GLBT INCLUSIVNESS;  
IMPACTING ORGANIZATIONAL LEARNING AND PERFORMANCE

Brent Opall  
University of Minnesota  
April 19, 2010
GLBT Inclusiveness; Learning and Performance

Abstract

Today’s workforce is a diverse montage of race, age, gender, religion, and sexual orientation. There is now more diversity among the workforce than ever before and this trend is predicted to persist well into the 21st century (Ivancevich and Gilbert 2000). Managing diversity well can bring a competitive advantage to an organization and conversely, if not managed well an organizations’ profitability can be negatively impacted. The underlying premise is that individuals are valuable and support the achievement of organization goals (Barry and Batemen 1996; Van Hoye and Lievens 2003). One of the components of diversity in the workplace is sexual orientation. Often sexual orientation represents a non-observable type of diversity and in recent years has received a significant amount of increased attention (Van Hoye and Lievens 2003).

Research shows that lesbians and gay men hold highly varied attitudes toward their sexual identity and the decision to share this information is highly complex (Button 2001; Cain 1991). The decision to affirm one’s sexual identity depends on the organizational context (Day and Schoenrade 1997) and disclosing sexual orientation within the workplace can: (a) leave one open to discrimination, (b) influence personal and social development, and (c) impact performance and job satisfaction. Studies demonstrate that the degree to which gays and lesbians are satisfied with work is correlated to how accepting they perceive the workplace environment. Further, because work is considered an indication for psychological well-being a great deal needs to be done to empower GLBT employees (Van Den Bergh 2003). Recent studies have demonstrated that the more open employees are, the more committed to the organization they will be, have higher job satisfaction, perceive support from top management, have lower role ambiguity, and less conflict between work and home (Day and Schoenrade 1997). These factors, combined with the overall social climate, have motivated many organizations to invest heavily on initiatives to become more inclusive of GLBT people.

Despite increasing significance, empirical inquiry regarding sexual orientation in the workplace is scarce (Van Hoye and Lievens 2003). Although numerous organizations have developed policies that affirm sexual diversity in the workplace little research exists on the implications of these policies for the GLBT employee or the organization they work for (Button 2001). To this end, organizations have only just begun to realize that GLBT diversity significantly impacts learning and performance in the workplace. This working paper discusses the HRD professionals role in fostering an inclusive environment for GLBT persons that, in turn positively impacts organizational learning and performance.

Keywords: Gay; Lesbian; Organizational Learning; workplace environment; HRD

Introduction

The impact of GLBT diversity issues on the workplace comes to fruition during a period when many organizations, and much of society as a whole, are debating the rights of GLBT persons. This paper coincides well with society’s debate but focuses the discussion on the impact to organizations; specifically the impact of an organization’s GLBT inclusiveness and the relevance to organizational learning (OL) and performance. The following section provides a general overview of the work climate for GLBT employees and how social capital and privilege impacts the work experience. The remainder of the paper offers ways in which being GLBT inclusive impacts an organization’s learning and overall performance. The paper ends by providing best practices for organizations to create a GLBT inclusive work environment that positively affects change on organizational learning and performance.
Despite increasing significance, empirical inquiry regarding sexual orientation in the place of work is scarce (Van Hoye and Lievens 2003). Recognizing that little research has been conducted on related topics - this study will tie previous research together in a manner that helps further our understanding of GLBT persons in the workplace, organizational learning, and performance.

Quantifying the GLBT Population

As noted by Kauffman (1998) the exact number of GLBT persons is undoubtedly a matter of debate. Harris Interactive, a global marketing research company, suggests that four to nine percent of the population identifies as GLBT (Bremer 2007). Powers (1996) suggests that the number of sexual minorities, people who identify as GLBT, in the workplace is between ten and fourteen percent. Kinsey et al. (1948) in a scientific study found that four percent of the population identified as exclusively homosexual. The Human Rights Campaign (HRC) (2007) estimates the number of gay, lesbian and bisexual adults residing in the U.S. range from 8.8 to 15.3 million. For the purpose of this paper a conservative range of three to five percent of the population is assumed to identify as GLBT. It is estimated that in 2009 there were 154 million people in the American workforce (Bureau of Labor Statistics 2009). At three to five percent the number of GLBT people in the U.S. workforce is approximately 4.62 to 7.7 million people. Compared to other minority groups such as racial or ethnic minorities, GLBT persons equal or exceed many of those proportions; for example in the U.S. Asian Americans comprise four percent of the workforce and Hispanic Americans ten percent (Munoz and Thomas 2006).

