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# Staying Employed During Transition

## It's a Right, Not a Privilege

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... transgender individuals experience double the average rate of unemployment

According to preliminary findings on Transgender Equality research conducted in the U.S. in 2009, transgender individuals experience double the average rate of unemployment. Ninety-seven percent of those surveyed reported having experienced harassment or mistreatment on the job, forty-seven percent experienced an adverse job outcome, such as being fired, not hired or denied a promotion and, sadly, fifteen percent experienced high rates of poverty (living on \$10,000 a year or less according to the 2009 National Transgender Discrimination Survey, funded by National Centre for Transgender Equality and National Lesbian and Gay Taskforce. U.S.).

So if you are a working and thinking about transitioning who wouldn't be afraid?

Sitting somewhat uncomfortably in my office in my designer costume playing the role of a successful female senior manager for a very conservative organisation in the mid 2000's, I was unaware of these statistics as this research had yet to be conducted. I was, however, instinctively aware of the perils of homophobia,

racism, generalised xenophobia and conservatism in Australia and, like any other person who is challenged by gender dysphoria, I managed to work and survive in this culture by subscribing to a fear-based code of shame and silence.

Over the years, I had perfected my female pantomime role to a 't'. This duplicity, however, eventually eroded my relationship with myself and the world about me and after a few decades of repression, my resilience waned and the weight of truth forced me to take the decision to transition, which has proven to be both liberating and costly. A major cost and the focus of this article was transition's effect on my work.

My career as I knew it just went out the door. In hindsight, and what I wish to stress, is that it did not have to be this way. I was crippled by deep-seated shame, some of it generational, but most of it familial and pathological.

Instead of trying to find a way through it and open up a dialogue, I took a redundancy cheque and ran straight to the barber shop on King St, Newtown, swapped my dark curly locks for a number 7 whilst I cried my eyes out. I still go there to this day, albeit with more hair on my face than on my crown and, thankfully, no tears. Thank God for testosterone. I can reflect on this moment and have some compassion for my somewhat adolescent response to this stress. I just couldn't cope at the time. Over the next few months, I went completely stealth (as if you can actually do that when puffed up on testosterone and squeaking like a chipmunk), changed my name, my paperwork and wrote the most difficult and important correspondence of my life, a letter to my former boss asking her if she would be my referee.

To her credit, she told me that it made "no difference to [her] nor to your skills or abilities or you as a person" so she happily endorsed me. Her main concern, revealed later through our continuing correspondence, was her curiosity as to how I was going to get a 'willy'. Her openness and support as a referee was crucial and I will be forever grateful. She did not abandon me.

As time went by, I found work doing government contracts in between surgeries and tried to keep my head above water. To my chagrin, the irregularity in my work history, created by my need for surgery and resultant time off, started to have a continuity and economic impact that still haunts me today. This was further complicated by my burden of extreme shame.

I felt caught between a rock and hard place; between the expression of my truth and the reality of having experienced the excruciatingly painful repercussions of transphobia that had occurred over the ensuing months and years from my family, who had completely disowned me, and some of my former, less evolved, friends who did the same.

To protect myself, I withdrew and decided to never reveal my truth. I mistakenly assumed all recruiters and potential employers would be as transphobic and cruel as the people closest to me. I did not grant them the opportunity to consider my truth and then make a choice to accept me or reject me, which I now understand was a rather self-defeating strategy.

I failed to consider that there could be a different way of approaching transitioning in the workplace or developing more transparency and confidence in my approach. I never asked what others were doing or what organisations existed (outside of the Gender Centre) that could help. I never appealed to the law for protection. Perhaps it was a generational aversion to airing my business in public. I am not sure. Perhaps I should have Googled it. What I do know now, years later, is that some people have had successful transitions in

the workplace by being open and they have maintained their employment and economic continuity despite their personal losses. I took a lone, shame-based approach and I do not recommend it.

During December, 2013, I was invited to attend ACON's Pride in Practice Conference at the Mercure Hotel, Sydney, on behalf of the Gender Centre, and was thrilled to see a modest turnout from the big end of town including banks, insurance companies and an assortment of corporate businesses, N.S.W. and Federal government agencies, N.F.P.s and N.G.O.s.

My biggest surprise, having gone through the infamous and painful homophobic witch-hunts in the defence forces as a youngster in the eighties, and losing my job because I was a lesbian, was the enthusiastic participation of members of the Royal Australian Navy and Army.

I managed to spend some time with some of them over lunch and we talked about transitioning in the services and their diversity policies. I must admit, I walked away feeling very validated and optimistic. Things can change. These serving members mentioned that the tone of the conversation within these highly conservative cultures has changed drastically and whilst not perfect by any means, having a legislated framework in place to protect serving members from discrimination, has gone a long way to reduce the type of silent devastation of young lives that I witnessed as a serving member over twenty years ago.

It is possible to transition in the defence force and retain your job. Never in a million years would I have thought that possible.

