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Creating inclusive workplaces in Singapore: A corporate guide for companies and HR practitioners

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“Our hope is that this guidebook will help companies recognise the importance of inclusion and provide practical suggestions for building inclusive workplaces.”

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PREFACE

We are a team of students from the Singapore Management University (SMU). Our team recognises that LGBT (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender) individuals – as with all employees – are valuable members of many organisations that operate in Singapore. We therefore believe that companies can harness the potential of stronger teams by creating diverse and inclusive workplaces for its LGBT and LGBT-affirming members.

While we acknowledge that diversity and inclusion ought to proactively encompass a spectrum of strands such as gender, race and socio-economic backgrounds, management literature concerning LGBT issues in Singapore remain relatively uncharted – a gap that this publication seeks to fill.

As part of the SMU's *Diversity Leadership Development Programme*, we created this booklet for Human Resource practitioners and companies operating in Singapore to shed light on some of the issues faced by LGBT individuals in the workplace. In addition, we explore opportunities for corporations to create a work environment where LGBT individuals can feel safe, included and valued as contributing members of their organisations.

Through this project, we reviewed academic literature and popular press, worked with various entities, and interviewed 22 individuals from diverse backgrounds and specialisations to develop content that Human Resources (HR) practitioners and organisations operating in Singapore might find useful in building inclusive workplaces. These individuals stepped forward after an open appeal for interviewees through professional and community networks.

Anecdotes from their interviews are included throughout this booklet so that readers can appreciate – in their own words – their experiences, challenges and hopes. In order to protect our participants' privacy and the integrity of their contributions, *pseudonyms* have been used have also been included to give readers additional context of the opinions shared.

Benjamin I Hafiz I Tye Wei

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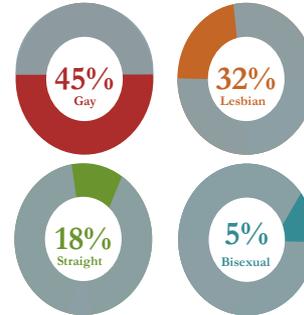
Disclaimer: The organisations and individuals that are publicly acknowledged have been consulted for their opinions during the research of this publication. However, the views expressed in this publication do not necessarily represent the views of the organisations.

The listing of any person or organisation in this publication does not imply any form of endorsement by the authors of the products or services provided by that person or organisation. Readers are urged to exercise their own judgement and discretion.

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RESPONDENT DEMOGRAPHICS



Sexual Orientation



Company Type



18% Technology
 14% Banking & Finance
 14% Education & Training
 9% Legal
 9% Energy
 9% Real Estate
 9% Tourism & Hospitality
 5% Maritime & Offshore
 5% Logistics
 5% Fast Moving Consumer Goods
 5% Non-governmental Organisation

Industry Representation

BUSINESS CASE OF INCLUSION

“The world is moving in a direction where equality is becoming more explicit. If Singapore does not respond to this global trend, its ability to function as a hub may be inhibited.”

**Sandra, Mother of two
Trader, Energy industry**

BUSINESSES today operate in a global economy that is complex, uncertain and interconnected. Companies in Singapore are not isolated from this evolving reality and as such, there is always a constant need to develop innovative strategies to remain relevant and competitive. One key strategy is to build robust and inclusive teams and environments, and to harness the benefits of talent diversity.

Since the arrival of the British and its establishment of Singapore as a trading port, the Singapore society has always been demographically diverse: multi-religious¹, multi-racial and multi-cultural. Today, this diversity is especially pronounced with the prevalence of multi-generational settings as our population ages² and there is an increased awareness and role of Persons with Disabilities in the workforce³. Over the years, these diversity issues have been acknowledged by many companies and with government support, measures have been taken to enable workplaces to cater for employees who identify with these strands.

Some multinational companies have also made concerted efforts over the years to tackle issues facing LGBT employees in the workplace as part of its broader diversity and inclusion initiatives. Some of these companies have localised policies that address workplace discrimination and have successfully rolled out employee benefits to

parallel that of their headquarters⁴; some have sponsored resource groups for LGBT staff and their allies, and a small but increasing number have supported local LGBT initiatives⁵.

LGBT employees in the workplace have been largely been ignored in an otherwise broad spectrum of diversity and inclusion. This comes as no surprise. Singapore's society has been frequently labelled as a “conservative” society by its political leaders⁶ and progress on LGBT equality has traditionally been met with resistance from some religious groups in Singapore⁷. LGBT issues are often regarded as “sensitive” in Singapore⁸ and corporations have, in turn, been less enthusiastic to engage on the issue.

While many recognise the value of fully engaging the inherent diversity of Singapore's society, others might argue: Do LGBT colleagues really face discrimination? Why invest time and resources to support this? How will it support the business?

Increased Business Opportunities

ENGAGING employees from diverse backgrounds enables a company to see a broader spectrum of perspectives that are crucial for innovation⁹. Innovation helps companies remain competitive and is a critical factor for organisational growth. Diversity is a significant part of this picture. In order to harness the full benefits of a diverse workplace, companies need to introduce strategies for employees that make them feel included. Inclusion is a state of being valued, respected and supported¹⁰.

Apart from supporting innovation, a diverse and inclusive workforce can provide useful insights into diverse stakeholder demographics. This is crucial in developing products, services, markets and relationships. More importantly, it helps ensure that the company's offerings are reflective of the societies in which it operates as well as

the company's target consumer base¹¹, and that they create a positive brand image. Based on a recent study from *Mercer*, more companies in the Asia Pacific are recognising the need for a diverse workforce, as they increasingly see diverse customers¹².