To complicate matters the actual number of GLBT employees in U.S. organizations is difficult to measure. Some research suggests that only thirty-three percent of lesbians and sixty-two of gay men openly disclose their sexual orientation (Seck, et al. 1993). Many organizations use their GLBT employee group membership to provide estimates but as noted by the HRC (2007) these estimates are limited due to both a highly dispersed workforce and an employee’s comfort level in the workplace to join a GLBT group. HRC’s 2006 Corporate Equality Index (CEI) surveyed over 400 employers and only seventy-three indicated they allowed employees to self identify as GLBT (HRC 2007).

Current climate

The work climate for gay and lesbian people in the American workplace has undergone a partial revolution over the past fifty years (Leonard 2003). In 2005 a record 92% of the country’s Fortune 500 companies included sexual orientation in their nondiscrimination policies (Graham 2005). From a historical perspective the inclusion of GLBT issues within organizations in the U.S. is a very new phenomenon. In 1990 just three organizations in the U.S. provided family and bereavement leave for GLBT employees (Mickens 1994). In addition, the HRC found in 1991 only one employer in the Fortune 1000 had adopted domestic partner benefits. However, in what appears to be a significant shift since the early 1990’s an unprecedented number of corporations began offering domestic partner benefits (Davidson and Rouse 2004).

Many GLBT people find the intersection between work and their personal lives is difficult to traverse. Research shows that lesbians and gay men hold highly varied attitudes toward their sexual identity and that the decision to share this information is highly complex (Button 2001; Cain 1991). As noted by Ellis and Riggle (1995) many gay men and lesbians feel the need to “hide” their sexual orientation in an environment that is not sympathetic to differences in sexual orientation. For GLBT employees, the decision of how to manage their sexual identity in the workplace is of significant importance. For many GLBT persons managing information about their sexual orientation is a lifelong process (Cain 1991). Sexual orientation is
an extremely private matter and many people choose to keep private issues out of the work environment citing professional reasons. The decision to affirm one’s sexual identity depends highly on the organizational context (Day and Schoenrade 1997) and disclosing sexual orientation within the workplace can: (a) leave one open to discrimination, (b) influence personal and social development, and (c) impact performance and job satisfaction. Within the workplace context GLBT persons are faced with a unique decision; whether or not to share their sexuality with coworkers.

**Social Capital and Privilege**

Social capital, by definition refers to connections inside and amid social networks and is a central component in business, economics, organization behavior, and in the foundations of work and human resource education. Coleman (1998) asserts that social capital is defined by its function and is not a single entity but a variety of different entities consisting of two common elements: some aspect of a social structure and the facilitation of actions of people or organizations within the structure. As Day and Schoenrade (1997) write, heterosexual relationships are often assets in the politics of the work environment and those individuals who lack networks and mentors often experience unequal career advancement. As an aspect of diversity, sexual orientation, like religion, may not be invisible. People make assumptions on who is GLBT and who is not based on preconceived stereotypes of behavior. However, most gay and lesbian people do not publicly identity as homosexual in the workplace (Malone 2000). GLBT people often face lose-lose situations in the workplace if they “out” themselves they may face discrimination and conversely if they do not share their personal lives they may be viewed as stand-offish, aloof, or snobby (Etsy, et al. 1995). For many gay and lesbian people this has a great impact on their social capital. Further research has demonstrated that from an individual’s perspective the concealment of one’s sexual orientation can induce negative work attitudes, decreased job satisfaction, role conflict, and role ambiguity (Croteau 1996; Ellis and Riggle 1995; Van Den Bergh 2003).

GLBT people, similar to women, risk underinvestment in social capital. Many women in the workplace devote much of their time outside of work to the family leaving little time to socialize with colleagues (Eagly and Carli 2007). In a similar way, many gay and lesbian people purposefully choose not to socialize with co-workers outside of the workplace – for fear of discrimination. These supplementary parts of work turn out to be very essential for promotional opportunities. Eagly and Carli (2007) find that social capital is more necessary to advancement than skillful performance of traditional management functions. Further, even when women, gays, and lesbians choose to engage in social networking they find most of the activities are geared towards heterosexual men and breaking into these gender specific activities can be difficult.

