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Transitioning in the Workplace

Avoiding Confusion and Resistance

by Liz Ceissman

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When I started at the Gender Centre nearly seven years ago, I saw many people who were seeking help because they were unemployed, having left their jobs due to their transition. Over these seven years however I have seen a huge shift in behaviour of those transitioning while employed. Rather than giving up work, more and more now bravely put themselves forward and ask their employers for support in transitioning in the workplace and keeping their jobs.

... you will not transition alone in your workplace. Everyone around you will be in a state of change.

The law states that you must not be discriminated against because you are transgender. You have the same rights as everyone else in the workforce.

When you are transitioning in the workforce, however, there are some important things to remember and some simple steps to take that can increase the chances of your transition in the workplace being less stressful and having a great outcome. The first is: Have a plan.

I mean by this, know how you would like to transition and when you would like to do so.

This means having a plan for when you would like to start working in your true gender. It is not advisable to 'mix it up' and come to work as one gender one day and another gender on other days. This only creates confusion for many in your workplace. Nor is it a good idea to go part of the way (wearing jewellery or makeup while still presenting as male, for instance) as this will also cause confusion and resistance.

The best step is to decide when you will come to work as your true gender and then start working with your employer on how you will achieve this goal.

Legally changing your name is an important part of this process, as your employer needs to change many records and documents about your employment. So having your legal change of name finalised is a helpful step. Another thing to remember is that once you change your name you need to change all of your important records. This includes your tax file number, your superannuation account(s), any academic records or documents, banking details and your personal records with Centrelink or other regulatory authorities.

The next thing to remember is that you will not transition alone in your workplace. Everyone around you will be in a state of change. Your colleagues will be learning your new name and the appropriate pronouns and titles to use. So expect them to make mistakes. Work out what you think is a fair and reasonable timeframe for people to practice and get it right. Some people may be a bit more challenged by the changes than others.

This does not mean they have an excuse to abuse or vilify you, but at the same time you need to remember that not everyone adapts to change quickly. That is why it is important to think about the time it will take people to practise and get your change of name correct.

You will also need to make your own judgement in individual cases as to whether a person has made an honest mistake based on long acquaintance with your former persona, or whether they are being deliberately resistant to your change.

The next thing to remember is that acceptance and respect are not the same thing. In any workplace there may be people whose life experiences are ones which others will struggle to accept or understand. Your employer cannot mandate that all employees be accepting of all the diversities in the workplace.

They can and should, however, demand that all employees are respectful of all the diverse people in any given workplace. So do not expect that everyone in your workplace will accept you as a transgender person, (it would be great if they did). But you can expect to be treated with dignity and respect the same as any other person in your place of work.

One of the most interesting questions or comments I hear when I work with organisations supporting an employee transitioning in the workplace is from other employees. The most common theme I hear is "will she/he still do the same work as before?". "I am really not fussed about my colleague's transition. As long as he/she still does his/her work, I am happy to work with her/him". From these types of comments I get the sense that most people's workmates really are accepting or at least not too disturbed by their colleague's transition.

Their only expectation is that you will continue to work in the same way you did in the past.

The other issue I hear regularly is, however, of greater concern. Many employees ask "how do I treat him/ her when he/she returns to

work?"

You will often find some of your colleagues are unsure of what to say to you and may appear to be ignoring you. This may be because they are frightened of giving offence or getting into trouble or creating embarrassment, if they say the wrong thing.

Do not mistake someone else's fear as discrimination or transphobia. Some of the best success stories I have seen and heard from people who have transitioned in the workplace have been ones where the transgender person openly helps people to understand who they are. This may include simple things like saying to the 'boys' on a Friday afternoon, "have fun tonight at the pub. I know that I can't join you, but hey, I understand you guys need time away from us girls".

The woman who said this had been out every Friday night with the boys for ten years prior to her transition. By letting the men know she knew she could not join in, she made the men in her workplace more comfortable around her and also set the stage for the ladies in the workplace to invite her to join the women's group.

Lastly, one other thing you can do when transitioning in your workplace that will make the process run more smoothly is to be open about your expected work performance. Have an open and frank discussion with your employer about your work performance so you know just where you stand in relation to the standards of work you are expected to maintain.

This practice is of benefit for two reasons.

First, it means you have a clear framework and basis from which you can measure workplace attitude. You know what is expected of you and what is reasonable. That way if your employer challenges your work performance after your transition you will be able to consider whether this is due to your not meeting expected standards or if it is, sadly, discrimination on the part of your employer.

The second reason for doing this is so that you and the employer have a formal process for discussing any current work issues and resolving them before your transition process commences.

This clears the air and provides you with a sense of how you are travelling within the organisation and it provides you with a base line to measure changes in your workplace and determine if they are fair and within reasonable limits or if they are the result of workplace harassment and unfair treatment.

These are just a few tips to consider if you plan to transition in your place of employment. If you would like to chat a little more about some of the processes for transitioning in the workplace, you can always just call the Gender Centre and we can chat in more detail.

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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.