Singapore has a reputation for being a key regional and global hub for businesses¹³. Many multinational companies have either regional or global headquarters based in Singapore. As the Singapore office is often tasked with managing across consumer markets, maintaining a diverse team in the Singapore office will enable diverse perspectives, which will allow the company greater efficiency and competitiveness as it coordinates the needs of various countries and markets. Moreover, the implementation of Diversity & Inclusion (D&I) policies and practices in the Singapore office will facilitate stronger communications, teamwork and trust within and between offices.

“In my organisation, diversity is emphasised as a valuable trait for business performance and respect for each individual is part of the culture. This translates to a more inclusive work environment where employees feel comfortable with who they are and valued for their individuality.”

Michael
Analyst, Fast Moving Consumer Goods

Inclusive operating practices can also expand business opportunities by going beyond traditional mind-sets and markets. The inclusion of LGBT individuals can, for example, bring about benefits associated with the “pink dollar”. The “pink dollar” is a popular term that refers to the collective buying power of members of the LGBT community and their supporters¹⁴. In Singapore, it is estimated that the population of LGBT individuals is about 350,000 with a spending power of some

US\$16 billion (SGD \$20 billion)¹⁵; and around USD \$2-3 trillion globally every year¹⁶. According to a *Straits Times* report, more businesses in Singapore are already recognising LGBT individuals as having a higher disposable income and will more likely use services and/or products of businesses that are respectful and welcoming to all¹⁷.

The building of environments that are inclusive for *all* employees help companies align themselves with other stakeholders who similarly value diversity and inclusion – and this can sometimes springboard organisations towards professional networks and markets. A global financial services firm with significant presence in Singapore had, for instance, shared with us how they had won a bid through the highlighting of their D&I practices. The assets involved were businesses that employ thousands of employees from diverse backgrounds; and as all bidders had access to the same due diligence and priced the assets similarly, this firm won by differentiating itself as a company capable of leveraging diversity towards a business advantage.

“In this talent-constrained market... if we cannot provide an environment for people of any background to come in and say that this company is a place that I can succeed, we are basically ignoring a large chunk of the talent market. This would constrain our business growth in a talent dependent industry.”

Michelle
Human resource professional, Technology industry

Attracting and Retaining Talent

IN an economy with a low unemployment rate of around 1.8%¹⁸ and plenty of employers to choose from, businesses in Singapore have to work harder to attract and retain talent. For some positions that require special skill sets, organisations are likely to spend more time and resources on recruitment. Diversity and Inclusion policies can be a method offer to draw talented individuals in an efficient and often cost efficient manner.

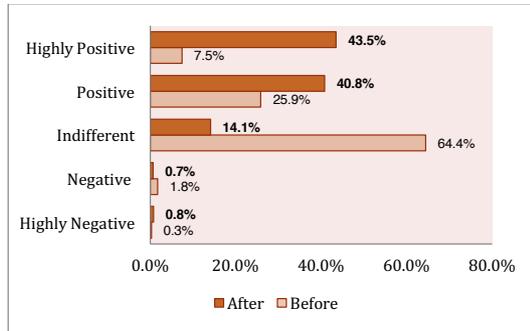


Figure 1: Pink Dot SG

First, an inclusive employer is better positioned as an "employer of choice" among potential candidates because people inherently prefer to work for organisations that are fair, inclusive and non-

discriminatory. This is evident from a recent survey carried out by Pink Dot Singapore: a local community movement that organises the annual Pink Dot event and attracted 28, 000 individuals in 2015 under the umbrella of the "freedom to love". Results of the survey indicated that 87% of respondents would work for a corporate sponsor of the event. Moreover, the survey (see figure 1) also reported a positive shift in brand perception when comparing sentiments before and after knowing that an organisation supports the inclusion of the LGBT community. This is an indication that external engagements that promote inclusion can compel people – employees, consumers and job applicants alike – to look upon the organisation in a more favourable light.

"Having Diversity and Inclusion policies is akin to using a floodlight in the dark. D&I is the floodlight that allows you to look at a bigger area and access the best candidates from a broader talent pool. As opposed to using a "flashlight" which only shows up a smaller section, for example when only recruiting from particular schools or from specific backgrounds. The latter is a more time consuming, expensive and ineffective method."

Martin

Diversity and Inclusion professional, Energy industry

Secondly, broadening the recruitment pool to include more demographic groups will give organisations more choices in attracting and selecting talents; which in turn increases the likelihood of finding the best talent. Today, more companies are becoming wary of "group-think" or "herd-mentality"; hence many are actively employing a variety of methods to engage demographic groups that it hopes to bring into the organisation¹⁹ across ranks and functions. One of these recruitment strategies is through career or professional networking

sessions that align with the organisation's diversity practices. These tailored sessions allow participants from an identified demographic group to raise issues that he/she may otherwise be hesitant to ask in a generic networking session. For example, a female job applicant may feel more comfortable asking questions about glass ceiling issues at forums and events aimed at advancing gender equity. Similarly, LGBT talent with questions to raise about an organisation's policy towards LGBT employees will need a platform that allows for such discussions. These events, when managed well, can lead to new hires, or at the very least, new professional connections.

