

So Just How Pink is the City?

By Sasha Scott

Stonewall has just published the 2009 Workplace Equality Index - the definitive national benchmarking exercise that crucially looks at not only what employers do to improve the workplace for lesbian, gay & bisexual staff but also how they demonstrate this has a real & lasting impact on their organisations.

The Workplace Equality Index (WEI) has been in existence for 5 years & features the best employers in Britain for lesbian, gay & bisexual people.

Looking at the city it is encouraging to see that out of the 23 sectors represented, investment banking & professional services were two of the top performing sectors.

This appears to illustrate that traditional & often robust environments are altering culturally regarding diversity & the promotion of inclusive workplaces. Much of this has been demonstrated by employers in the city becoming more proactive in relation to sexual orientation issues. Numerous law firms & banks have active LGB networks and we notice our clients using these as beneficial tools internally around networking, mentoring, identifying role models and offering support as well as method of reaching out to clients & stakeholders – enabling businesses to connect ‘off deal’ on these issues & thus gaining a powerful business development advantage in a tough climate.

I notice however pockets of cynicism & prejudice, often from staff at varying levels who cannot see the value in LGB networks; “Where is my network then Sasha?” I am asked, “I am a white male heterosexual so where’s my club? “

I am tempted to answer- you are the club and for the last 50 years it’s been all yours but what’s the point?

Right now in 2009 the business case has never been stronger.

In this cold economic climate it’s more important than ever for employers to take diversity seriously. Diversity is not simply a policy or a compliance issue. It goes straight to the heart & core values of an organisation & if it’s really going to be embraced then all employees, senior & less so need to consider how inclusive their behaviours are.

Many employers within the financial & legal sector have invested in diversity policy & initiatives over the last 5 years but the challenge of building & then maintaining inclusive workplaces remains.

The reputation of an employer or brand is enhanced by showing this commitment, which is aligned to corporate responsibility.

According to Stonewall ,74% of gay & 42% of straight consumers are less likely to be associated with organisations that hold negative views on LGB people.

This also links to recruiting & retaining talent -concealing sexual orientation at work reduces productivity by up to 30%. People at work, regardless of whom they are, yearn to be valued & appreciated. If an employer demonstrates it is committed to having an inclusive workplace then

people feel safe to be themselves at work. It has been shown that people who are out in supportive workplaces are more creative & productive. Stonewall's recent research showed staff who can be open & out at work are more engaged, feel able to be themselves, form honest relationships with their colleagues & the bottom line is are ultimately more productive.

On the flip side 1/3 of the 1.7 million gay people in UK workplaces still feel unable to be open about their sexual orientation.

Recent research into experiences of lesbian & bisexual women has revealed that for many 'coming out' at work is very difficult.

"A lot of lesbians in the workplace don't want to put their hands up twice: once for being a woman & then secondly 'by the way, I'm a lesbian' they feel they've got hard enough work cut out as a woman".*

This invariably means that LGB networks are often underrepresented by woman – making it even harder to come out if you are female. There is also a distinct lack of high profile lesbian role models in the city. This in turn perpetuates the situation. I have huge respect for women who do 'come out' & in turn they often do a tremendous job internally in supporting others who feel encouraged by their integrity.

In the Pink List 2008 of the most influential gay men & women in the UK, Ashley Steel from KPMG is mentioned as the only known lesbian on the board of a Square Mile company.

So where have all the women gone?

It appears clear that there is much work to be done on this issue and creating a culture that openly value & respects everyone must come from a leadership level initially.

Last year saw the creation of Interlaw founded by Daniel Winterfeldt , a partner at Simmons & Simmons .

Interlaw is open to anyone who is interested in improving the working environment for the LGBT Legal Community by encouraging a climate of understanding, respect and inclusion.

The InterLaw Diversity Forum has regular meetings in addition to organising a range of events, including panel discussions, seminars and networking opportunities.

More good news from the legal sector - Simmons & Simmons were listed for the first time in the Workplace Equality Survey & encouragingly were named the most improved employer.

"Simmons & Simmons is honoured to be recognised by Stonewall's WEI as a diverse and inclusive workspace, ranking first among law firms in the top 100, as well as presented with the "Most Improved Employer" award. It is also promising for the legal sector to see four law firms in the top 100 this year and we hope to see more in 2009."

Daniel Winterfeldt

Other law firms were Pinsent Masons LLP, Herbert Smith & Eversheds.

This compares to 2008 when there was only one law firm in the Index

From Investment Banking Goldman Sachs, Credit Suisse, Morgan Stanley, American Express & J.P. Morgan all featured too.

Finally in these increasingly litigious times there are further compelling reasons for employers to take diversity seriously. We need to keep in mind that prejudice & discrimination has a very human cost and as the city knows, there is no limit to the amount that can be awarded by an employment tribunal for discrimination at work.

Sources

**The Double Glazed Glass Ceiling 2008 Stonewall publication*

Stonewall Top Employers 2009

www.interlaw.org.uk

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