In a similar framework, heterosexist privilege can also enlighten our understanding of GLBT persons in the workplace. As defined by Munoz and Thomas (2006, 86) privilege are those common activities, rules, laws, and situations that create opportunities or rewards for persons who fit the characteristics of the defined norm and disadvantages persons who do not conform to society’s expectations; characteristics can include race, gender, sexuality, and physical ability. Unlike racism or prejudice, where individuals seek to oppress or demean ethnic, racial or sexual minorities, privilege theory suggests that the day to day life experience of the majority culture is viewed as normal rather than advantaged. This assumption focuses discussion of inequality on the disadvantages of other groups, and on what can be done to bring them up to the majority culture’s ‘normal’ standards.

**Implications for Organizational Learning and Performance**
Cummings and Worley (2005, 250) define Organizational Learning (OL) as the ways organizations seek to enhance their capability to acquire and develop new knowledge. OL is recognized as being viral in today’s complex and rapidly changing environments. Further, OL can be a source of strategic renewal, can enable organizations to acquire and apply knowledge more quickly compared to competitors, thus establish a sustained competitive advantage (Cummings and Worley 2005, 497).

To maximize the skills and talents within an organization it is important to ensure harmonious integration of all employees. Managing diversity well can bring a competitive advantage to an organization and conversely, if not managed well an organizations’ profitability can be negatively impacted. The underlying premise is that individuals are valuable and can be helpful in the achievement of organization goals (Barry and Batemen 1996; Van Hoye and Lievens 2003). Often sexual orientation represents a non-observable or underlying type of diversity and in recent years has received a significant amount of increased attention (Van Hoye and Lievens 2003) Numerous U.S. organizations are integrating diversity management into their HR practices and some companies are including sexual identity within their lists of chief sources of diversity (Day and Schoenrade 1997).

Studies have shown that the degree to which gays and lesbians are satisfied with work is correlated to how accepting they perceive the workplace environment. For both the employee and employer this is an important concept. One study used the Job Descriptive Index (JDI) to measure job satisfaction in relation to the openness of an employer and found gays and lesbians open about their sexuality was associated with increased satisfaction (Ellis and Riggle 1995). Button (2001) found that discrimination towards GLBT persons was negatively associated with job satisfaction and organizational commitment. Further, because work is a central aspect of one’s life and is considered an indication for psychological well-being a great deal needs to be done to empower GLBT employees (Van Den Bergh 2003). Organizational commitment is a concept framed by the congruence of ideals and a sense of identity the employee feels within the organization (Day and Schoenrade 1997). Research shows that the more open employees are the more committed to the organization they will be, have higher job satisfaction, perceive support from top management, have lower role ambiguity, and less conflict between work and home (Day and Schoenrade 1997).

**Bottom-line HRD and ROI**

A significant movement towards GLBT inclusive HR policy consumes considerable time, energy, and cost for the organization. However, regardless of cost to the organization the majority of Fortune 500 corporations have chosen to be inclusive (HRC 2009). In comparison some companies have chosen to not be inclusive. What then is the Return on Investment (ROI) for the companies that choose to be inclusive? The ROI can be found in four major categories: (a) competition for skilled employees, (b) losses due to losing or dismissing GLBT employees, (c) productivity of employees, and (d) increased job satisfaction. Indeed Morrison (1991) proposed that diversity initiatives increased productivity, competitiveness, and workplace harmony.

In today’s business environment competition for skilled employees is a significant challenge for many organizations. Within the literature it is recognized that GLBT persons commonly seek employment with businesses that prohibit sexual orientation discrimination (Van Den Bergh 2003). Competition from regional to worldwide organizations is becoming more and more intense which causes organization leaders to increasingly recognize that employees are resources that must be sustained and developed (Swanson 2001). As Van Den Bergh writes, “In
a service, post-industrial economy where the demand for qualified employees exceeds the supply, firms are advantaged by creating a welcome and inclusive workplace for sexual minority employees (Van Den Bergh 2003). Further Gilley and Maycunich (2000) cite recent studies that establish human resources as a significant contributor to competitive advantage. Hence, organizations are seeking ways to attract talented employees. Because GLBT persons embody a considerable portion of the workforce, approximately 3 to 5%, it is imperative to enhance their draw to the organization (Van Hoye and Lievens 2003).