Thirdly, inclusive policies that create environments where employees feel engaged, included and respected can further enhance the attractiveness of an organisation among potential candidates. Non-financial rewards and incentives offered by organisations (work-life balance, leave entitlements, etc.) have been found to have statistically significant effects on employees' perceived attractiveness of a job offering²⁰. For organisations which feel that they may not be able to compete on the basis of financial remuneration, adopting these inclusive policies may be a viable alternative to attracting talented individuals to join the organisation.

"I like my work environment as it has a very open culture. Even after my boss and a few colleagues found out about my sexual orientation, they were very accepting and gave me the respect that I deserved."

**Zhong Ru
Teacher**

Fourth, organisations who endeavour to build inclusive work environments provide a compelling case for existing employees to stay in the organisation. Safe working environments that enable employees to be themselves will also allow an employee to voice

important personal needs like partner-related benefits and relocation issues. When an LGBT employee does not feel comfortable in sharing his/ her relationship status, support will be neglected. The fact that the LGBT employee might receive less or unequal support from the organisation will probably serve to distract, if not, frustrate the employee. This could lead to personal stress, performance issues, or even a decision to leave their job. Inclusive working environments that allow all employees to be themselves go a long way in helping organisations retain talent and reduce staff turnover.

"I think the business case of inclusivity is very relevant to start-ups. Think about it: many start-ups run on thin margins and if start-ups cannot afford to pay attractive salaries, how else can they attract and retain talent? By recognizing your employees' needs and providing flexibility for it – be it to take care of their partners, kids or elders or any other fundamental requirements."

**Serene, Mother of one
Software Developer, Technology industry**

When it comes to transgender employees, other issues related to retention need to be taken into account. Transitioning is the process that some transgender people go through to begin living as the gender with which they identify, rather than the sex assigned to them at birth. This may or may not include hormone therapy, sex reassignment surgery and other medical procedures²¹. Through our interviews, we found that it was during this process of transitioning that many transgender people experienced discrimination to an extent where they can no longer stay with their employers. While the loss of skills, knowledge and experience can be disruptive to any organisation, we know from research that this is compounded when an organisation loses minority talent²².

On another note, inclusive working environments should provide *all* employees with a safe space to engage with one another, and with senior management. This enhances the organisation's attractiveness as an employer of choice and helps reduce turnover. Amongst other initiatives, formal feedback channels can be introduced through Employee Resource Groups (ERGs). Companies with ERGs can better understand how and what messages resonate better with their employee demographic rather than simply making assumptions.

Greater Organisational Commitment

THE results of strong diversity and inclusion policies include enabling freedom of identity, offering a climate of inclusiveness, and equal access within the organisation. Research shows that a company that is able to provide this type of environment has a high level of organisational commitment and also benefit from heightened employee job satisfaction²³. Improved organisation commitment not only motivates employees to contribute to the organisation, but it also reduces the often significant cost associated with employee turnover.

Due to the predominantly negative attitudes toward gays and lesbians amongst Singaporeans and permanent residents²⁴, many LGBT employees find it difficult to be themselves in the workplace. In a recent survey conducted, 60.2% of the respondents indicated they have had experienced abuse and discrimination based on their sexual orientation and/or gender identity. These levels were highest for transgender females (94.4%)²⁵.

During our research, some LGBT participants voiced that they were used to "compartmentalising" their lives by not discussing their private lives in the workplace and by "remaining in the closet". Others talked about the unspoken "don't ask, don't tell" rule that is pervasive in many organisations. Our participants further explained that many of

these learned behaviours are due to the homophobic cues that were displayed within the organisation.

"The directors of the company were conservative and from the same religious group. Their beliefs on various issues were often articulated and translated into various business practices... As they have very publicly condemned the LGBTs before, all the LGBT individuals "remain in the closet" for the fear of being discriminated against."

El

Sales Manager, Real estate

"Senior bosses in the organization have made very homophobic remarks during private meetings where they expected staff in attendance to agree with the view against homosexuality. Knowing their stance, I fear that I would be marked down during my yearly appraisal should my bosses become aware of my sexual orientation."

Daniel

Senior Manager, Public Infrastructure Company

"During lunch time or small office get-togethers, we would naturally talk about issues not related to work. This would sometimes include current affairs and the latest "hot topics". Whenever the LGBT issue was discussed, my colleagues will voice strong disapproval and make derogatory remarks about LGBT individuals. I am thus not willing to come out to them."

Charmaine

Project Manager, Technology industry

"In the corporate setting, people are more cautious of their behaviour as they do not want to jeopardise their career. LGBT employees are worried that their sexual orientation would be a way for others to find fault with them."

Melvin

Former customer service manager, Hospitality industry

In such environments, LGBT individuals will not feel safe to be themselves, and this can negatively affect interpersonal trust with colleagues and clients²⁶. While some might argue that it is possible to draw a distinction between professional and personal relationships, the value of building authentic working relationships in contributing to better job performance cannot be ignored. Research has shown that workers are happier in their jobs when they have friendships with co-workers²⁷. In turn, "happiness" creates stronger organisational commitment, which then motivates employees to go the extra mile. This is particularly important in Singapore, as Singaporeans have the longest working hours in the world²⁸.

"Work environments are social environments. While work relationships are driven by performance, measured by work output. But often, the personal portion affects performance as people whom you work with eventually want to get to know you better."

Robin

Senior analyst, Technology industry

¹⁴ NOTE: Coming out/ Being out/ Out of the closet: "Coming out" refers to the process through which a person recognizes, acknowledges and finally accepts their LGBT identity. Some people are selectively "out" in some settings (with friends) and "closeted" in other settings (at work or with family). Yangfa, L. (2013)²⁹.

