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More Transsexuals Start New Life - Keep Old Job

Positive Trends as Employers and Co-Workers' Knowledge Improves

by Sarah Schafer, Washington Post, U.S.A.

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... telling her boss about her coming sex change proved far easier than announcing it to anyone else.

Ron Hoyman had something shocking to tell his boss. He was about to become Rhonda. For months, Hoyman, supervisor of vocational programs for Baltimore County schools, Md.

U.S.A. had changed clothes in his pickup truck each evening as he left work so that he could live his personal life as a woman. But now it was time to become Rhonda full-time, dressing as a woman at work as he prepared for the surgery that would transform him physically from male-to-female.

And it was time to tell his supervisor and co-workers that soon they would have a new colleague. "I am trying to make changes which impact my personal wellness as well as be a more productive worker," Hoyman wrote to his

supervisor in the summer of 1995, explaining that he was a classic transsexual - someone who felt he had been born the wrong sex.

"[If] I can learn to begin living life for myself as well as the benefit of others, could you accept Rhonda instead of Ron as someone you could work with?" he wrote. He signed it "Ron/Rhonda." The supervisor's response? First, shock. And then, "Why not?"

She immediately started discussing ways she and Hoyman could prepare other co-workers for the change. Until about five years ago, someone in Hoyman's situation likely would have quit his job and disappeared, preferring to start a new life with a new identity and employer rather than tell his boss that he would soon change his sex. But transsexuals - people who have undergone or are about to undergo sex change surgery - have gained a new measure of acceptance from employers, according to some mental health and workplace experts.

As a result, more transsexuals, their managers and co-workers are learning how to cope with a transformation that can be long, painful, emotional and unsettling. Roughly one in 30,000 men and one in 100,000 women undergo sexual reassignment surgery, according to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, a handbook for psychiatrists.

About 1,000 people seek reassignment surgery each year, according to an estimate by the Transgender Education Association, a non-profit research organisation. At least half of all people who undergo sex change operations return to their jobs after the surgery, according to the association and mental health experts.

Not many years ago, almost none did. Transsexuals enjoy few legal protections when it comes to workplace discrimination, but that is gradually changing. Minnesota includes transsexuals in its human rights act. Iowa Governor Tom Vilsack plans to ask the state legislature to pass an anti-discrimination law covering transsexuals, according to a spokeswoman. And increasingly, local governments are incorporating transsexuals in their anti-discrimination policies. This year, Portland, Oregon; Boulder, Colorado; Madison, Wisconsin; and Atlanta all expanded their laws to bar discrimination against transsexuals. About thirty-five local jurisdictions have such laws, up from about eleven in 1996, according to the Human Rights Campaign, a gay and lesbian advocacy organisation in Washington.

At least three Fortune 500 companies - Xerox Corporation, Apple Computer Inc., and Lucent Technologies Inc. - cover transsexuals in their anti-discrimination policies. After changing their sex, transsexuals may be straight or gay, and so they do not necessarily qualify for protection under policies that prohibit discrimination against homosexuals. Experts trace the shift toward acceptance in part to the nation's tight labour market and the imperative to retain talented workers. In addition, advocates for gays and lesbians have been paving the way for transsexuals and other minority groups by broadening society's view toward those who go against sexual norms, these experts say.

The competition for talent is extraordinary, and that certainly has presented opportunities for a lot of folks," said Suellen Roth, vice-president of policy, diversity and retention at Avaya Communication, a spin off of Lucent Technologies. Both companies bar discrimination against transsexuals. To be sure, many transsexuals continue to face intense on-the-job prejudice and discrimination.

The American Civil Liberties Union has received an increasing number of such complaints, according to Jennifer Middleton, a staff

lawyer with the organisation's lesbian and gay rights project. But Middleton said the spike in cases reflects a positive change as well: "Today, people are more willing to challenge society to accept them." Because of that willingness, companies are learning - often one employee at a time - how to accommodate transsexuals in the workplace. And some transsexuals find that their co-workers may handle their transition more easily than their families do.

Janet, a computer systems administrator who was once a male, agreed to be interviewed but asked to be identified only by her first name because her teenage children are worried their friends might see this article. Janet said telling her boss about her coming sex change proved far easier than announcing it to anyone else. Janet said she was so nervous that her hands were trembling when, carrying a stack of papers explaining transsexualism, she went in to tell her boss.

