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Successful Transition while Working Fulltime

Waiting for the Wheels to Fall Off, But They Didn't!

by Kerry

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H! My name is Kerry. I am a male-to-female transgender, and I have just completed a successful transition while working full-time with a Commonwealth Government Department. This transition has been notable for it's total lack of problems - for a time I was waiting for the wheels to fall off, but they didn't. I don't think they ever will now.

The major reason for this is that I work with several hundred extremely tolerant and accepting people - they are that way due to the nature of our business. I don't think that there are many other places in Australia in which I would have had the same response. Despite the fact that I seem to have gone about it the right way, without them it would not have been so smooth. I owe them more than I could ever repay.

I would like to share my experience with you - maybe it could be of help in your transition.

In many ways, I am lucky. I am only 168cm (5ft. 6in.) tall, and I don't have strongly masculine features. My face is acceptable (I am a young looking forty-seven-year-old woman), and my hands and feet, although definitely not feminine, are not too big. I had lost much of my hair years ago, so I have to wear a wig. I have several, but the one I use at work is layered close to the head, is appropriate for my age, and suits me perfectly. This is one of the biggest regrets I have - like most women, my hair is one of the most important aspects of my appearance, but I am resigned to wearing wigs for the rest of my life. However, in general my appearance is appropriate, I am naturally feminine, and I am healthy. I am difficult to "pick", so I must have a lot going for me.

I left my transition until later in life, as I was unable to deal fully with my feelings until now. I have had many problems with self-confidence over the years, and I have struggled for most of my life with guilt as a result of being "different". I have never been able to accept that I was doing or feeling anything wrong, so I persisted and finally reached a satisfactory resolution.

Although I had tried unsuccessfully to do a transition ten years ago, and have been working towards this attempt for the last three or four years, I did not start my final preparations until August 1996, when I finally came to terms with the last part of me that I had been denying. By this time I had been on hormones for over a year (this time around), and I was physically ready. The last of my preparations was to tweeze my face, and I still have to spend several hours on it every day to maintain my appearance. However it is early days yet and the growth is showing signs of softening, although I may be forced to have laser treatment to resolve it for good.

A large part of my success is due to the fact that I now have the confidence and poise I had been lacking for so long. I was ready, and I took what was probably my last chance. I had also decided that I could not fool all the people all the time, so I no longer worry about it - the result was to increase my self-confidence and make me even harder to pick.

It is an interesting fact that people see what they want to see. Give them an acceptable, "normal" appearance, and they won't question some anomalies. For example, although my voice is not feminine, I soften it and raise the pitch a little, so no-one has ever changed their mind about me because of it. They see an ordinary woman, and they accept me as that. Mind you, although some anomalies won't be noticed, that doesn't mean that a glaringly appropriate mannerism will be accepted. By and large, if your appearance is appropriate, and your mannerisms natural, that will swing the balance. The key word here is natural - if your behaviour is forced, it will show.

I take great care to dress appropriately, and I tend to wear predominantly casual clothes. My job is such that jeans are appropriate, so I often wear them - most women doing the same job dress the same way. However, I am a feminine woman and prefer skirts, so I make a point of wearing one regularly. I don't want anyone to think that I will be avoiding that particular statement.

Over the years, I have given a lot of thought to my transition, and the correct way to approach my workmates. Until recently, I didn't think I could do it at my current workplace (Commonwealth Government) but my mind was to change. I was telling a lot of people about myself - probably a fundamental need for acceptance - and everyone I told at work was highly supportive. Over the six and a half years I have worked there, I have made many friends and gained the respect of most of the staff due largely to my good nature and helpful disposition. All my "support group" at work were encouraging me to do my transition there, so I changed my mind and decided to go for it.

That was the best decision I have made for a long time - until then, I had assumed that I would be self-employed for the rest of my life. I was intending to work from home, doing word processing, desktop publishing and multimedia presentations. I wasn't looking forward to being financially secure for a long time, if ever. This decision changed all that, and its importance cannot be overrated - work is the hardest issue to resolve in our lives. Yes, it was extremely difficult to do the transition so openly in front of hundreds of people, but it

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The decision made, all that was left was to implement it. As I worked in the public service, there is a well established approach to the dissemination of information, In my case, I presented an open letter to all staff to all the Branch Heads. I gave it to them personally, and they had the opportunity to ask questions and make comments. I am lucky in that my workplace is very tolerant due to the nature of our business, and I expected it to be well received by the staff - numbering in excess of 350 at this time, over several sites. The Branch Heads were asked to pass it on to their Section Heads, and from them it was to be distributed to all staff.

I gave the letter to the Branch Heads on 5th November 1996, and immediately went on sick leave. This was to give the staff time to talk about it without my presence, and to allow me to complete my preparations. I had urged staff to call me with their feelings, and although not a lot did, there was a strong response from a significant number of people. They were unanimous in praising my courage, and the integrity and power displayed by my letter, but it is courage when you have no options left?