Companies run the risk of underperforming when they do not seek to build inclusive work environments. An LGBT employee who feels that they must hide who they are (and are directly or indirectly receiving these messages from the work environment or organisation) will invest unnecessary energy into hiding their identities. This can adversely affect performance. Diversity management literature has shown repeatedly that employees perform better and are more productive when they feel safe and valued at the workplace³⁰.

"Despite my boss's initial hesitation with the idea of me being a lesbian, she eventually began to ask me to bring my girlfriend to business functions in the same way others were invited to bring their spouse. Her acceptance of my partner and I made me happier and strengthened my relationship with the rest of the team. I was willing to go the extra for the company as a result."

Angeline

Personal Development Trainer

This applies to transgender workers as well. Transgender individuals experience "gender" in ways that differ from their biological sex. Environments that are not sensitive to transgender people add to the psychological stress that already exists with the transition processes or and work.

Ultimately, diversity and inclusion practices can present a cost-effective solution for companies to reduce the high cost of staff turnover and to increase productivity. On the contrary, an organisation that is not inclusive will be less efficient and experience lower productivity³¹.

INCLUSIVE WORKPLACE POLICIES

Company-wide policies

1. Non-discrimination statement

COMPANIES can take the first step of creating an inclusive environment by publishing its commitment in the form of a non-discrimination statement to ensuring that it will respect all employees and not discriminate on the basis of age, mental/ physical ability, gender, gender identity or expression, national origin, race and sexual orientation or other difference. All these dimensions are inherent and mostly are permanent to the individual – characteristics that cannot change³². While most of these dimensions are visible, a person's sexual orientation is invisible and difficult to ascertain until the individual identifies it themselves in one form or another. It is therefore more important for companies to include this and other invisible dimensions, signalling to *all* employees, that they can and **should bring their full, authentic selves to the office.**

By extolling this commitment, companies who are just starting out can then take a gradual but progressive approach to ensuring that all its policies are inclusive. This Diversity and Inclusion strategy should always be holistic in encompassing all forms of diversity and be consistent in terms of communication.

“Our vision is to be a leader in diversity and inclusion and as an employer of choice worldwide. We will do this by valuing differences, promoting a culture of respect for each individual and encouraging workforce diversity in all aspects and at all levels. We believe that diversity is not just about valuing differences based on gender, age, race or colour, gender identity, religion or belief, disability, national origin, and sexual orientation. We know that if our people are able to be themselves at work they are more engaged and productive. By creating an inclusive environment where every individual knows that they are valued and can progress on the basis of merit and skill we can leverage the full potential of our workforce.”

Ivy

Diversity and inclusion coordinator, Legal industry

2. The role of senior management

THE corporate culture of **many companies is often moulded by the ideas, beliefs and vision of its leadership.**

Rightly so, senior management should take the lead in creating a safe and inclusive culture in the workplace, for example, by being visible allies, extolling the virtues of inclusion, or coaching and mentoring LGBT and other minority talent. Senior leaders could show their support in other tangible ways, such as by being sponsors of LGBT networks within their companies. The impact of a senior leader representing a minority group either as a member of that group or ally is significant.

“If throughout your whole life you’ve never met a positive LGBT role model in your industry or been allowed to see one in the local media, then you’re never going to have an LGBT role model. It is obviously different now with the Internet but... never underestimate the power of positive influence by having senior professionals who are ‘out!’.”

Thomas

Senior sustainability manager, Maritime and offshore

Inclusive HR practices

1. Fair employment practices

TO ensure that the best people are hired, interview processes should seek to be aware of and minimise the unconscious bias of interviewers. Companies can take specific actions such as implementing a system of “**blind resumes**” for all roles. These “blind” resumes are redacted so that they do not include the applicant’s personal details, such as his/her name, marital status, nationality, race, address and gender; but would retain information pertinent to the role such as past working experiences, awards attained and various relevant skills.

Even information such as a candidate’s name or address can trigger an unconscious bias in an interviewer. Removing this information forces those who are screening the resumes to focus on the areas specific to the role: experience and skills. Once candidates have been reviewed, screened and short-listed, HR can then return the redacted information (name, address, etc.) and carry out interviews. This process helps interviewers remain impartial and focused on identifying the most suitable and qualified candidate for the role.

Secondly, organisations can provide **training for interviewers on unconscious bias**. Through our interviews, we found this to be popular among larger firms, especially in the Financial Services sector. The heightened awareness around unconscious bias allows employees to “check” themselves and each other when making certain decisions. Through unconscious bias training, a hiring manager may realise that they have a bias towards candidates who have graduated from the same university. In an interview situation, this may result in the hiring manager asking fewer questions about the candidate’s education and instead delve deeper into the education of other candidates who graduated from different universities.

Implementing a system of **interview panels** rather than one-on-one interviews can further enhance this. The interview panel of three people should comprise of at least one male and one female employee who would interview the candidate together. Apart from gender diversity requirements, the interview panel could alternatively include at least one panellist from another identified minority demographic in the organisation. The value of having an interview panel is the breadth of perspectives that different backgrounds will bring, while also lessening the impact of unconscious bias. Using the same example as above, another interviewer on the panel might then pick up on those questions that his/her colleague on the panel may have missed out on as a result of the unconscious bias towards the interviewee. In turn, this ensures that all candidates are posed the same or similar questions and each given the same opportunity to respond.

