

LGBT+ EMPLOYEE NETWORKS

Lots of organisations in Poland have been considering how to set up and run groups focused on different dimensions of diversity. One area of focus is the LGBT+ community and its allies. What are the most common and best practices in this regard?

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In several parts of the world, June is celebrated as 'pride month' for the LGBT+ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and people from a wide spectrum of non-heteronormativity, asexuality, intersex and allies) communities. The sixth month of the calendar year included several events important to this diverse group of people, including the Stonewall Rebellion and the introduction of marriage equality in all US states.

Business in Poland is increasingly bold in addressing the LGBT+ community. In our experience, diversity and inclusion strategies initially focused mainly on issues related to gender, ability, age, but for several years now we have seen an increasing interest in minority groups related to psychosexual orientation and gender identity

The most visible indication of support is June's alteration of the logo to a more rainbow-coloured one. The rainbow flag was designed in 1978 by Gilbert Baker as a symbol of pride and the movement for LGBT+ equality. Simultaneously, employees in Poland signal that, although the visual support of the community means a lot to them, the HR and management support is of greater value and worth to them. In a situation where local legislation and society are hardly willing to recognise the specific needs of this group, the employer can listen to them and make an educated decision on which areas it is willing and able to support its male and female employees.

Social and cultural realities mean that it is not uncommon for the majority group to question (or even challenge) why the themes of this community are taken into account in diversity, inclusion and belonging strategies. Other employee networks arouse much less interest and excitement. In our experience, initial fears in organisations are often not borne out in reality; on the contrary, pride groups are often one of the most resilient and intersectional groups in a company. Indeed, it turns out that, for example, topics related to a child's coming out can potentially affect any parent. In this article, we explore how employee networks for the LGBT+ community and allies in Poland are set up and function.

THE LGBT+ COMMUNITY IN POLISH ORGANISATIONS

Between 5 and 7 per cent of any society, including Polish ones, are LGBT+ people [1]. If these rates are taken into account in the calculations, there are between 2 and 4 million non-heteronormative, transgender and non-binary people living in Poland. Statistically, therefore, one person in a team of twenty belongs to this community, while in a company of four hundred there will be twenty such people. Meanwhile, this minority group, for social and cultural reasons, is particularly vulnerable to stereotypical perceptions and discrimination. According to reports by the International Lesbian and Gay Association (ILGA), Poland was once again ranked as the least LGBT+ friendly country in the European Union in 2020 [2]. People from the LGBT+ community face discrimination in all areas of life: in educational institutions, in public places and at work.

LGBT+ PEOPLE IN THE COMPANY

Every person working in a company brings a dimension of diversity to the organisation. Unlike many other traits (e.g. skin colour), sexual orientation and gender identity are quite easy to conceal. Heteronormative society encourages and rewards employee behaviour of concealing orientation and identity - even unconsciously.

If a colleague asks a female colleague at work if she will come to the company gala, he usually assumes that she is in a heterosexual relationship, so the question is often: Will you come with your boyfriend or husband? The question would sound different if it was formulated: Will you come with your close friend? In this case, usually neither party has negative intentions, but neither the colleague knows to phrase the question differently, nor does the friend feel like making stressful corrections about her private life. Therefore, many people prefer not to come out (i.e. disclose their minority orientation or identity) for fear of discrimination and not to talk about their family situation, their same-sex partner or their perceived gender incompatibility with the one assigned at birth.

However, this initially 'safe' choice can lead to negative consequences for both employees and employers. Minority stress for LGBT+ people is exacerbated by thoughts of colleagues guessing or finding out what their true orientation or identity is. They are concerned that this information may negatively affect their career and functioning at work. When employees feel obliged to lack authenticity, conceal their identity and create a false self-image and personal identity, their productivity can decline.

HOW TO START A CONVERSATION?

Our experience suggests that, most often, discussions about LGBT+ employee networks and the desire to act in this area tends to take two opposite directions.

The first one stems from the global structure of numerous multinational companies: a local branch of a company located in Poland is asked what activities it undertakes for the LGBT+ employee community in Poland in connection with its global diversity and inclusion (D&I) strategy and employee resource groups (affinity groups). If an organisation's local branch does not have an individual dedicated solely to diversity, inclusion and belonging management, human resources departments are most often faced with this challenge. This line of discussion could be called top-down - the global D&I strategy is sent from the company's headquarters to the country offices and then to the individual departments and teams. Global recommendations are implemented with consideration of the local specificities, needs, business and social

environment. This situation has its advantages: the support of the company's management, the anchoring in the company's strategy, the 'mandatory' implementation linked to the allocation of finances and people to create an employee network in accordance with requirements, internal procedures and best practices.

Sometimes, however, the opposite is the case. The factor that generates discussion is the interest of male and female workers themselves. This direction can be described as bottom-up. Employee networks are gaining popularity in Poland and are increasingly appreciated by employees. Employees are therefore themselves asking whether it is possible to establish an employee network in their company in a particular diversity area (e.g. gender, age, fitness, orientation and identity). In organisations with few resources, such a group may operate as a network simply dealing with diversity and inclusion in different dimensions. If the interest is more significant and each network has a leader, then one can think about setting up groups focused on a particular dimension of diversity.

This is based on a willingness to start working in all areas of diversity (gender, ability, age, multiculturalism, sexual orientation and gender identity). Company communication should start by letting employees know that a culture of inclusion is important to the company because every employee is different, yet together we are building an organisation where every person should feel included and valued regardless of the dimension of diversity they bring to the company.

HOW TO START?