Unfortunately there was a breakdown in communications in one branch, and not all staff received the letter when they should have - a situation I had deliberately tried to avoid by using this approach. However, in general it worked very well.

My intention was to visit the workplace after two weeks to show people that I am quite normal in appearance, and to break the ice for me. I did this, and visited on 20th November for lunch in the cafeteria. I was terrified - I have never been so scared. It was far worse than the first time I went public over ten years ago and was probably the hardest thing I have ever done in my life. The reason was, of course, the fact that there were over 200 people there, all of whom I know very well, and all of whom would be eager to see me (although I didn't expect many to come up to me and welcome me back yet).

Most of my "support group" knew I was coming in, and I think they were almost as nervous as I was - they had no idea what I would look like. Of course, I looked quite normal, but despite all my assurances they weren't to know that. I was careful to wear something neutral - styled jeans and a knitted top - so as not to give them too much to deal with at one time.

I arrived just before noon. The first person I met was one of my support group, who passed me in the corridor without recognising me, or seeing me as other than a normal visitor (we get a lot). She smiled as she walked past, and then I spoke to her. She spun around, and the joy in her face was wonderful - she was so pleased to see me back, and so excited that she must have been on the phone within seconds to spread the news. My immediate workmates were overjoyed to see me, and relieved to see that I did, after all, look quite normal and "unpickable".

Over lunch in the café (I could only drink a coffee) and for a further three hours, I was seen by a lot of people (many of whom didn't recognise me at first), and spoke to over thirty. As people met me, their reaction was always one of amazement that I look so good as a woman. I had told them this, but they had to see it to believe it. They couldn't help staring at this attractive woman called Kerry, who looked so different, and was so natural as a woman, but was otherwise the same Kerry they had worked with for years. I felt naked being the centre of attention, but it was also a good feeling that they were so happy with what they were seeing. I knew that I was not "pickable", but it was nice to be reassured and accepted. This was also the day I went full-time, and I was out as much as possible from then until my return to work.

I then went away to complete my preparations, and to allow the news to get around. I returned to full-time work on 2nd December and although I was nervous walking into the building, my earlier visit had served to make my return far less traumatic. Many people thought I was just another temp in the Registry, and the look in their faces when they realised it was me was great.

It is now 7th December, and I have been back at work for a week. In that week, I have not had one problem. Prior to my transition, I had arranged that I would only use a specified women's toilet for a short time - it was cleared with those affected while I was away, and has been very satisfactory in practice. The only thing I was firm on was that I would not use a man's toilet under any circumstance, but it has not proven to be a problem.

For my first four days back, I was careful not to give them too much to come to terms with at one time. I wore jeans and casual tops, and I did all the work that was expected of me - the same as if I had not done a transition. I work in a registry, so I was doing the internal mail runs twice a day, and I also did the external courier run in the van. I felt it was important to be seen to be doing all the normal things, and although it was difficult to do the internal deliveries right from the start, it was the right thing to do.

On the fifth day - Friday - I was determined to show them that I was a normal feminine women, so I wore a calf length casual skirt and top. I was again nervous (I had overcome the nerves early in the week), but it broke the ice for them. I had nothing but good comments on my dress sense, and the fact that I look so normal. This was what most impressed everyone - the fact that I look quite normal, and that my behaviour is naturally feminine and convincing. Until they saw it, they didn't know what to expect - was I going to turn up in a mini and stilettos?

After a week they now know that I am a normal attractive women. By the very fact that I was so up front with my transition, and so normal after it, I left them with nothing to question or criticise. As a result there has been nothing but good feeling, and I am now starting to be treated like any other women. In particular the other women are starting to see me as a woman now, and talking to me about normal things. I have had more questions about how I stop the lippie bleeding, and where I bought the skirt, than I have about the practical aspects of changing from a male to a female role. In fact, those sort of questions have so far been notable by their absence.

I now consider that I have completed my transition. Life to me feels quite ordinary, and although I have been looking forward to this time for more years that I care to remember, it is almost an anti-climax. There is just so much "interesting life" one can cope with, and I simply want an ordinary life now. I am looking forward to a quiet life as a woman, with a normal job and friends. I want surgical reassignment as soon as possible, and the fact that I have transitioned successfully in my job will be a very positive influence.

Summary:

One month ago I circulated a letter to all the staff, In it, I stated that I had been suffering from an identity crisis all my life. So I went, did what I had to do, and returned as a perfectly normal woman - I took the challenge I had set myself and faced up to it. I was careful not to confront them or offend them.

