

## Protected Characteristics : Sexual Orientation

The UK Government estimates that around 5-7% (around 3.7 million people) in Britain are gay, lesbian or bisexual. This is an estimate, as disclosure of sexual orientation has never been officially surveyed and retains a level of social stigma which means that many people are hesitant to come out and publically identify as gay, lesbian or bisexual.

Sexual orientation refers to a person's attraction to people of the same sex, the opposite sex or either sex. It does not cover particular sexual practices or preferences for particular types of sexual activity.

The Equality Act specifically protects the rights of individuals regardless of their sexual orientation, it is one of the protected characteristics, and that extends to the workplace. No employer can treat a lesbian, gay or bisexual employee or applicant differently from any other employee or applicant simply because of their sexual orientation.

Despite this protection in law many lesbian, gay and bisexual employees face discrimination in the workplace and are reluctant to be open about their sexual orientation in the workplace. This is a great loss not only to the individual themselves but to the country as a whole as lesbian, gay and bisexual people who feel able to be open about their sexual orientation at work say they are more productive, confident, creative, loyal, motivated and better able to build good working relationships with colleagues. (Stonewall)

Not all gay, lesbian and bisexual individuals are equally comfortable about openly sharing their sexuality. Bisexual individuals are typically less confident disclosing their sexual orientation than gay individuals. Similarly, cultural and socio-economic factors may make it easier for white gay men to be open about their sexual orientation than other groups of individuals.

So, what actions can you take to support lesbian, gay and bisexual employees in the workplace?

- Don't assume that everyone is heterosexual. It can be common for heterosexual individuals to assume that everyone else is and ask about husbands and wives, whilst not overtly homophobic such questions can make gay, lesbian and bisexual employees uncomfortable and feel that they must challenge prevalent assumptions.
- Set up a staff support group. Top performing organisations for equality often have support networks for lesbian, gay and bisexual employees, strongly supported by heterosexual champions.
- If an individual has revealed their sexuality to you treat that information as privileged and don't tell other people. Similarly, if you happen to find out about an individual's sexual orientation by accident, please treat this information sensitively.
- Avoid 'banter' that could be construed as homophobic. In fact it's better to err away from any sexualised banter in the workplace as this can create an unpleasant place to work and has been linked to many cases of harassment.

## Summary

It is illegal to treat anyone less favourably in the workplace as a result of their sexual orientation. This extends to every aspect of the workplace from opportunities, access to services, or treatment by others within the organisation.