



Disability & LGBT – Similarities and Difference and How to Support Them in the Workplace

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THAT'S SO GAY. *That's retarded. Are the children yours? Can you have children? But she doesn't look like a lesbian. I have that handicapped woman on my team.*

Alarming? Yes, but these are just some of the remarks heard around the water cooler. These words are hurtful and can be seen as a form of bullying and harassment.

About 15 percent of the workforce is either someone with a disability or someone who has a child or other dependent with special needs. Another 10 percent is someone who is LGBT. Many companies have policies in support of these individuals, due to legal requirements, while others have policies surrounding a company's commitment to fairness and/or the ability to recruit and retain qualified employees.

And while the policies are important, it takes a lot more than policies to make a workplace LGBT or disability friendly. It takes the practices of social justice, of supportive co-workers who show genuine respect and possess sensitivity to the concerns of these communities.

For someone who is LGBT, the process of coming out can be misinterpreted, which often leads to invisibility and social isolation. For someone who has not come out, what seems like a simple question, such as "are you married?" can become complicated. On the other hand, for people with disabilities, our society's most socially isolated group, coming out

is often unavoidable either because the disability is visible or the person needs to come out in order to receive the supports they require to be successful in the workplace.

So often these inappropriate comments arise as the result of misunderstanding or a lack of information. So what's an employer to do? Train; specifically on etiquette and awareness, using real-life examples that will help guide understanding, inclusion and acceptance of everyone. Also ensure that internal communications, company-wide celebratory events, resource groups and mentor programs are inclusive of the LGBT and disability communities.

In conclusion, keep in mind that people who are LGBT and/or disabled, are individuals with families, jobs, hobbies, likes and dislikes, problems and joys. While their sexual orientation and/or disability may be an integral part of who they are, it alone does not define them. Making it comfortable for everyone to be who they are and bring their full selves and creativity to the workplace is critical to everyone's success.

You can learn more about this most important topic and how best to support it in the workforce and workplace by contacting Springboard Consulting. **PDJ**

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Nadine Vogel is President of Springboard Consulting LLC. Springboard (www.consultspringboard.com) is considered a global expert; working with corporations, governments and organizations on issues pertaining to supporting the disability community in the workforce, workplace and marketplace. She is also the author of DIVE IN: Springboard into the Profitability, Productivity and Potential of the Special Needs Workforce.