Coming Out: Coming out at work

"Coming out" is the process of self-acceptance as a lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or queer (LGBTQ+) person. Coming out can be both a difficult and liberating process. This article series offers information on making the very personal decision to come out to family, friends, co-workers, and others.

This is the fourth in a four-part series of articles on coming out which starts with "Deciding to Come Out." Read the previous article, "Coming Out to Your Community."

Coming out at work

Like coming out to friends, family, and community members, coming out to co-workers or your manager is a personal decision. But harassment against LGBTQ employees is widespread, and you might worry that if you come out at work you will face subtle or obvious forms of discrimination from co-workers or management. But at companies that are supportive of LGBTQ people, that's much less likely to happen.

As with every decision to come out, you should consider how comfortable you'll feel discussing your sexual identity with whomever you're planning on talking with—in this case, your manager and/or colleagues. Although there are some risks, being open about aspects of your non-work life can lead to closer relationships with co-workers.

If you decide to come out at work, here are some suggestions:

Find your company's written policy of nondiscrimination based on sexual orientation. This may help you have any conversations with your human resources (HR) department if you feel you receive any harassment or discrimination as the result of coming out.

Decide whom you want to tell. You might consider telling your manager about your sexual orientation first. Disclosing your identity to your manager sends a signal of trust, and usually has a positive impact on your professional relationship. If you're unsure about how to proceed, someone in your company's HR department may be able to provide some assistance. You can also contact your organization's assistance program for support.

Talk with LGBTQ people at your company who have come out. Find out if there is an LGBTQ employee network group at your company. You may discover that there is quite a community and that people are welcome to include same-gender partners at company functions. Or, on the other hand, you may find people who would advise you to downplay your orientation at work because of real or perceived discrimination. Your ultimate responsibility is to take care of yourself and your career in these situations and to stay within your own level of comfort.

If you decide to come out at work in stages, tell the people who know your sexual orientation that some co-workers don't yet know. Explain that you want to be the one to tell people.

Come out in your own words and your own way. If you don't feel comfortable making a direct statement like, "I'm a lesbian," then drop subtle or strong hints. When talking with a co-worker, for example, you might refer to your partner.

Be prepared to handle people's reactions. Give them time to adjust to the news, and tell them you are available to answer any questions. Recognize that while some people may be tremendously supportive, others may be shocked, saddened, ashamed, or disapproving.

Developing a community of friends and co-workers who are supportive will help make this rejection less difficult.

Once you have come out, you may want to take further steps to find support and network to develop professional relationships:

Find mentors and role models. Once you come out at work, search for like-minded co-workers who can serve as mentors and role models, both within your company and outside of work.

Network with LGBTQ people within your company. Many companies have resources for LGBTQ people. Contact information may be listed on your company's intranet.

Join an LGBTQ professional organization. Not only do these organizations create networking opportunities, they can help build and strengthen safe and equitable workplaces for LGBTQ people and their allies.

Coming out can be both a difficult and liberating process. It will likely require courage on your part. Coming out can increase your energy and self-esteem, and it can increase the trust and confidence others have in you. The more support you have from friends and family during this time, the easier the process will be. And the more open you are with the important people in your life, the deeper and richer your friendships and relationships can be.

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This article was developed in collaboration with Adrienne Shoffner, MA.

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