2. Equitable appraisal practices

WHILE most companies believe in and have implemented meritocratic processes and reward individuals based on performance, a manager’s impressions and personal opinions often also impact the way an individual’s performance is measured and therefore rewarded. This

unconscious bias can be a significant factor when managers complete performance appraisals³³. This can lead to inequitable outcomes that are contrary to the company's values.

In order to reduce the impact that unconscious bias can have on the appraisal process, companies can implement a variety of actions such as **adopting a 360-degree appraisal system** to obtain a more holistic assessment of an individual's performance as opposed to simply that of an individual. A 360-degree appraisal includes a line manager's views and feedback of an employee but also takes into account that of subordinates, peers and other stakeholders. While this type of appraisal usually is more balanced it does not assume that all bias – unconscious or otherwise – has been identified and/or addressed.

As part of this study, we have heard from employees in a variety of positions who have shared their concerns – real or perceived – of being judged or appraised unfairly if they were to truly be themselves in the workplace, and therefore go to great lengths to mask or hide that part of themselves. The fear of negatively impacting one's careers by being true to oneself, being who you are can impact your career and/or compensation is a real one for many, even if that concern is a perceived one. Additionally, employees should have **an avenue to seek redress**, such as an appeals system if and when they feel that they have been discriminated against during the appraisal process.

3. Recognising all relationships

MANY companies currently extend benefits or other HR policies to the spouses of employees whose legal marriage is recognised in Singapore. However, in many companies that operate here, it is highly likely that there are employees who are in committed long-term relationships but are not legally married; or whose union may not be recognised in Singapore.

This is not just an issue for LGBT employees and their partners but indeed an even bigger issue for common-law heterosexual couples who choose not to formalise their relationship. There is an increasing trend in Asia, including in Singapore, for opposite-sex couples not to legalise their relationship, but who consider their partner to be their husband or wife³⁴. As with LGBT employees, this precludes them from being able to access benefits such as health or life insurance coverage for their partner and so on. Nonetheless, these relationships remain an important part of our societies and are meaningful to those involved.

Companies with work environments that are inclusive of all employees do not discriminate against those with "non-traditional" family models and gives due recognition to an employee's partner. This is achieved through **inclusive language where the term "partner" is used** instead of "husband", "wife" or "spouse". When opting into health and life insurance policies, an inclusive company will invite employees to nominate an "individual" (or "individuals") as opposed to "family member". In this way, a heterosexual employee may choose to elect their common-law partner or their same-sex partner for an LGBT employee. Companies concerned about the potential to abuse the system, can implement best practices such as:

(A) Obtaining an **affidavit** from a lawyer including a statement of affirmation of the relationship and identifying the individuals in the relationship.

(B) **Declaration from** the employee that his/her partner share the same address and/or bank account and are in an ongoing committed relationship.

These documents would thereafter be kept on file by HR as evidence for the company to provide benefits to the nominated individual, the partner of the LGBT employee. The employee is required to inform the company when there are changes to the relationship.

“There are many countries which have recognised same- sex couples and their families. If Singapore wants to continue to remain attractive to all forms of talent, it has to help everyone can feel comfortable raising a family in.”

Ellen, Mother of 2
Senior Manager, Banking and Finance

4. Inclusive staff benefits

MANY companies provide varying degrees of benefits to support their employees and their families, including the recognition of various milestones of their career or personal life. This can include long-term service awards; as well as support of overseas postings, medical conditions, births, deaths and marriages. This level of support helps companies build organisational commitment and loyalty amongst its employees and is instrumental in retaining employees.

As LGBT employees go through similar challenges as compared to their heterosexual counterparts, it only makes sense to offer equal support for all employees, regardless of their sexual orientation. Some organisations have chosen to review benefits entitlements to same-sex couples on a case-by-case basis. While addressing the circumstances of same-sex couples on a case-by-case basis may be well intentioned, this method may create inequality and draw a distinction between same-sex and heterosexual couples. Rather than appearing subjectively or partially inclusive, companies can **take a more principled stand to provide all employees and their families with the same or similar set of benefits in all circumstances at all times**. As referenced earlier, a company that includes “gender identity or expression” in its non-discrimination policy should be also prepared to **support an employee undergoing gender transition**¹¹.

More importantly, the **transparency and proper communication of the organisation’s benefits policy** minimises the need for LGBT individuals who may not be out in the workplace to engage in uncomfortable conversations with different parties to seek clarifications if they are not out in the workplace. It would also be very helpful to provide the contacts of HR personnel, LGBT-ally network, senior leaders or trained counsellors that LGBT employees can approach for various matters.

While most companies typically have a list of medical institutions and counselling services for its employees to seek subsidised medical or psychological support, inclusive companies can go a step further by **identifying specific institutions that have stronger expertise in dealing with the needs of a particular demographic**. For example, a clinic that specialises in women’s medical issues could be identified for female employees, and LGBT-friendly counselling services can be highlighted to LGBT employees or employees with LGBT family members. A list of useful contacts of LGBT friendly organisations in Singapore is provided at the back of this publication.

A common challenge for LGBT employees with foreign partners is the ability to obtain a dependency pass or long-term visit pass from the Immigration and Checkpoints Authority (ICA). As part of our research we encountered individuals and companies who had appealed directly to the ICA to seek a dependency pass or long-term visit pass; failing which, the **company identified other options to support the dependent** by providing them with assistance to gain employment or seek education opportunities in Singapore, for example.

