

Employee Self-Identification: Increasing Workplace Inclusion in Metro

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Although equal protection laws for the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender (LGBT) community are inconsistent across the United States, many employers have taken proactive steps to offer their employees equitable treatment by way of non-discrimination policies, equal benefits, and inclusive practices. Metro Nashville Government is one such employer.

One obstacle to these efforts is the inadequate information available about LGBT employees. In the context of the work environment, both gender identity and sexual orientation are generally hidden, visibly indistinguishable characteristics. As a result, evaluating the success of diversity and inclusion practices is difficult because most employers do not have a sense of how many LGBT employees they have or where in their businesses LGBT employees actually work. Furthermore, unlike other diversity categories, such as race and gender, employers are not required to collect statistics on the number of LGBT people they employ. As such, the metrics to measure LGBT workplace equality and to assess diversity in hiring and promotion are not always easily available.

This issue is not unique to the workplace. Even the U.S. Census—often our most reliable source for population estimates—does not ask respondents about their sexual orientation. While the Census does provide an estimate of the number of same-sex households, it does not offer an accurate count of the number of people who identify as LGBT. The most detailed figures place LGBT individuals between 3.4 and 3.8% of the overall population,ⁱ with Nashville's LGBT population close to the national average at about 3.5% of its population.ⁱⁱ

Why measure?

Quite simply, what gets measured gets done. Conversely, you can't improve what you don't measure. The ability to quantify the number of LGBT employees allows organizations to track their progress over time, particularly as it concerns diversity benchmarks and ongoing self-assessments.

Organizations that have committed to diversity and inclusion must also commit to evaluating data related to recruitment, retention, and productivity. Having business metrics to quantitatively evaluate these programs is critical to growing and expanding a viable diversity program. Employers typically capture an employee's race, ethnicity, gender and sometimes military and disability status to quantitatively evaluate recruitment and retention across the entire organization and within individual business units. It makes good sense to innovate

existing data collection methods (or add new ones) to also track and gain a more complete picture of LGBT employees to significantly enhance efforts of diversity/inclusion initiatives.

Moreover, the inclusion of an LGBT option for self-identification improves workplace climate and fosters a culture of inclusion. The very nature of knowing that something is being monitored causes us to work harder and perform better. There's actually proof of this—often called the Hawthorne Effect. While LGBT employees report feeling that they count when they are counted, it also sends the clear signal to the entire workforce that the organization is fully committed to inclusion for LGBT employees.

Strategies for Measurement

Recently, employers have begun efforts to identify and quantify the experiences of LGBT employees:

1. **Anonymous engagement surveys.** Organizational climate surveys, typically anonymous, can include optional demographic questions on gender identity and sexual orientation which can then be reported through aggregated data, and parsed by sector to protect confidentiality. These surveys can be conducted internally or by a third party.
2. **Confidential employee records.** Existing human resource information systems ask employees to optionally provide demographic data and can include questions relating to gender identity and sexual orientation. Access to this data must be restricted to specified personnel for defined workforce management and development purposes.

These strategies are becoming common practice in the corporate sector globally (with Bank of America first providing its employees the option to self-identify as LGBT in 2001). According to the Human Rights Campaign's Corporate Equality Index 2016 Survey, 45% of employers allow employees to voluntarily provide sexual orientation and gender identity, up from 27% in 2008 and 17% in 2006ⁱⁱⁱ. These practices are not limited to private employers, but have also been embraced by the federal government and local municipalities.

The federal government serves as an important model for using self-identification data to better understand how its LGBT employees differ from their peers. Starting in 2012, the federal government has expanded its notion of diversity beyond traditional demographic characteristics (i.e. race/ethnicity and gender), allowing individuals to identify as a veteran, as a person with a

disability, and as LGBT on their biannual Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey. With this information, the federal government has found that LGBT employees are generally less satisfied than their heterosexual/straight counterparts. These metrics allow for the federal government to begin working towards addressing this discrepancy.

At the level of local government, cities and counties collect a variety of information about their employees. This includes a number of demographic categories that can help identify where challenges lie for particular populations and assist in the recruitment and retention of local talent. As recent events in cities such as Flint, Michigan and Ferguson, Missouri have shown, it is vital to the health and well-being of any municipality that leadership reflect its constituents. Allowing government employees to self-identify according to race, ethnicity, gender, LGBT, disability, military status, and immigrant or refugee status signals to employees and constituents alike that equity and inclusion are a priority. For example, the Seattle Office for Civil Rights conducted a Race and Social Justice Initiative Employee Survey in 2012 for city employees, designed for the purpose of addressing institutional racism within government. In an effort to be as inclusive and reflective of the workforce as possible, the agency included in the survey the option for city employees to provide demographic information. Gender identity, LGBT identity, and disability status were intentionally added to ensure a representative survey of the workforce.

Other Types of Identification

These strategies for collecting LGBT self-identification data also allow employers to solicit other sorts of employee information – for example, that related to physical or mental disability, veteran status, and religious affiliation. In fact, companies that allow LGBT self-identification often include these other demographic options as well, capitalizing on the opportunity to learn more about their employees. A commitment to deep inclusion requires widening the definition of workforce diversity beyond the usual metrics (i.e. race/ethnicity and gender) and necessitates the option for employees to self-define in a variety of ways that speak to their background and experiences.

