

LGBT in Construction: Exploring Experiences to Inform Inclusive Practices

Sarah Barnard, Andy Dainty, Sian Lewis and Andreas Culora, Loughborough University

Study background

An annual survey collaboratively conducted by New Civil Engineer, Architect's Journal and Construction News revealed that homophobia is commonplace in the construction industry; many gay men and women encounter homophobic comments in the workplace and a small minority of gay employees reported that they could be open about their sexuality.

Although there has been a sustained focus in recent years on understanding the experiences of underrepresented groups in construction such as women and minority ethnic workers, there has been a lack of work that has explored the experiences of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) workers. This study, funded by the Bowen Jenkins Legacy Research Fund of the CIOB, seeks to amplify the voices of LGBT people and provide a forum for people to come together to promote positive change.

What we did

Carried out a review of previous relevant research, in-depth interviews with 16 people and focus groups with 8 LGBT employees who work in construction. In the interviews and focus groups we used a qualitative approach by asking open questions about the person's work experiences and career, their LGBT identity and perceptions of industry practices. A stakeholder workshop was held with attendees from across the sector to share findings and feed into recommendations for improvements in employment practices in the sector, culminating in an agenda for change.

What we found

Site and office differences, exemplified by the drift from site to office

A major theme to come through from the research was a dichotomy within the construction industry between office workspaces and the construction sites. Participants often framed office workspaces as sites of diversity, inclusion and acceptance for LGBT employees and other minority groups within the industry, e.g. females, ethnic minorities, individuals with disabilities etc. Construction sites were often framed as traditional, exclusive spaces dominated by hyper-masculine white males. Participants were predominantly based in offices, rather than site locations, and they talked about the conscious decision through their career to seek out a place they feel safe.

Discussions during the stakeholder workshop about the context of work centred on how site culture is harder to shift, due to supply chain fragmentation and the lack of control that any one organisation has over workplace behaviours. Consequently, there is less chance to formulate coherent inclusive cultures. There is also difficulty with developing a zero-tolerance approach through the supply chain. Therefore, there is a potential role for procurement policies that address these issues, framed in discourses that emphasise the benefits of an inclusive workforce.

Work as a safe space despite incidents of discrimination from customers/clients/colleagues

Many people described work as a safe space during their periods of coming out or transitioning. One trans-male participant said that if it hadn't been for the support he received both formally and informally '*I would have been another statistic, as in I would have committed suicide*'. Another described how due to regulations, laws and structures in place, it meant that if they experienced homophobia or discrimination, they would be able to report it in a formal way. This gave them security that they felt they did not have in public spaces.

Examples of negative experiences mainly focus on interactions with clients and colleagues: '*I've had a couple of situations where colleagues have completely ignored me and refused to talk to me when they knew who I was*'; '*we had a phone call from a customer who had a complaint about something and they referred to the fact that they'd*

placed the order with me and called me a load of names that were you know homophobic, like oh it's that puff that you've got in there, or words to that effect. But it was quite horrible'. Despite these kind of incidents for some the construction sector is experienced as a safe space in relation to other contexts.

During the stakeholder workshop examples of good practice were shared: Highways England – internal website, 'affinity' networks that give minority-employees a voice; 'respect at work' training (though might be implemented as a 'tick box' exercise in some cases); and inclusive leadership courses that cover management skills and getting the best out of everyone regardless of who they are. There are powerful LGBT people in the sector who can use their positions to challenge behaviours to great effect.

For women, gender is a bigger obstacle than sexuality for career

Cis-female participants (i.e. those female at birth) identifying as lesbian stated that they felt their gender had more of an impact as to how they were treated at work, in comparison to their sexuality. One participant said '*I can hide I'm gay, but I can't hide that I'm a woman*'. The pervasiveness of gender discrimination was also underlined during the stakeholder workshop discussions. The domination of the construction by white heterosexual males, particularly at the very top of companies was posited as a more substantial barrier to their career progression than their LGBT identity. The term "old boys club" came up repeatedly in the interviews to describe gender-related issues within the industry.

Some women participants outlined how they had progressed within construction firms by entering in administrative roles and transitioning to technical roles. This pathway through administrative into technical roles within construction represents a positive example of career progression for women within the industry.

Recommendations

Greater support for specialised LGBT support networks/groups. Where companies had formal LGBT networks set up within the company, LGBT employees often feel a greater sense of recognition, acceptance and empowerment within the firm. Those who are active in LGBT networks should receive recognition for their contributions. There is also scope for greater collaboration between LGBT networks and other groups focusing on equality and diversity inclusion agendas.

Embed facilitating LGBT visibility and awareness in normal business practice. Visibility in the physical sense (e.g. networks, badges, meetings/socials, presence at the London Pride event) as well as intellectual sense (awareness of LGBT groups and what this means for their identities) was crucial in facilitating positive experiences for interviewees. Outward displays of support for LGBT help workers feel more welcome.

Actively promoting diversity and equality in the industry throughout the supply chain. Many interviewees stressed the importance of promoting diversity and equality within the industry, both specifically for LGBT employees and in a broader sense, e.g. gender, race, disabilities. There is scope for greater integration of EDI into procurement processes, especially in the private sector where more encouragement is required. This could include a differentiated EDI strategy depending on context (focus, size) and alternative career pathways into technical roles from parts of the sector that are more diverse.

Training for colleagues, particularly managers and leaders. Some interviewees suggested that it is important for colleagues to have LGBT-specific training to facilitate awareness, understanding, and to provide the tools to ensure an inclusive and welcoming working environment. This could include a focus on language and the development of scripts on how to practically challenge negative behaviours as and when they happen.

Development of a sector wide code of practice. Developing a code of practice based on 'zero tolerance' that construction firms might adopt represents an important first step in addressing discrimination wherever it resides. For such as initiative to work in practice we suggest an overarching body is hosted by the Construction Industry Council to oversee the development of the code of practice and monitor take up by professional bodies in the sector.