



# Addressing Homophobia in the Workplace

Tips on recognising homophobia  
and how to minimise  
the negative effects on  
employees and workmates

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## **Addressing homophobia in the workplace**

Most of us take it for granted that we can have photos of our partners on our desks, kiss them goodbye if they drop us off at work, or comfortably talk about planned holidays with our 'other half'.

But what if your staff can't, or don't feel comfortable about doing that? What if, by talking about their partners, they open themselves to ridicule, bullying, discrimination, or threats? What if mention of their partner could mean the end of their job?

Homophobia in the workplace can be blatant, such as sacking someone, or quite subtle, such as excluding someone because of their sexuality. Whatever form it takes, there's no place for it in the workplace, and it could also be against the law.

If you want more information check the Anti-Discrimination Commission's website at [www.adcq.qld.gov.au](http://www.adcq.qld.gov.au) or give us a call on **1300 130 670**.

Help put an end to homophobia in the workplace. Start by reading this booklet.

**Susan Booth**

*Anti-Discrimination Commissioner Queensland*

## **Homophobia is ...**

- discriminating against lesbians and gay men because of their sexuality
- harassment of lesbians and gay men through name-calling, jokes about their sexuality, bullying or teasing
- treating same sex partners differently to opposite sex partners
- showing disrespect towards the lives and relationships of lesbians and gay men
- making lesbians and gay men feel they cannot be open about their sexuality

## **Homophobia in the Workplace can lead to ...**

- failure to attract and retain talented staff
- loss of worker self-confidence and productivity
- harm to the health and safety of workers
- potential legal action

## **Fight Homophobia in the Workplace**

- Implement an anti-discrimination policy that includes sexual orientation
- Be familiar with anti-discrimination and health and safety legislation and how it applies to homophobia
- Reprimand homophobic behaviour and take more serious action where necessary

## **Make sure your recruitment procedures are non-discriminatory**

- Make all benefits and leave entitlements the same for lesbian and gay workers as heterosexual workers
- Foster an environment in which all workers feel safe and respected, regardless of their sexuality

## **Benefit from a Workplace where ...**

- all workers are healthy, self-confident and productive
- all workers feel they are treated fairly and respectfully
- talented staff are retained because of the healthy environment
- new staff are attracted by good policies and reputation

## **Introduction**

This information booklet provides tips for organisations, large and small, to halt homophobia and make their workplace more equitable. We hope it will inform managers and other workers about how homophobic beliefs and behaviours can have a negative impact on their lesbian and gay colleagues.

Many people are unaware that approximately, one in five families has a member who is gay or lesbian. Unfortunately, many people make thoughtless and hurtful homophobic comments and are totally unaware of the impact their words have on those around them. The comments aren't always intended to hurt or offend, but they can have a detrimental effect on gay and lesbian colleagues or those with gay and lesbian loved ones.

We hope that the information provided will be a step towards altering attitudes and belief systems which keep homophobia alive and well in many sections of the general community. Homophobia can lead to bullying and discrimination which if not prevented can create problems for managers and business owners. Nobody gains from this negative behaviour and it's in the interest of everyone to stop it.

This booklet aims to help the reader understand lesbian and gay workplace issues and provides advice to organisations who wish to address workplace homophobia.

## **What is Homophobia?**

Homophobia is the fear or hatred of homosexuals and homosexuality. It is based on the belief that heterosexuality is the only normal and natural sexual behaviour with homosexuality being abnormal or deviant sexual behaviour.

Homophobia is not a phobia or morbid fear in the literal sense in the same way that people fear spiders. Homophobia is usually displayed through attitudes varying from indifference through to anger and contempt, more so than fear. Such homophobic attitudes are widespread throughout Australian society, including the workplace.

Homophobia is not only openly discriminatory or offensive behaviour but also includes a general attitude of intolerance, ignorance or disregard. This can lead to socially imposed silence, where lesbian and gay workers feel unable to freely express themselves and openly talk about their lives.

While not everyone engages in discriminatory behaviours towards lesbians and gays, workers are more likely to contribute to a general attitude of intolerance and socially imposed silence that is widely accepted within the Australian workforce. This means that workplaces can be extremely distressing with many attempting to hide their sexuality. This is difficult and demoralising with many living in fear of being outed and something we, as heterosexuals, will never have to experience.

## **Some Facts about Homosexuality**

Many people naively believe that they don't know a gay or lesbian person, while others think there are no lesbians or gay men in "their" workplace. But, how do you know? What does a gay man or lesbian look like? We need to understand that we can't be sure unless they tell us. Lesbians and gay men are police officers, tradespeople, labourers, doctors, lawyers etc. They come from all walks of life, socio-economic groups, religions, races etc.