Each year N.S.W. Pride and Diversity also hold awards for businesses at the conference who demonstrate excellence in diversity practice in the workplace. The two day conference also featured a number of presentations with keynote speakers and academics, break-out sessions and facilitated workshops. The Gender Centre's Senior Case Manager, Liz Ceissman, led the opening forum on the first day which focused on transitioning in the workplace. During her opening remarks, Liz suggested that retaining talented transgender workers affords them the dignity of a future and economic viability. She also stressed that transitioning in the workplace is legally mandated through the process of a change of identity and is not necessarily dependent on surgery.

The forum panel included speakers who had successfully transitioned in the workplace. Their key takeaway messages included an emphasis on the importance of realising that the transitioning person bears primary responsibility and how crucial it is to not be caught up in a mood of entitlement and demand.

The panel also expressed the importance of establishing clear communication and respect for both the employer and employee. Careful planning and timing were also highlighted as was the importance of ensuring that expectations such as correct use of pronouns and use of facilities were not unrealistic. While it is frustrating for those transitioning, employers, colleagues and friends do need time to adjust.

Members of the audience participated in the Q. & A. enthusiastically and feedback during the break sessions after the forum was extremely positive. A common response was that participants did not realise the enormity of transition, nor could they ever gauge the challenges that transgender folks endure to stay in active employment. There is much more to it as we know, but I'll take that response with gratitude. Awareness at any level is gold.

For me personally, and I fully acknowledge my 'ostrich status'; I was overwhelmed by the openness and willingness of participants to discuss transgender issues and transitioning in the workplace.

I sat in on a breakout session with H.R. and diversity leaders entitled 'Commencing the Journey', which was a geared discussion on best practice and lessons learned for businesses starting the process of incorporating transgender and diversity issues into their I.R. and H.R. frameworks. There was a great deal of knowledge and experience at the table and shared experiences provided significant insight for those practitioners just starting the policy journey. This honest discourse was personally liberating and while it may have been a bit grandiose of me, I came out and quietly announced my transgender status to these participants who as it turned out, didn't give a toss. This was an enormous step towards reducing my burden of shame. I can reflect candidly now on my naivety and fear and as I grow in confidence, I realise that the truth is best served seriously chilled, and at any time.

Conferences like these are a sign of things changing and an indication that transgender issues and workplace transitioning are making it onto the diversity agenda of business and government agencies. This change is also an opportunity to send a clear message to our community that we do not have to walk away in shame, nor lose our livelihoods just because we change our gender.

A trade certificate, diploma, PhD., Master's or Bachelor's degree, is still your achievement, and your years of experience don't just go away with a shot of testosterone or patch of estrogen. We should stand with pride and hold on to what we have achieved and not add these achievements to the 'past pile' alongside the fallout, losses and secrets so many of us accumulate on this arduous, yet liberating, journey.

While the financial benefits of retaining employment are obvious, the opportunity to remain employed gives a person a sense of meaning and connectedness to wider society and a purpose. Without this, people are at risk of falling into the depths of despair and loss that erode personal dignity and respect and which can lead to poverty, social exclusion and, in some cases, homelessness. In my opinion, every Australian has the right to work and the right to retain her or his personal and professional dignity.

The Gender Centre team have worked hard over the past years to assist clients in transition and this work has been extended to the establishment of working relationships with corporate businesses and Government services across Australia by providing specialised training for businesses that are constructing their diversity policies in order to cope with transitioning employees. During 2012/13, the team successfully provided training and assistance for nineteen organisations that had employees in the process of transition. This involves meetings and professional guidance on legal frameworks and obligations, facilitation of workshops, training materials and ongoing support. It is an area that has a lot of future potential for the Gender Centre and its clients. It is a vital service that can help progressive businesses avoid the socially devastating and morally reprehensible consequences of sending talented and experienced

employees into poverty and ongoing despair.

There is no shame in being transgender. Walking the journey of transition and maintaining your employment and economic viability is a fundamental right, not a privilege and, as such, we have the legal right to fight to retain our employment if we have been productive members of an organisation.

Standing your ground is not about acceptance, it is about mandating for tolerance in the workplace and the community at large which is legislated and afforded to any other minority or religious group in Australia. If you are struggling with how to come out at work and keep your job, or you are having some H.R. issues concerning your transition, or a business that would like to know how to create the conversation, please contact the Gender Centre for assistance on 9519 7599 and ask to speak to Liz.

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The Gender Centre is committed to developing and providing services and activities, which enhance the ability of people with gender issues to make informed choices. We offer a wide range of services to people with gender issues, their partners, family members and friends in New South Wales. We are an accommodation service and also act as an education, support, training and referral resource centre to other organisations and service providers. The Gender Centre is committed to educating the public and service providers about the needs of people with gender issues. We specifically aim to provide a high quality service, which acknowledges human rights and ensures respect and confidentiality.