In Nashville, military service and religious affiliation are two such important identification markers. Veterans make up an estimated 7.3% of the adult population in Nashville,^{iv} and Metro currently offers various levels of support to those who have served in the military through programs like *How's Nashville* –which provided housing for almost 300 veterans in 2015 –and

with the assistance of a Veterans Service Officer and the Davidson County Veterans Court^v. Nashville is also home to a population of diverse religious and spiritual beliefs. In 2010, the Association of Religion Data Archives reported nearly 80 different religions in Davidson County.^{vi} Additionally, the 2014 Religious Landscape Study found that 71% of Tennesseans say that religion is “very important” in their lives, with another 18% saying that it is “somewhat important.”^{vii} For these reasons, both veteran status and religious affiliation should be included as other identification options for Metro employees.

The Metro Human Relations Commission sees value in this broader definition of diversity. In response to the 2015 IncluCivics report, which examined racial/ethnic and gender diversity in Metro government, constituents and policy makers alike questioned why other demographic indicators, like LGBT identification and disability status, were not also included. As such, we know that this type of information is of interest to our community, even before it has been collected. Moreover, we encourage comprehensive and inclusive options to account for individuals whose self-identity falls outside traditional categories.

Nashville is Ready

Given these models, a self-identification program in government makes sense for a city like Nashville, whose recent accolades and commitment to diversity and inclusion have affirmed its reputation as a friendly and welcoming city in which to live, work, play, and do business. Civil rights organizations use a number of indicators to determine how friendly a municipality is to its LGBT constituents, including inclusive legislation, LGBT representation in local governing bodies, and anti-discrimination policies. In the Human Rights Campaign’s 2015 Municipal Equity Index, Nashville earned a score of 66 out of 100. This aggregate score – which was higher than both Chattanooga (35) and Memphis (56), but lower than Atlanta’s perfect score (100) – is revealing but obscures some of the areas in which we are already excelling. Although we scored 0 out of 30 when it came to non-discrimination laws in the areas of employment, housing, and public accommodation, the city received a score of 18 out of 24 for Municipality as Employer – with full points for non-discrimination in city employment. In addition, the city leadership’s relationship with the LGBT community was given full points, based on its public position on LGBT Equality and Pro-Equality Legislative or Policy efforts. Nashville’s progressive stance on many of these issues should be applauded, with the recognition that there is still more to be done to ensure equity. Instituting a voluntary employee satisfaction survey

that includes anonymous LGBT self-identification could increase our Municipal Equality Index score, making Nashville all that more attractive to diverse talent.

Self-identification data is necessary for ensuring parity for LGBT employees. More to the point, it is vital for monitoring and preventing discrimination, for working towards equality in pay and benefits, and for fostering a workplace culture of acceptance and equity. Metro currently reports salary data by race/ethnicity and gender every quarter, a necessary and important step toward achieving equity in pay. However, without quantifiable data about sexual orientation and gender identity, it is difficult to ensure that LGBT employees are, in fact, receiving equitable treatment and that the non-discrimination policy in place is more than just symbolism.

While we have become increasingly more aware about gender and race discrimination within local government, far less has been done for sexual orientation, even while public policy research suggests that public-sector LGBT employees face widespread discrimination but report it less than their peers in the private sector.^{viii} Additionally, a report from the Center for American Progress and AFSCME on “Gay and Transgender Discrimination in the Public Sector” cites a study that finds that gay and transgender public-sector workers make less than their peers for equal work. Allowing LGBT employees to self-identify will provide the information necessary to guide local government toward effective inclusionary policies. Moreover, it would prove a useful tool for Nashville’s own LGBT Chamber of Commerce and model a best practice for the public and private sectors alike. As the “It” City, Nashville should strive for more than protection for its LGBT constituents and employees—it should aspire to equal recognition.

Recommendation

The Nashville LGBT Chamber of Commerce and the Metro Human Relations Commission recommend that Metro:

Take the necessary action to allow employees to self-identify by sexual orientation and gender identity through an employee satisfaction survey conducted by a non-partial third party. This survey should measure subjective employee experiences and also allow employees to self-identify according to other important socio-demographic markers such as disability status, veteran status, and religious affiliations.

NOTE: The recommendations in this report are endorsed and supported by *Empower Tennessee*, whose mission is to promote opportunities for people with disabilities to strive for greater independence.

ⁱ Gates, Gary J. and Frank Newport. 2012. "Special Report: 3.4% of U.S. Adults Identify as LGBT." October 18. <http://www.gallup.com/poll/158066/special-report-adults-identify-lgbt.aspx>

ⁱⁱ Ibid.

ⁱⁱⁱ Human Rights Campaign. "Self-Identification of LGBT Employees." <http://www.hrc.org/resources/self-identification-of-lgbt-employees>

^{iv} American Community Survey 2014 (5-year estimates)

^v "Mayor Barry Seeks to Recognize Veterans Day as Official Metro Holiday" Press Release. April 21, 2016. <https://www.nashville.gov/News-Media/News-Article/ID/5174/Mayor-Barry-Seeks-to-Recognize-Veterans-Day-as-Official-Metro-Holiday.aspx>

^{vi} The Association of Religion Data Archives. 2010. "County Membership Report – Davidson County, Tennessee." http://www.thearda.com/rcms2010/r/c/47/rcms2010_47037_county_name_2000_ON.asp

^{vii} Pew Research Center. 2014. *Religious Landscape Study*. <http://www.pewforum.org/religious-landscape-study/state/tennessee/>

^{viii} Burns, Crosby, Kate Childs Graham, and Sam Menefee-Libey. 2012. *Gay and Transgender Discrimination in the Public Sector*. <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/lgbt/report/2012/08/30/35114/gay-and-transgender-discrimination-in-the-public-sector/>