

Homosexuals in the workplace

by Nicole Bellefleur (Business Editor)

More and more, homosexuals are coming out of the closet. For some, it's a relief to be able to stop hiding, to be themselves. Many others however, face the threat of losing their jobs when the truth comes out.

No one really knows for sure how many individuals are homosexual. It could be your neighbour, your best friend or perhaps your co-worker. One survey estimated that at least 10% of the American population was either gay or lesbian. This means that if you work for a large corporation, chances are that someone you think you know well, may be a homosexual. And if you thought that homosexuals only worked in the arts and entertainment industries, think again. A recently conducted survey found that 40% more homosexuals are employed in finance and insurance than in arts and entertainment, and 10 times as many work in the computer industry than in the fashion industry.

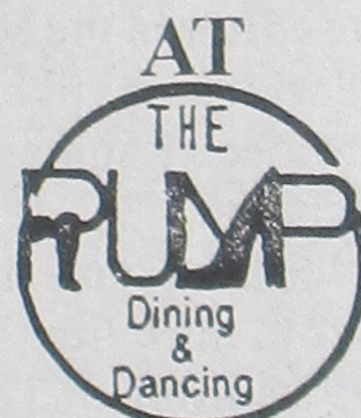
It is a fact that workers who are openly gay or lesbian are less likely to move up the corporate ladder than their heterosexual co-workers. Very rarely are they ever promoted to top management positions. Some executives, worried about company image, have been known to dismiss employees when their sexual orientation became known. Even when employees do not lose their jobs, many go to work every day only to face discrimination and hostility from their co-workers.

With all of the career risks associated with exposing one's homosexuality, why would a person decide to come out of the closet at all? For many, the burden simply becomes too heavy. They feel that they cannot cope with heterosexual role playing any longer. They want to share their private lives with their co-workers, just as any heterosexual would share his or her life at the office. They'd like to display their partner's photo on their desks, just as someone else would proudly display photos of their spouse and children. They long to be able to bring their partners to company functions, rather than covering their tracks by inviting a friend of the opposite sex for a show. They simply want to be able to do things without having to worry about being discriminated against, taunted or fired. Another reason for the increased number of people exposing their homosexuality in the workplace, is that many recent college graduates are used to the higher homosexual tolerance

levels on college campuses. They liked not having to hide being gay or lesbian while in school, and don't intend to start hiding afterward.

Companies are finally beginning to realize that the stress brought on by homophobia does take its toll on worker productivity. Discrimination based on sexual orientation is now being taken seriously by companies and government. Activists would eventually like to see this type of discrimination as illegal as discrimination based on race, age or gender. Some companies are funding homosexual employee support groups, where individuals can meet one another to discuss important issues. Other companies are setting up education programs to help their heterosexual employees overcome homophobia. Even though these programs do cost a lot for companies, the long term payoffs make them more than worth the effort. Happier employees are more productive employees. Companies are able to attract and hold on to valuable employees who, because of their homosexuality, are likely to work for companies with reputations for fair employment.

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