

How the 'yes' vote will impact workers and HR

Written by The Conversation

The conclusive “yes” outcome is great news for millions of Australians and the [841 corporations](#) that support marriage equality. However, the struggle continues to build inclusive workplaces in which all staff feel valued and that they belong.

The marriage equality debate has also created a realisation of the importance of spreading awareness of LGBTIQ+ issues in order to gain support from others and achieve equality. [Allies](#) have been integral to LGBTIQ+ people throughout this debate, and hopefully, the “yes” outcome will empower more LGBTIQ+ individuals to be out at work.

However, the marriage equality debate has been [an intensely personal and often exhausting time for LGBTIQ+ individuals and allies](#). The “respectful debate” we were promised was instead characterised by homophobic and transphobic [incidents](#) that have caused [enduring pain for LGBTIQ+ people](#), at least in the short term.

What’s worse, for many LGBTIQ+ people, coming out at work still represents a [risk to their career and relationships with colleagues](#). The fear of coming out will still persist for many LGBTIQ+ individuals and workers.

Impacts of coming out still costly for some workers

Legal recognition of same-sex marriage would certainly enhance the visibility of LGBTIQ+ individuals in our communities. In Canada, the number of people who [reported being in a same-sex relationship surged by a third](#) after same-sex marriage was legalised.

However, the fear of coming out has shown to be costly to [the quality of work-life](#) and [well-being](#) of LGBTIQ+ workers. Moreover, their employers also suffer [financially](#).

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through
[staff turnover](#)
and
[negative reactions from shareholders](#)

LGBTIQ+ people who have spent years not disclosing [their relationships](#) and/or [family](#) at work may also experience psychological strains which have an effect on work, family conflict, job satisfaction, and family satisfaction.

For those who are empowered to come out, their workplace may not be a safe space, particularly in [remote areas](#) and in [occupations](#) where discrimination towards LGBTIQ+ workers is still prevalent.

The “yes” outcome is not just a victory for LGBTIQ+ people; it is a victory for equality. Looking at diversity and inclusion policies through the lens of LGBTIQ-inclusion has a number of benefits to a wide range of groups in the workplace.

Creating organisational change

The debate about marriage equality should be catalyst for organisations to look at their internal policies and practices to make them more inclusive. Inclusion isn't a zero-sum game, it is [good for business](#) and [all employees](#)

First, organisations should focus on creating an inclusive culture is beneficial to both LGBTIQ and non-LGBTIQ workers. And one of the simplest ways for organisations to build an inclusive culture is through the language they use.

Inclusive language enables a diversity of people (such as those of different ages, cultures and genders) to [feel valued and respected and able to contribute their talents to drive organisational performance](#) . Simply thinking about the language we all use when

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addressing staff, customers and other stakeholders, asking about partners for example, can go a long way to making LGBTIQ+ and non-LGBTIQ+ workers feel included.

An appropriate use of language is also critical in respectful dialogue between workers when addressing delicate issues such as same-sex marriage. Thus, organisational policies also need to address the appropriate use of language in formal and informal dialogue at work, particularly [drawing a fine line between free speech and hate speech](#).

Second, a recognition of same-sex relationships provides an opportunity for revisiting and updating policies relating to partnerships and families such as parental leave policies. Prior to this conversation, same-sex relationships and 'rainbow families' may not have been commonly discussed in the workplace. And this invisibility might be reflected in workplace policies.

The [current](#) government-funded programs only makes the birth mother the primary carer by default. This policy for example could be inclusive to LGBTIQ families by making it gender neutral.

Introducing gender neutrality to parental leave policies also means dads in heterosexual couples can spend precious time with their newborn babies. In fact, many [leading Australian companies](#) already provide paid parental leave to the primary carer no matter the gender of the parent. And this has a huge benefit for workforce [gender equality](#) in terms of load sharing when it comes to child-rearing and household chores.

The same can be said for workplace flexibility. When [Tony Wood](#) (a partner at a leading law firm) became a dad, he helped to pioneer workplace flexibility for other dads in his legal firm. The more men who access workplace flexibility, the better for [parents of both genders](#) in heterosexual families.

The way forward

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As society becomes more diverse and inclusive, organisations need to ensure that their policies and practices catch up with these progressive changes.

The new era of marriage equality means organisations need to become more inclusive of both LGBTIQ+ workers and their issues in order to attract and retain top talent. Equally important, LGBTIQ-inclusion makes the organisation more inclusive for everyone.

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Raymond Trau has served as an expert panellist and academic/research adviser for the Diversity Council of Australia and Pride in Diversity (a national not-for-profit organisation that supports employers with their LGBTI inclusion strategies and programs). Diversity Council Australia (DCA) is the only independent, not-for-profit workplace diversity advisor to business in Australia. DCA's income is generated from membership fees, sponsorships and services to businesses.

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