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Three Reasons Why Employers Should Recognize Pride Month

It's Pride Month; let's have a party!

For those who identify as gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex, and ally ("LGBTQIA"), June is a time to celebrate one's willingness and ability to live authentically as a human.

For employers, there's often the question of whether to formally recognize June as a month with special meaning for LGBTQIA employees or their family members. After a quick synopsis of why June is special to LGBTQIA folks, family and friends, I offer three reasons why employers should by all means provide such recognition.

A Brief Historical Primer

June's "Pride Month" designation owes to the historical fact that the Stonewall riots—which are commonly recognized as the tipping point for the modern gay rights era—began on June 28, 1969 outside the Stonewall Inn in Greenwich Village in New York City. One year later, in late June 1970, various gay and lesbian groups organized parades and marches in New York, Chicago and other places to commemorate the first anniversary of the riots.

Those parades were also pointed reminders that gay and lesbian persons lacked basic civil rights of any kind. Indeed, it wasn't until 1982 that Wisconsin enacted the first state-wide legal protections for persons identifying as gay and lesbian.

Recall that in the late 1960's and into the '70s, the common term for persons with same-sex attractions wasn't "gay" or "lesbian" but instead "homosexual" to be polite and something far more derogatory when manners didn't matter. Employers, landlords, the military, social clubs, and other organizations routinely discriminated against gay and lesbian persons via job terminations, evictions, dishonorable discharges, and banning. For the vast majority of gay and lesbian persons, hiding in the closet was the only mode of self-preservation.

Fast forward to 2016. This month, in hundreds of cities across the country, there will be parades and parties celebrating LGBTQIA people, with the Stonewall Riots as an implicit commemorative underpinning.

Even more important, gay marriage is now legal in all fifty states. In twenty-two states, it's illegal to discriminate against gay and lesbian persons in employment, housing and other life necessities. (In eighteen of those states, it's also illegal to discriminate against transgender persons.) Even in states that don't offer LGBTQIA legal protections,

the federal government (via the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission [EEOC]) is increasingly stepping in to assert that Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 protects gay, lesbian and transgender persons in employment settings.

Still, the country as a whole has a long way to go. In more than half the states, it remains legal for a landlord to discriminate against a tenant on the basis of the tenant's sexual or gender identities. Similarly, in a majority of states LGBTQIA folks can be legally denied access to various services or organizations (car or life insurance, medical services, professional associations). More recently, with the onslaught of "bathroom bills", we are seeing states take active steps to target transgender persons relative to their ability to engage in basic bodily functions. Really?

Why it's Important to Recognize Pride Month in the Workplace

Whether located in a LGBTQIA-protection state or not, there are at least three reasons why it's critical that an employer recognize June as Pride Month:

1. **Acknowledging June as Pride Month Reaffirms a Safe Workplace:** Let's be honest—in many locales, and even in states with legal protections—social or family pressures often make it difficult to be an "out" gay or lesbian person. Since we spend an inordinate amount of time at work, an employer's willingness to acknowledge June as a special time for those employees messages that at least for eight or ten or however many hours a day, the employer will have their backs.
2. **It's Not Only about the G or L's:** Pride month isn't just about giving gay or lesbian employees their due. Rather, the other letters of the LGBTQIA alphabet (persons who identify as bisexual, transgender, queer or intersex) want to feel welcomed and accepted too. The A's—allies (those who aren't gay or lesbian but are strongly egalitarian)—also like knowing that their employer protects others whom society marginalizes. Moreover, as they say, what goes around comes around; one never knows how an act of kindness or solidarity (e.g. an employer's Pride Month recognition) might help every employee—gay or straight—feel that the employer actually cares about its workforce. The workplace benefits could be enormous!
3. **It Makes Great Business Sense:** At this very moment, employers across the country are wrestling with what I call the "crazy bigotry quilt" of state laws relative to LGBTQIA protections, where some states are protective and others are not. More and more, employers are finding that some of their best employees or applicants—who may be gay, lesbian or transgender—are refusing to be hired in or relocate to states or cities that refuse to provide LGBTQIA legal protections. In turn, this is causing huge business headaches; I can imagine that in many companies, there's an HR professional with a multicolored map of the United States with sticky notes attached to a cubicle wall—"Can't send Joe here"; "This place isn't safe for Mary." An employer who visibly acknowledges Pride Month as a special time is more likely to attract and/or keep its key LGBTQIA employees, even with our present crazy bigotry quilt, since doing so tells the applicant or employee that the employer won't let someone else (such as a state governor or city mayor) set workplace human resource (and rights) priorities.

Mechanics

Finally, if you're on board with my thesis and wondering how to actually give June a "Pride Month" spin, there's a lot an employer can do. For example, include a brief story about the history of Pride Month in the company newsletter (feel free to cut and paste from this article!). Other ideas include notices about local Pride Month events on workplace bulletin boards or hanging Pride (rainbow) banners or triangles in appropriate workspaces. There's even gold star action—encouraging positive workplace trainings and dialogue about what it means to be a part of the LGBTQIA alphabet and using that as a basis to create or support a LGBTQIA employee resource group in the workplace.

Closing

Forward-thinking employers can use June's designation as Pride Month as a way of reaffirming their commitment to a safe and welcoming workplace for all employees, including those who identify somewhere on the LGBTQIA alphabet. Doing so benefits all employees and helps to make the workplace more accepting for everyone.

About the Author: Ellen (Ellie) Krug is a civil trial lawyer who transitioned genders (male to female) in 2009 and later became one of the few attorneys in the country to try jury cases in separate genders. She presently splits her time between nonprofit work and speaking/training and consulting on diversity and inclusion. Ellie is the author of *Getting to Ellen: A Memoir about Love, Honesty and Gender Change* (2013). Read more at www.elliekrug.com. Ellie can be contacted at elliekrug@gmail.com.

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