Sexual orientation has nothing to do with personal choice, abuse or bad parenting. We are born with our sexual orientation. Homosexuality is considered to be a natural sexual variant by the American Psychiatric Association and the Australian Psychological Association and in 1983 was removed from the list of mental illnesses.

Sexuality is like eye colour, nobody chooses, there are different eye colours and different sexual orientations and all are natural.

Homosexuality isn't a "private matter". It isn't about what you do in the bedroom. It's an important part of who you are. It isn't uncommon to hear people say "we don't care that they're gay as long as they don't flaunt it". We as heterosexuals flaunt all of the time by having photos of partners and family on the desk, wearing a wedding or engagement ring, discussing the wife/husband, holding hands, a kiss on the cheek when saying hello or goodbye to a partner.

Statistics vary but it's considered between 5% and 8% people are sexually diverse. It isn't ok to hate someone with a disability because they can't help it – but people reason that it's ok to hate someone because of sexual diversity because of the out-dated belief that it's a choice, or easier lifestyle.

Being lesbian or gay is very difficult, they risk abuse and/or rejection by family when they inform them that they are same sex attracted. They risk abuse and ridicule at school should other students recognise they're "different" and then they again face abuse and ridicule in the workplace. This is something we as heterosexuals will never have to experience but we can alter these injustices by being more inclusive and accepting and ensuring that homophobia quickly becomes a thing of the past.

## **Homophobia in the Workplace**

As a consequence of homophobia, workplaces can be extremely distressing for lesbians and gay men with many attempting to hide their sexuality and living in fear of being found out.

For people who are "out" in the workplace the treatment they can receive if working in a homophobic atmosphere can lead to depression, stress-related illness, substance abuse and even suicide. Studies show that over fifty percent of the gay community surveyed have experienced harassment or prejudicial treatment at some time in their workplace. This ranged from sexual and physical assault to verbal abuse, destruction of property, ridicule, unfair rostering, unreasonable work expectations and career restrictions.

Because the workplace is central to most people's lives and typically mirrors conditions present in society at large, it isn't surprising that societal discrimination against homosexuals can be worst in the workplace. The negative behaviour directed daily at lesbians and gay men may have a very real impact on their ability to find employment and possible promotion.

Gay and lesbian workers often remain silent about their orientation through the fear of negative or homophobic responses. This is a common occurrence even if they're "out" to family and friends at home. But there is a price attached to their silence. Self-confidence is important in any work environment. The effort it takes to hide one's identity and not be oneself, for the sake of job security, has the effect of undermining one's self-confidence and ultimately, affecting work performance.

For those considering "coming out" to work colleagues there is a constant fear that such honesty may have a detrimental effect on career prospects and job promotion. Plus, there's the possibility of being ostracised and the object of gossip and jokes.

Pretending to be something you're not, ie straight, is hard work. So it isn't surprising lesbian and gay workers may feel they can't be themselves and so are constantly checking themselves, trying to fit in. They may be regarded as not being team players, or seen as being withdrawn or secretive.

Sometimes lesbian and gay workers construct false identities by pretending to be straight and taking opposite sex partners to work functions.

Everyone has the right to be open about themselves if they choose - but for many in the workplace this fear is too great and so they omit a large part of their identity.

No person has to disclose their sexual orientation if they don't want to - but it generally makes more for a productive workplace if people feel comfortable in themselves. Being open is a basic human right, not an obligation.



## Homophobic Harassment

Harassment is repeated unwanted conduct which either violates a person's dignity, or creates an intimidating, hostile, degrading, humiliating or offensive environment for that person.

This includes, among other things:

- name calling
- teasing
- homophobic jokes
- leaving offensive messages on email or the telephone
- maliciously excluding and isolating a person from workplace activities
- humiliating a person through gestures, sarcasm, criticism and insults
- spreading gossip or false, malicious rumours about a person with an intent to cause the person harm

Many use the excuse that "it's all just in good fun, no hurt is intended" but it's not acceptable for jokes about gender or race, so it shouldn't be condoned against gays and lesbians.

Managers need to be aware that workplace harassment may harm the health and safety of workers and other persons. Therefore, employers' obligations include identifying and managing exposure to the risk of death, injury or illness created by workplace harassment.

## **What Employers Can Do**

To halt this discrimination managers need to ensure their lack of prejudice isn't a facade. Unfortunately, if it is just a facade, nothing is likely to be done to halt or acknowledge homophobic behaviour that may be occurring in your workplace.

Managers also need to ensure that they have an open workplace where workers know their rights, will be protected and if complaints are made they'll be taken seriously. People need to feel they are respected and problems heard.