Our experience suggests that communication with employees can best start by explaining more about what is meant by a diversity and inclusion strategy and employee networks centred around different dimensions of diversity. It is also useful to provide best practice and examples from other departments or company locations, if you have any. Communication should be straightforward, friendly, with a clear focus on how this initiative fits into the company's strategy and business objectives.

Often people who are interested in being part of the employee network, have questions and put forward ideas already at this stage of information. It also happens that such communication provokes reactions of scepticism and questioning of the legitimacy of a staff network for the LGBT+ community. It is important to respond to any employee concerns in this step, but at the same time not to be discouraged if the communication does not generate a lively discussion or the feedback is ambivalent. Since communication should address all dimensions of diversity equally, without highlighting any one group.

If we are planning an online event (participation is usually lower at the company's physical premises), it is worth presenting what employee networks are in our company, how they work, what their objectives are, who can belong to them and how employees and the business benefit from belonging to them. Inviting a variety of guests (organisational leaders, HR, individuals interested in the topic, experts, well-known and well-liked people) makes this kind of opening event quite popular. It is also an excellent opportunity to gauge the scale of interest among male and female employees during the Q&A session.

It is useful to collect the contact details of those who declare a desire for further information. Already at this stage there may be people who want to actively participate. Some organisations are then told that it is not yet time to create a support network for LGBT+ people because there is a lack of interest. The most common thing, however, is that there are allies in every company who are willing to get started. The most important aspect is

to manage the initial enthusiasm and energy appropriately.

WHAT CAN AN EMPLOYEE NETWORK ACHIEVE?

A properly run pride network can contribute to the company's growth: increasing employee engagement, developing diverse talent and reducing employee turnover. It can also positively influence the sense of belonging and the employee experience with the employer. How can these positive outcomes be achieved? What can an LGBT+ and allied employee network do for a company?

Initially, it is worth communicating that the company is interested in supporting the community and is willing to act. It is worth asking people in the workforce what the employer can do to make the working experience of people from the LGBT+ community better. It depends on the characteristics of the company what is included in the answers. At the beginning, multiple questions may relate to the diversity and inclusion strategy itself, followed by questions relating to the employer's capabilities and readiness for change. If the company wishes to act proactively, a review of procedures with a view to the inclusion of people from the LGBT+ community will certainly be noticed and appreciated. If the company provides life or health insurance, is it also possible to provide insurance for a same-sex partner? What is the procedure for changing a person's name after gender correction? Are invitations to company events and training courses sufficiently inclusive and aimed at all employees?

IS IT WORTH IT?

Firstly, many of the organisations we have worked with are open, respectful and supportive in their corporate values. We believe that the mission of any business is to change the world for the better. Activities related to supporting all people, including those from the LGBT+ community, stem from a belief in corporate social responsibility by building a culture of diversity, inclusion and belonging.

Secondly, such a value-based approach can make our clients see that we value diversity. If our employees from different groups feel included, they can be even more responsive to the needs of our customers who belong to different groups, including the LGBT+ community.

Third and finally, a culture of authenticity, support and inclusion is beneficial for the development of the company, the talent and the market. Nowadays, for LGBT+ people in business, the company they work for is not only a place where they earn money and develop their talents, it can also be a safe space where they can be authentically themselves and, if they want to, they can also talk to their colleagues about their lives without fear of stigmatisation and discrimination.

WHAT'S NEXT?

Employee pride networks - gathering the LGBT+ community and allies within organisations - are on the increase. Company activities, both internally (e.g. training) and externally (e.g. marketing), are most visible in June - the 'pride month' of the LGBT+ community. If a company is planning to launch activities to support diversity and inclusion, it should consider a D&I strategy if it does not already have one. LGBT+ employee groups in Polish organisations are at vastly different levels of maturity: some approach the issue consciously, use best practices, employ specialists and managers working in this area, while others rely mainly on their own so-called D&I

volunteers, i.e. committed individuals who often sacrifice a lot of time to make the face of Polish companies more welcoming for all.

We have noticed a steady increase in interest in training on D&I strategies, inclusive language, LGBT+ allyship, not only in June but also throughout the year. Companies in Poland are definitely open to following global trends when it comes to building a conscious policy on diversity, inclusion and belonging. They are also keen to share their experiences of events, training and their own challenges in this area. The difficult issue, however, is measuring the effectiveness of these efforts - under Polish and European law, an employer may not ask about either orientation or identity, even when its intentions are entirely anti-discriminatory and intended to improve the situation of LGBT+ people in the company. Our interviews and analysis suggest that male and female employees are, for the most part, very positive about companies' diversity and inclusion efforts. Especially when they perceive that concrete positive changes in the working environment result from strategic declarations. These can have a positive impact on the wellbeing, development and better functioning at work of people from the LGBT+ community.

Observing the business environment and recognising the need to support businesses in creating and running LGBT+ employee networks in Poland, this year at the Diversity Hub we created the Employee Network Support Centre (ERGs Center). We help companies and members of employee networks to make these increasingly mature structures effective, visible and supportive of business strategic goals. Meetings at our Employee Networking Support Centre are also an excellent gathering and networking space for companies and individuals who want to support diversity and inclusivity in their companies for people from the LGBT+ community and their allies.

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1 See: <https://www.rp.pl/ Spoleczenstwo/312019867- Niemcy-policzyli-gejowi-lesbijki-w-Polsce.html>, (access: 8.09.2021).

2 See: <https://kph.org.pl/ ranking-ilga-europe-2021/> (access: 8.09.2021).

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