¹¹ NOTE: Staff benefits for a transitioning employee, amongst other considerations, should be made clear to transitioning employees, their supervisors, colleagues and other staff. More detailed considerations can be found on www.hrc.org/resources/entry/workplace-gender-transition-guidelines

As Singapore is an “open economy” that welcomes foreign direct investment, there are evidently foreigners who come to Singapore for work, contributing to the local economy. Some of these workers with partners may come from countries where same-sex marriage or unions are legally recognised. Thus, Singapore’s ability to attract and retain the best talent in all industries is limited by its recognition, or lack thereof, of the realities of the circumstances of LGBT individuals, including but not limited to securing legal status for their partner to remain in Singapore together with them.

From our interviews, some participants have shared stories of local and foreign employees who were either forced to leave Singapore, or whose partners had to live elsewhere because their partner was unable to secure a visa or other legal means for the partner to live in Singapore. While there are implications on couples’ relationships, it is also clear that businesses have also suffered losses from the expenses incurred from relocating their staff to Singapore and then repatriating them; as well as the missed opportunity of having the talent contribute to Singapore.

5. Comprehensive insurance coverage

AS part of employee benefits, many organisations provide various forms of insurance coverage and protection for their employees and often their families. These insurance offerings, such as life insurance and medical insurance, seek to protect individuals against the potentially heavy financial burden of unfortunate circumstances in life as well as helps the company maintain an engaged workforce. It is therefore important for any employer to **extend insurance coverage to the partners and the families of all employees regardless of sexual orientation**.

In Singapore the majority of insurance offered to employees are “group” policies, where the policy-owner is the employer, and the policy covers the employees or members of the group (“Insured

Persons”) which is sometimes defined by the employer, but more frequently by the insurer. Many insurance companies in Singapore still require Insured Persons be a legal family member, the opposite sex spouse of the employee, and/or to produce a recognised marriage certificate or other evidence of formal blood relationship in the case of dependents before the coverage can be extended to their partners or family members. This current practice is therefore limiting in covering LGBT employees. This is equally an issue for unmarried employees in heterosexual opposite-sex relationships as well as transgender employees.

Some of the companies we spoke with shared their frustration with archaic approaches to insurance coverage and the concept of Insured Persons that is out of touch with the reality of the modern workforce and the evolving nature of family units. As such, employers have told us that they need to be **pro-active in negotiations with insurance providers and to carry out thorough due diligence to ensure that no employee is ‘left behind’**.

Some more savvy insurers such as AIG Asia Pacific Insurance have gone as far as saying that the sexual orientation of its policyholders and Insured Persons “is not relevant during application for insurance or claims of assessment across all AIG products”³⁵.

From our interviews with transgender individuals, we have also found that many corporate insurance plans do not cover medically necessary transition-related care for transgender individuals. These individuals thus have to pay for expensive treatments that are crucial during their transition. Inclusive organisations should consider **extending their employee insurance coverage to include medically necessary treatments and procedures**, such as those defined by the *World Professional Association for Transgender Health*³⁶.

Building a network for support

1. Raising awareness about LGBT issues

APART from understanding the meaning of the abbreviation 'LGBT', many people in Singapore may not know anyone who identifies as LGBT, or what that identity or experience really means. While some argue that it is the responsibility of society itself to be enlightened, it is equally important to help raise employees' awareness and understanding on this matter in creating a culture that supports a safe, inclusive working environment for LGBT employees.

Inclusive organisations can consider **organising dialogue sessions** with invited non-governmental organisations, external speakers or senior leaders of the company to speak about their experiences or challenges of LGBT individuals. Discussions on the business case for LGBT inclusion are important, as many corporate cultures and indeed many parts of our society perceive LGBT to be taboo. If not for these deliberate and explicit messages, discussions will likely remain underground, along with the stereotypes and ignorance of people. This scenario makes it even more challenging to build an inclusive work environment.

This space to question and understand LGBT issues in the workplace is vital in Singapore, due to the lack of such forums in the public domain. These talks can also extend to other diversity issues that the organisation is addressing to help build a greater understanding of the value of diversity and inclusion.

“It is important to increase a company's awareness of LGBT discrimination issues at the workplace, in order to break that old taboo and understand the challenges both sides face. We need this to facilitate constructive conversations”

Howard
Sustainability professional, Real estate

Events supporting LGBT equality could be marked in the office as part of a broader diversity event. For example, acknowledging International Day Against Homophobia and Transphobia (IDAHOT) on 17 May annually, in addition to the other events that are celebrated in the office, such as Durian Days, Earth Day, Hari Raya, International Women's Day or Deepavali, can play a vital role in helping employees understand the issues, as well as to advance the business case for inclusion. These events also highlight that the organisation's commitment to recognising and appreciating the individuality of all employees. A firm in Singapore recently initiated Pink Fridays in the office where employees are invited to wear pink on a particular Friday as a statement on equality and symbol of understanding, acceptance and support.

“When people do not personally experience the challenges of being LGBT or know someone who is doing so, it makes it harder for them to relate and understand.”

YS

Analyst, Banking and finance industry

2. LGBT-Ally networks

ORGANISATIONS can establish employee resource groups (ERGs) or interest groups relating to the various diversity strands. These networks are not grievance platforms for employees but rather, important platforms to facilitate the creation of inclusive workplaces. These networks lend their voices in pointing out discriminatory behaviour or policies that may be present in the organisation, initiate programmes to raise awareness of its diversity issue and propose initiatives that could make the organisation more inclusive for everyone. Most importantly, ERGs are **employee-driven and have the explicit aim of supporting the business.** These ERGs also serve to **raise the awareness of LGBT issues in the workplace,**

develop allies, and **provide support** for LGBT employees and those interested in LGBT issues.