If as manager you decide to implement many of the strategies below, expect some backlash from some colleagues, but this can be seen as a sign of progress. Your actions are a first step to addressing another form of discrimination. No initial act towards inclusion is too small or insignificant, never feel powerless as an individual, a lot of change can occur on an everyday basis.

You just need to find the starting point. There are no acceptable excuses for not starting to work on this issue. Lack of knowledge or experience is no excuse: educate yourself and be aware that this booklet is a good start. Take pride in working towards a more democratic, inclusive workplace and indicate to others that you take the problem of homophobic behaviours and attitudes seriously. And let it be known there is no room for this behaviour in your workplace.

Creating an open minded workplace in all aspects can begin with you.

## **How this can be achieved by Management**

1. Take pride in actively working towards an inclusive workplace and indicate to others that you do not tolerate homophobic behaviours and attitudes.
2. Ensure that your anti-discrimination policy explicitly includes sexual orientation.
3. Be familiar with anti-discrimination law (eg Queensland Anti-Discrimination Act 1991) which prohibits sexuality discrimination and vilification.
4. Ensure all staff are familiar with anti-discrimination law and provide training, if necessary, specifically including sexual orientation as you would disability, race, ethnicity etc.
5. Aim towards being an industry leader in gay and lesbian friendly policies, and be aware of what other organisations are doing in this area.
6. Encourage contractors and suppliers to comply with your anti-discrimination policy.
7. Make sure your recruitment procedures are fair eg: selection criteria are applied consistently and personal questions are not asked at interviews.
8. Include an anti-discrimination statement in employment application forms and only use recruitment agencies you know are not homophobic.
9. Make all benefits and leave entitlements the same for lesbian and gay workers as heterosexual workers, and treat their partners as you would partners of heterosexuals.
10. Make it very clear that people are free and welcome to bring same-sex partners to work-related events.
11. Appoint an equal opportunities officer who champions equality within the organisation.
12. Consider sponsoring gay and lesbian events and support staff who may wish to attend under the auspices of the organisation.
13. Promote the idea that fighting homophobia in the workplace is something everyone is responsible for, that lesbian and gay workers have a right to feel safe at the very minimum, and that no matter what your sexual orientation, you are a worthwhile person and everyone deserves respect.

14. If you hear homophobic comments, make it known that this is no longer condoned at work. Silence condones and most homophobes, if challenged, will back down.
15. Advertise your product or business in gay media.

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## **Stop Direct Discrimination**

Include all partners or have no partners to work functions. If straight partners can show affection to their partners the same should apply to same sex couples.

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## **Stop Indirect Discrimination**

Employers shouldn't hand out perks to straight couples that same sex couples can't benefit from.

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## What Trade Unions Can Do

1. Don't avoid this serious issue and don't assume it's the workers fault or that he/she brought the abuse on themselves. If a worker comes to you with a problem relating to sexual orientation and discrimination you must take action, even if you have never been faced with this issue before.
2. Make the removal of homophobia in the workplace part of your work code because this is an issue that affects everyone in the organisation.
3. Have information available for both employees and employers to combat homophobia.
4. Inspect what actions the employer takes when a complaint is made and ensure the appropriate changes are made at the company and there is no further discrimination or harassment towards the complainant.
5. Don't assume the complainant should expect or accept the abuse just because he looks too effeminate or she looks too masculine.

## **Some Words from Lesbians and Gay Men in the Workplace**

Here are some responses from lesbian and gay men when asked to share their workplace experiences.

### **Case One:**

"I was very unhappy. I was drinking far too much and really hating my life. I was not being honest about who I was. I came to realise how internalised my homophobia was, how much I felt inferior because I was gay...I would second guess myself when the partners would ask me what I thought about a case. I would never say what I was thinking. I would think, 'what does he want me to think'.

Admittedly, that concern is there for everyone, but it is an extra burden for closeted gays and lesbians because we spend all our time dealing with that pressure...Hiding takes energy on a constant basis. It's stressful -- there's always the fear of discovery, slipping up, substituting pronouns, using "my friend"- type language, "sanitising" the nature of events".

### **Case Two:**

"I'm hiding something. It occupies time at work, especially when social conversations occur. I fear people will find out. I don't want to test their policy on sexual orientation. Being gay and hiding it adds innumerably to the stress of working in a firm. I spent all my time worrying about the impact if people found out. Every word I spoke, on the phone to clients, to other lawyers, to secretaries, I had to be concerned about what I said. I was constantly checking myself and my reactions. Time better spent on doing work is taken up with anxiety about being discovered as gay or lesbian."