She was prepared to be fired. Instead, her boss barely looked up from his desk when he heard the news, Janet recalled recently, sitting on a sofa in her Fort Belvoir apartment, dressed in a short, loosely fitted, flowered dress. "I was told it wasn't an issue," she said. Janet's boss, who had supervised transsexual employees in the past, asked how he could help her prepare colleagues for the change, asked her to use the unisex bathroom, and said he would call a meeting to explain her situation to the rest of the staff.

Switching sexual identities is a long process. The "standard of care" to which most doctors subscribe (only a handful of hospitals perform the actual surgery) stipulates that patients must undergo hormone therapy and live as a member of their desired sex for a year before gaining approval for sex change surgery. During that time, a patient may change the pitch of his or her voice and most male patients begin what will be a lifetime of painful electrolysis sessions to remove unwanted hair. Others get cosmetic surgery. Some say they endure rollercoaster emotions as their body adjusts to new hormones.

Co-workers actually seem to fret most over the bathroom question - which one to use before having the sex change surgery - said Michelle Martin, an American Airlines employee who had such an operation nearly ten years ago and who now consults with companies that have an employee making the change. Martin often recommends that managers ask the transsexual employee to use a particular bathroom all the time or that the company create one unisex restroom. Some co-workers prefer to know as little as possible about a transsexual's experience, but unanswered questions could drive many colleagues to distraction, especially that nagging question, "Why?"

Because of this, Martin said, transsexuals should tell their managers about mental-health practitioners who could come speak to workers. Or, she suggests, transsexuals should be candid with their co-workers. That's what Hoyman did. Hoyman, fifty-three, knew her peers and co-workers would be surprised because, as a carpenter by training, she had always projected a stereotypical guy image at work and in professional associations. "They wondered why I drove a pink pickup truck," she said, laughing, during a recent interview at the Sollers Point South-eastern Technical High School.

After sharing her plans with her supervisors, Hoyman began telling the principals and teachers at the twenty-five schools whose vocational education programs she helped to manage. Telling the large staff of Sollers Point in Dundalk, Md., U.S.A. was one of her toughest moments, she said. Principal H. Edward Parker suggested Hoyman address the faculty at an afternoon staff meeting. Parker, sixty-three, said he had to reconcile Hoyman's revelation with his limited worldview.

"I guess my first exposure to [transsexualism] was in the 1950s with Christine Jorgensen," Parker said, recalling the highly publicised first ever sex change operation that turned American ex-G.I. George Jorgensen into Christine. "As a teenager at the time, I was mortified." Parker said his views hadn't changed much by the time Hoyman revealed her new identity, although he learned to accept her. "This is an age of enlightenment," he said. "I changed a lot of things that I learned growing up. You have to learn to operate in those grey areas." Those areas included watching Hoyman swap make-up tips with the women on staff, "which was interesting to us," Parker said diplomatically. Those tips were valuable lessons in how to fit in at work.

A male-to-female transsexual is "essentially doing a crash course in learning about feminine styles," said Gregory Lehne, an assistant professor of medical psychology at Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine who has counselled transsexuals for nearly twenty years. "They might dress too young for their age, or overdress, trying to represent themselves as a femme fatale in the workplace rather than "Jane Doe goes to work". Hoyman worked with an image consultant to carefully choose make-up and clothing appropriate for work. "Every eye is on you, judging your walk, your appearance. You have to be willing to re-prove yourself", Hoyman said. At work, Hoyman's transition appears to have gone as smoothly as possible.

But some mental-health experts worry about potential unintended effects of the growing acceptance of transsexuals in the workplace. Transsexuals suffer from more psychological problems - including severe depression and suicidal tendencies - than other groups of people, said Cynthia Osborne, associate director of the sexual behaviours consultation unit at the Johns Hopkins School of Medicine. Osborne worries that if the workplace sends the message that "anything goes," people may not seek out the psychiatric help they need. But many transsexuals say their problems were mostly medical. They would not have suffered such mental anguish if they had been born as a member of the opposite sex, they say.

And once the "mistake" had been corrected, they felt healthier than ever, not to mention more productive, they say. Janet and Hoyman insist they're not activists. They simply want to live life as they think they were intended to live it. Keeping their jobs helps them maintain normalcy, they said.

Besides, starting over from scratch in a new job with a new identity is hard because it means building a brand new résumé at middle age. "It's easier to change on the job," Janet said, "because then you have references."

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