All the staff seem to have responded to my honesty and integrity, and to my openness, despite the extreme difficulty of my actions. I have had many comments on the integrity of my open letter, and the powerful emotions it raised. On my return to work, I immediately went around the building on the internal deliveries (I work in a registry) - that showed them the strength of my commitment. They have therefore accepted me without any apparent reservations, and have a lot of respect for the way I went about it.

I believe that is why I have been so successful in my transition - I told them openly what I was going to do, and then did it just as I said I would. I have not hidden away, and I have not asked for any concessions. Basically I have given no one any ground for criticism. I have their respect - that is the recipe for a successful transition!

My advice to anyone:

In your private life:

- Remember that much of what makes a person is not visible - it is in your attitudes and concepts.
- Get as much honest feedback as possible - preferably from the broader community. Ask your friends to be totally honest with their opinions of you and your appearance.
- Use self-affirmation techniques regularly - stand in front of the mirror often and praise yourself. It works!
- Observe people carefully. See just what is the normal dress and behaviour of your chosen gender. You will find that it varies enormously, and that there are many anomalies.
- Always dress and make up appropriately for the circumstances and your age. Try not to "dress up" - over dressed people draw attention.
- Never try to force your behaviour - it will look unnatural. Instead, be aware of yourself, and let the inappropriate behaviour die out. Ask friends to tell you honestly if they see any inappropriate behaviour.
- Practise walking and standing properly, but don't exaggerate. Don't try to be a perfect member of your chosen gender leave that to professional models (and even they don't see themselves as perfect!)
- Don't be afraid to ask your friends about proper dress sense and presentation.
- Get out in public as much as possible, and don't avoid daylight. It will be very difficult at first, but the only way to become "natural" is to live the life you want. It will improve your confidence, and as a result, your general wellbeing.
- You will find that people see what they want to - they don't want to have to question. The first impression (usually visual) they get of you will be the lasting one. If they see a few anomalies later, they will tend to ignore them if they are not too obvious.
- If you have a voice problem, do get professional help. Speech pathology can be very useful. One of the hardest things is to convince someone you have never met, on the phone. Try a little harder than usual - it is possible to get success here too.
- Be aware that human behaviour is very varied. Not all women like to watch the *Midday Show*, and not all men like going to the pub. You don't have to become a totally different person to succeed in your chosen gender. In fact, a transition will be easier when people realise that you are still the same person you always were.
- People will definitely have difficulties if you suddenly change your behaviour - work on changing things slowly so they can get used to it, and above all, don't exaggerate.

In your transition, both in your private life and at work:

- Be open and honest.
- Make it clear exactly what you intend doing, and why.
- Give people the chance to come to terms with your decision - they have their rights too.
- Do the transition exactly as you said you would.
- Don't confront them - give them the opportunity to decide for themselves - but don't hide away.
- Always show the strength of your commitment.
- Continue your life in your chosen gender normally.
- Dress and make-up appropriately.
- Don't avoid difficult situations.
- Be committed to your new life, no matter what the difficulties, and
- Don't ask for any concessions not afforded anyone else.

Remember that it is up to you to convince those around to accept you. Tolerance may or may not be a legal requirement, but acceptance is another matter. You may have the right to live your life the way you want, but so do they. You could well find that you are a bit unlucky with some physical aspects. The trick is to make the most of everything you can, and you will find that you can often get away with some problems. Behave appropriately, live normally, and show the strength of your commitment to your new life.

The main aim is to gain the respect of those around you - once you have this, their acceptance should follow. You will give yourself the

best chance of success if you can get, and keep their respect.

Everyone who has completed a successful transition will have their own story and suggestions. They all vary - no two situations are the same - but there will be common threads running through them all. Take note of the advice we offer and adapt it to your situation. I consider that if I can help only one person with one aspect of their transition, I would be very happy.

Update: January 1997

I took a couple of weeks recreation leave at Christmas, after a little more than three weeks back. My feeling is that everything is back to normal, and I have been accepted totally and without reservation - one of my male friends at work even gave me a friendly hug and kiss publicly when I left on Christmas Eve. He was one of the "support group" I had in place at the start, but he would not dream of doing that to someone he saw as a man. That is indicative of the support and acceptance I have received from everyone, both at work and outside.

Everyone finds that the hardest thing to get right is that very small word "she". Gender is so integral with your identity that they will keep referring to you as "he" for a long time. Maybe when you no longer hear "he" in reference to yourself, that will be the sign that you have made it!

I consider that I have now completed a totally successful transition. I am completely comfortable in the workplace as well as outside, and I am being treated normally by everyone. They will eventually see me only as a woman, but for the time being many will continue to have a strong memory of who I was. In time that will fade away, and while at the moment I am totally accepted as "Kerry, who is now living as a woman", I will eventually be simply "a woman called Kerry". That will happen without being noticed " one day I will come to the realisation that it is a fact. I look forward to that day!

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