### **Case Three:**

"Most straight people don't mean to be hurtful, I'm sure. They should just think a little before they say silly things. Scatological jokes about gay men and anal sex are juvenile and belong, if they belong anywhere in the locker room. They aren't funny, even the people who say them don't think they're funny..."

The other thing I find socially difficult is when a woman makes an assumption that because I'm a gay man, I find

women in some way repugnant, that I'm scared to be touched by them. Really if they'd just think before they put their foot in their mouth they'd realize what an absurd proposition they are making, that gay men can't stand contact with someone they don't want to sleep with. Really, if people paused for a second before opening their mouth, everyone would get on better."

### **Case Four:**

"We are human. We have feelings just like heterosexuals. We have the ability to think for ourselves. We are only different if you want to make us different. ... People should just stop worrying about something that isn't their issue. Homosexuals do not make a big deal about people being heterosexual, thus the feeling should be mutual. Different strokes for different folks, each to their own and all that jazz. If heterosexuals (generally) didn't make it an issue there wouldn't be an issue."

"We are not different to any other colleague with the same hopes, worries and issues. ... Just because a colleague is gay does not mean that he/she is sexually interested in you. ... The [lesbian and gay] community is as diverse as the heterosexual and you will find people from either end of the spectrum: Very gay and flamboyant to extremely conservative / hardly noticeable. There is no stereotype gay or lesbian and it is important to acknowledge that fact."

### **Case Five:**

"Homophobia at work has never been a really bad thing, for me personally I guess. I think the times it has been good is when I wasn't so worried about what the other person or people thought, or when people have just sort of accepted it and not cared, or when they've been interested in knowing about my life and stuff. The worst is when people go 'oh...' and then don't ask any more.

Occasionally some people treat me differently. At the moment I am having issues with my supervisor who has been pretty much constantly negative towards me since I mentioned I was gay at a work-related social event. ... it goes above and beyond the negative treatment others receive, and as I am currently the only openly gay person in my department, I think that may have something to do with it."

### **Case Six:**

“Never assume anyone is either gay or straight, because it makes it that much harder for gay people if they are constantly being asked whether or not they have a boyfriend or girlfriend of the opposite gender. Next, just treat people as you would be treated. It’s no big deal. Also, don’t ‘out’ people or spread rumours in the workplace. Just be upfront. Never ever discriminate.”

“Being respectful of our relationships will help us. Our commitment to our partners and children whether recognised by Government or not is as genuine as anyone else’s relationship.”

### **Case Seven:**

“In my current job, when I went for the interview I didn’t come out and say that I am gay, once I got the job and started working I did wait for a few weeks before saying anything to suss out what the other staff thought and said about gay and lesbian people. Once I saw that they were ok with it, I told them that I am gay, and now I regularly chat about guys etc with the female staff. However homophobia was a major reason why I left my old work place.”

### **Case Eight:**

Treat us like everyone else – include our partners.

Be careful about throw away remarks – calling someone gay as an insult, or inappropriate and ill-informed discussions on HIV can be hurtful. Companies need to discipline homophobic actions

### **Case Nine:**

We are not different to any other colleague with the same hopes, worries and issues. And gays are not automatically paedophiles and don’t want to jump on other males just because he’s male. Just because a colleague is gay doesn’t mean he/she is sexually interested in you. And if you think he/she is interested it’s ok to say that you’re not interested. It’s the same as being approached by a colleague of the opposite sex. Unfortunately, a lot of people take advances very personal and react in an aggressive manner.



### ***Case Ten:***

Don't assume that everyone is straight, so don't use exclusive language, eg wife/ husband. I also find overt discussion about Christianity a bit off-putting – it makes me feel a bit “on guard” if I don't know the people well. But that may be my own prejudice talking there!

### ***Case Eleven:***

We don't lust after you and we don't want to change you.

There is more difference within groups than between groups. As individuals we have as wide a range of interests, histories, relationships, beliefs, goals, morals and intellect as the rest of the community

And we probably don't know your gay cousin in Sydney, anymore than you know my straight aunty in Ballarat.

## Conclusion

We thank you for taking the time to read this booklet and we hope that you and your organisation will now make changes so that your workplace is more equitable and non-discriminatory for all of your workers. Research shows that organisations who strive to be inclusive benefit from workers being more loyal and hard working.

Attitudes and beliefs towards lesbians and gay men are changing in many parts of the world due to improved awareness and education. Many countries are recognising the need for equality which is a human right that we as heterosexuals in Australia take for granted. We believe this booklet is an opportunity for “everyday” workplaces in this country to give those living in the gay community a “fair go” by removing homophobic behaviour. You and your work colleagues can only gain.

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