An important element of these networks is **straight allies**. Straight allies are heterosexual employees who support equality and the inclusion of LGBT employees in the workplace. For example, allies can **create a more visible representation of their own inclusion and support** by displaying cards, stickers, lanyards and/or flags that they can use/display on their desks. This visibility also sends a strong signal that the organisation, and teams in particular, strives to be an inclusive place for all employees.

For many LGBT employees, the process of coming to terms with their sexual orientation or “coming out of the closet” can be difficult and emotional, and for reasons including those addressed above, often more so here in Singapore. The gender transition that some transgender individuals go through is also immensely challenging. These ERGs offer LGBT employees an avenue where they might find support from colleagues and peers who are willing to listen as well as to address issues and areas of opportunity. Nonetheless, inclusive companies should have a variety of ERGs that cover different D&I strands and populations.

“In my coming out, I have allowed myself to become the personification of the LGBT issue for my friends. This suddenly isn't just a distant concept, rather one that directly affects someone they know, and people begin to question their prejudices.”

Priya
Business Manager, Financial Services

The distinction between LGBT-Ally network and other employee networks is the **importance of an LGBT employee's representation in the core group**. This is important as it sends a message that the organisation is a safe environment for employees who choose to “bring their whole selves to work”.

For companies who are starting an LGBT or an Ally network, the core group should include:



Senior leader(s) who can act as an executive sponsor providing support and leveraging their influence to raise issues to the senior most level of the company



Senior HR personnel who has the ability to understand and address matters from a people-process perspective



Legal advisor to help advise on matters such as perceptions that it's ‘illegal’ to be gay in Singapore



LGBT Employee to send a message that the environment is safe for employees who choose to “bring their whole selves to work”

“When a senior leader steps out to say, “I am gay”. It signals to various LGBT employees in more junior positions that the organisation is a safe environment.”

Sylvia
Consultant, Education

Apart from creating a culture of inclusion within the organisation, **ERGs can work on a variety of events to help support the**

organisational goals. For example, when ERGs organise events around diversity themes to raise awareness among its own employees, it could also invite other stakeholders of the organisation, including industry peers, suppliers, existing clients and potential customers, to participate as well. This not only promotes the organisation as a partner that values diversity and inclusion, but also provides networking opportunities for all parties.

Similarly, ERGs can organise **career forums** to target their respective demographics. These events are important in creating a safe space where candidates can seek clarifications or discuss sensitive issues particular to the demographic. For example, a LGBT fresh engineering graduate could ask about benefit offerings for her same-sex partner. These sessions provide companies with the opportunity to engage the best possible talent in the market.

While there have been opposing voices from the external environment with regards to LGBT-affirmative events – including professional events, such events continue to exist and have, in recent years, been increasingly successful in generating discussions and expanding networks. While it can be argued that organisations ought to remain mindful of the negative voices, observers and commentators agree that companies need to stand firm on its position on inclusion. After all, it is precisely because of such prejudice that these events are organised – however, it is also more important to demonstrate integrity³⁷.

“Coming out is a very personal issue for each individual. For some, they may not be ready or comfortable; while others may not see the need to. However, an inclusive environment is still important in building a safe space to make all individuals feel comfortable regardless of the choice they make in deciding whether to come out or not.”

**Sean
Lawyer**

3. Diversity training

COMPANIES competing in the global economy operate in different markets and employ a workforce that is unprecedentedly diverse by default. In order to be successful employees therefore need to be equipped with the various skills and knowledge to effectively manage this new reality. One such way to provide this is through diversity training offerings.

There are many aspects of diversity training. From educating employees about unconscious bias, to empowering employees with practical methods to create inclusive work environments such as toolkits for straight allies (LGBT), skills for operating effectively across different cultures (ethnicity), disability awareness (people with disabilities) and so on. These types of training can take on various forms including online modules, structured face-to-face training conducted by external parties or sharing by trained professionals during company events.

For companies starting out, the below are **four practical considerations** that matter most to our LGBT respondents:



Gender identity/ Expression

Incorporate education about gender identity and gender expression in diversity training programs to build sensitivity towards colleagues who identify as transgender, transitioning or questioning. For example, most people take reasonable access to restroom facilities for granted as transgender people often face the burden of being confronted or questioned about which gender's restroom they should use¹. Companies should therefore educate *all* employees on this matter to help all parties feel comfortable, and promote inclusion within the work environment.

Inclusive conversations should also use gender nouns/ pronouns that are consistent with the gender identity of the individual. Enquire beforehand which gender pronoun an individual wishes to identify with and never assume where the trans-person is on in their journey of transition. Proper usage of gender nouns / pronouns, even in private conversations, can help tremendously in shaping inclusive environments.

“When I began transitioning from a male to a female, my colleagues would make many defamatory remarks at me. It was hurtful. I only hoped that they saw me as a hardworking individual who wanted to contribute as much to my company as possible.”

Nicole
Consultant, Hospitality industry



Inclusive “Monday conversations”

Trust building often starts during Monday morning conversations around the phrase “How was your weekend?”- a question to which it is deemed acceptable that heterosexual employees can talk about their boyfriend, their girlfriend, their spouse or their children, but one which in many companies suggests that LGBT employees should not talk about their partner. These Monday morning conversations become cornerstones to building relationships in the workplace and carry over to job-related requests and support. Without these trust-building conversations, working relationships become less effective.