The cost, both financially and to productivity, of non-inclusive or discriminatory practices to GLBT people is astounding. Estimates indicate that 42,000 employees are dismissed each year due to sexual orientation which results in an estimated cost of $47 million (Van Den Bergh 2003). As found in the literature employee productivity can be significantly impacted by the work environment. A hostile work environment for GLBT persons is estimated to cost organizations $1.4 billion each year (Poverny 2000). Employee satisfaction can have a significant impact on the bottom-line and culture of an organization.

**An Organizational Learning and Performance Model for GLBT Inclusiveness**

Within today’s context organizations are encouraging their workforce to accept change, take risks, and find innovative ways to ensure the organization’s future (Lien, Hung, and McLean 2007). In support of this, specific OL initiatives must be undertaken. These initiatives will significantly enhance an organizations’ competitive advantage while demonstrating that GLBT people are a welcome and valued human asset. To attain the maximum benefits from the OL and performance model for GLBT inclusiveness, the following model must be considered within the HRD function.

**Diversity and Inclusion Statement.** An inclusive work environment starts with a diversity and inclusion statement. HRD practitioners provide much of the context for which employees, GLBT or heterosexual, learn the organization’s values regarding diversity and inclusion. Every organization needs to write an antidiscrimination policy, including procedures for enforcing and addressing discrimination within their organization and must explicitly prohibit harassment based on sexual orientation (Van Den Bergh 2003). In the absence of a statement of nondiscrimination GLBT persons must face the prospect that they could be terminated for their sexual orientation. To this end, antidiscrimination policies that include sexual orientation teach all organization members about the extent to which GLBT employees are valued in the workplace.

**Recruitment and Retention.** The decision to offer domestic partner benefits has become a strategic business decision aimed at employee retention (Davidson and Rouse 2004) often including specific initiatives for GLBT recruits. Similar to other payment measures, domestic partner benefits enhances an organizations’ ability to recruit. Further, in a competitive recruiting environment the ability to offer domestic partnership benefits over peer organizations is additionally compounded.

**Leadership Commitment.** All of these efforts would fail without the support of top leadership within the organization. Further, leaders must be able to effectively frame the organizational conversation around GLBT issues and larger diversity goals and relate these to business goals (Thomas 2005). It is vitally important for organization leaders to be an advocate for GLBT employees in the workplace. Senior leaders have the opportunity to confront overt instances of GLBT resistance by stating their commitment for equity. Munoz and Thomas (2006) cite that leadership commitment is one of the best practices for supporting GLBT employees.

**Affinity and resource groups.** Munoz and Thomas (2006) cite that affinity and resource groups are one of the best practices for supporting GLBT employees. It is well documented
within the literature that the establishment of GLBT employee networks significantly impacts how valued GLBT people feel in the workplace (Button 2001; Van Den Bergh 1999). Affinity groups can also be a powerful advocate in diversity training and other diversity initiatives and be leveraged by HRD practitioners to help implement training and learning.

**Organization Development.** Diversity training is an important piece of organizational development. Studies have verified that cultural diversity training increased employees’ perception of importance for the organization and decreased their perceptions that minorities get too much attention, and reinforced the belief that the organization is concerned with their personal growth (Ellis & Sonnenfeld 1994). It is important that the HRD practitioner anticipate resistance. Developing “safe zones” where GLBT persons feel accepted for their sexual orientation is also vitally important (Van Den Bergh 1999).

**Conclusion**

When strategic HRD planning and implementation is inclusive of GLBT issues the organization is recognized as an innovative leader and sees a return on investment (ROI). Operational, or short term planning, is not going to provide a positive ROI and solutions that are short sighted or bow to short-term financial pressures will ultimately do the organization more harm than good. A long-term, strategic plan that goes beyond protection and seeks inclusion of GLBT people will result in an increased organizational learning and performance. Importantly, it will be difficult for competition to imitate.

**Bibliography**


about one's sexual orientation for lesbians and gay men. *Journal of Homosexuality* 30, no 2: 75-85.


