Fafo, a Norwegian independent research foundation that focuses on social and economic issues, looked at this issue.

The review shows that while attitudes towards these individuals have become more tolerant over the years, many members of the LGBT community still experience discrimination in the job market.

A survey conducted in 1999 by Norwegian Social Research, an institute based at Oslo and Akershus University, is probably the most comprehensive source of information about the experiences of lesbians and gays in the workplace.

In this survey, roughly one-third of those surveyed kept their sexual orientation hidden at work.

Every fifth woman and every fourth man had experienced discrimination and / or harassment at work, often with health consequences.

"Although a somewhat larger proportion are probably open about their sexual orientation in 2013, the proportion of individuals who continue to keep this hidden is still significant," said Fafo researcher Arne Backer Grønningseter to forskning.no in 2013.

This need to keep an important part of one's identity secret can affect a person's health and career.

A Norwegian report from 2005 shows that among those who hid their sexual orientation in 1999, a higher proportion of individuals had mental problems and identity difficulties compared to their non-closeted peers.

[Read the Norwegian version of this article at forskning.no.](#) [7]

 [It is important for us to be able to talk openly at work about our private lives. \(Photo: Photographee.eu / Shutterstock / NTB scanpix\)](#) [8]

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April 27, 2018 - 06:45

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