It is therefore helpful to start conversations about relationships with nouns/pronouns that are not gender-specific. For example, “you and your partner” is more inclusive than “you and your boyfriend/ girlfriend/ husband/ wife”



Using appropriate nouns/ pronouns

Use the same nouns/ pronouns as expressed by the other party.

Male employee 1: I went out with my *partner* over the weekend.

Employee 2: Where did you and your *girlfriend* go?

Employee 3: Where did you and your *partner* go?



Stop derogatory remarks

From a management perspective, make it clear that derogatory remarks against any group of individuals, including homophobic comments are not only inappropriate but are also in conflict with the values and rules of the organisation. Encourage employees to stand up or speak out against such behaviour even in private settings (at the office pantry, over causal conversations etc.).

This stance is particularly important in Singapore as a recent survey found that the most common forms of abuse or discrimination faced by LGBTQ individuals are homophobic jokes and being called derogatory names³⁸. These insulting words that should be avoided are in English, Chinese, Malay, Tamil and other local dialects. Examples include:³⁹

| Offensive terms to avoid | “Inclusive” terms |
|------------------------------|------------------------------|
| Ah Kua, Bapok, Pondan | Gay man or transgender woman |
| Dyke, Les | Lesbian |
| Faggot, Homo, Kedik | Gay man |
| Tranny/ Transsexual | Transgender person |

BUILDING INDUSTRY ALLIES

WHILE many organisations seek to drive internal policies to build inclusive workplaces for all employees, no single organisation alone will be able to effect lasting change that is required to address many diversity and inclusion issues. As such, there is tremendous value in supporting others in this journey through industry/sector specific “inter-groups”. While these “inter-groups” typically involve networks and staff from different organisations in the industry, these groups remain free and open to all who are interested in building inclusive work environments.

A case in point would be “inter-groups” effectiveness in dealing with the low representation of females in STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics) industries/ jobs. While we recognise that part of the problem is the lack of positive messages about STEM careers that children receive implicitly and explicitly, no single company will be able to change the way that a culture sends messages to females and males about careers in STEM being a valid career option for both genders. It is only through concerted efforts at the industry level will this kind of change ever begin to be made. It is for such reasons that many companies connect with each other to share best practices and experiences.

Participation in these inter-groups provides a forum for participants to discuss issues affecting LGBT employees in their day-to-day work environments, share/learn about the best inclusion practices within the industry, promote networking opportunities within the industry and for companies to collaborate on matters related to diversity and inclusion when synergies can bring about mutual benefit.

For companies that are new to the diversity and inclusion space, these inter groups are excellent platforms to seek support and to learn from

other industry peers who have more experience in dealing with inclusive policies.

“When evangelizing D&I, much like CSR, we cannot leave the SMEs out – they have to be in everyone’s radar as a bulk of Singaporeans work for SMEs... Like CSR, what then needs to be done in the SME space for D&I is for them to find among themselves strategic partnerships and alliances because there’s a lot of potential synergies for cross collaborations and collective efforts – and [in this circumstance] that’s the best way to do things.”

Hazel

Corporate social responsibility professional

CONCLUDING REMARKS

CONSIDERING that Singapore workers spend an inordinate amount of time⁴⁰ at work (sometimes more than they spend with their families and friends), the psychological and emotional stress of hiding in the closet in the case of LGBT employees should be a legitimate concern. Companies and HR practitioners can help address this by implementing *inclusive workplace policies and practices* to ensure that their work environments allow for identity freedom, nurturing a climate of inclusiveness while guaranteeing equal access for all employees. The implementation of D&I also has a strong *business case*.

Despite our best efforts, our team recognises that there are limitations and areas that deserve further study. Firstly, our pool of participants was gathered through purposive convenience sampling, using established professional networks and social organisations. Given more time, we would have liked to interview a larger pool of participants, which might further validate our findings. Although our guidebook has served to introduce best practices in the field of Diversity and Inclusion, it is lacking in stating the challenges of realistically implementing our recommendations, particularly in Singapore's context. Further research could therefore explore this aspect and understand how companies can overcome these challenges. Studies could also consider the inherent differences between types of companies, and its relation to implementing diversity and inclusion practices.

Through this publication, we hope that companies, especially Singapore-based organisations, will reflect on the importance of diversity and inclusion – not just for the benefit of their employees, but also, for their businesses. With this realisation, it is our hope that companies will use our guidebook as a starting point of reference for practical *inclusive workplace policies* to be implemented within their organisations.

USEFUL CONTACTS

1. **Dr Tan & Partners** (<http://drtanandpartners.com/home/>)

A group of medical clinics dedicated to providing holistic health care and disease prevention. It currently has four outlets in Bencoolen, Novena, Robertson and Scotts.

2. **DSC Clinic** (<https://www.dsc-clinic.sg/>)

DSC clinic operates under the Ministry of Health for the diagnosis, treatment and control of Sexually Transmitted Infections in Singapore.

3. **Tsoi Clinic** (Tel: 6734 5191)

TSOI Clinic provides psychiatrist and general practitioner services with experiences working with transgendered individuals.

4. **Oogachaga** (www.oogachaga.com)

Oogachaga is a community-based counselling, support and personal development agency for LGBTQ individuals, couples and families.

5. **Counselling and Care Centre** (www.counsel.org.sg)

Counselling and Care Centre offers psychological counselling services and training for professionals in the mental health and social services.

6. **Pelangi Pride Centre** (www.pelangipridecentre.org)

Hosted by the Free Community Church, Pelangi Pride Centre is an LGBTQ resource centre, library and community space.



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