WHAT WORKS:

Career–building strategies for people from diverse groups
A COUNSELLOR RESOURCE

Sexual Minorities

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Statistics

Canadians aged 18 to 59 in a 2003 survey	1.0% considered themselves homosexual 0.7% considered themselves bisexual 1.3% of men considered themselves homosexual 0.9% of women reported being bisexual 0.6% among men reported being bisexual[1]
Number of same-sex common-law couples in Canada	In 2001, 34,200 identified as common law In 2006, 37,900 identified as common law In 2006, 7,500 identified as married[2]
Respondents who experienced and reported discrimination because of their sexual orientation	78% gays and lesbians 29% bisexuals 2% heterosexuals[3]

Context

In this chapter, *sexual minorities* includes gay men, lesbian women, bisexual persons, transgendered and two-spirited persons. The abbreviation GLBT is used throughout this chapter and refers to individuals in these populations. Where the abbreviation GLB appears, the discussion refers only to gay men, lesbian women and bisexual persons.

Terminology and definitions

It is essential for counsellors to use terminology that is accepted by the GLBT community as respectful and inclusive. Use of appropriate terminology helps clients feel they are in a GLBT-friendly environment.

Sexual orientation

Sexual orientation is the "affection and sexual attraction to other persons, regardless of gender."[4]

Gender identity

Gender identity is a person's internal sense of being male or female. It is not the same as sexual orientation. It may or may not be the same as one's biological sex. Gender expression relates to how a person presents his or her sense of gender to society through how one looks, acts, grooms or dresses.[5]

Queer

Queer can include lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered individuals, as well as heterosexual allies supporting liberation efforts for sexual minorities. The term may also refer to an individual who has adopted "an identity that celebrates differences within a wider picture of sexual and social diversity."[6]

Once a discriminatory term used with reference to gay men, the term has been reclaimed by some people from sexual minorities who now use it with a more positive connotation. Because of its negative past, it is suggested that counsellors avoid using the term unless clients use it first with reference to themselves.[7]

Gay

Gay refers to a male individual who is physically, emotionally and sexually attracted to members of the same sex. The term is frequently used as a synonym for *homosexual*. Some lesbian women use the term to refer to themselves and other lesbians.

Lesbian

Lesbian is a generally acceptable term to describe a female individual who is physically, emotionally and sexually attracted to members of the same sex.[8]

Bisexual

A *bisexual* is an individual who may be physically, emotionally and sexually attracted to members of either sex. The degree of attraction may not be the same for both sexes and may vary over time.[9]

Many people do not believe that bisexual is a valid orientation. Many believe that bisexuals are simply confused about their orientation and that identifying as bisexual is a step in the process of identifying as a gay or lesbian. Bisexual individuals are subject to discrimination within both the heterosexual and homosexual communities. Bisexual individuals have largely been ignored in the literature and research.[10]

Transgender, trans-identified

Transgendered or *trans-identified* refers to individuals who question the gender identity they were biologically assigned at birth and reject that identity either partially or completely. Transgendered people are persons whose "gender identity, outward appearance, expression and/or anatomy do not fit into conventional expectations of male or female. [The term] is often used as an umbrella term to represent a wide range of non-conforming gender identities and behaviours."[11]

"The great majority of cross-dressers are biological males, most of whom are sexually attracted to women. People generally experience gender identity and sexual orientation as two different things. Sexual orientation refers to one's sexual attraction to men, women, both, or neither, whereas gender identity refers to one's sense of oneself as male, female, or transgender. Usually people who are attracted to women prior to transition continue to be attracted to women after transition...That means, for example, that a biologic male who is attracted to females will be attracted to females after transitioning, and she may regard herself as a lesbian."[12]

Transgendered people have many issues in common with GLBT individuals, such as identity development, coming out, oppression and discrimination. At the same time, they face unique challenges, such as the impact of sex change procedures, legal issues regarding their status as male or female, the impact of cross-dressing, and a variety of occupational choice and adjustment issues.

Intersexed

Intersexed refers to "a person born with ambiguous sex characteristics that do not seem to conform to cultural or societal expectations of a distinctly male or female gender. For example, some intersexed individuals are born with the reproductive organs of both males and females or ambiguous genitalia. In some cases, a person is not found to have intersex anatomy until he or she reaches puberty."[13] *Intersexed* is now used in place of *hermaphrodite*.[14]

Transsexual

Transsexual refers to individuals who desire to live permanently as the opposite sex from their birth sex. Transsexuals may choose to have sex reassignment surgery.[15]

Two-spirited persons

Two-spirited refers to gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered persons of Aboriginal origins. Traditionally the Two-spirited person housed both male and female spirits within their bodies.[16] Historically, in many Aboriginal cultures, two-spirited persons were respected leaders and medicine people and were often accorded special status based on their unique abilities to understand both male and female perspectives.[17]

Homophobia, homonegativity

Homophobia is the fear or misunderstanding of homosexuality and GLBT individuals. It is often expressed by offensive, discriminatory and violent actions. The phrase *internalized homophobia* refers to a "diminished sense of personal self-worth or esteem felt by an individual as a result of the experienced or presumed homophobia of others."[18]

Homonegativity is a more specific and updated version of the term *homophobia*. Homonegativity refers to having negative views toward gay individuals without implying fear.[19]

Heterosexism

Heterosexism refers to a world view in which all activities are seen from a heterosexual point of view. A heterosexist point of view excludes references to gay people, which may make them feel invisible.[20]

Closeted, covering and passing

Closeted describes individuals who have not disclosed their sexual identity to other people. Closeted individuals hide their sexual orientation in the workplace, at school, at home and with friends.

Covering refers to attempts to appear to be a heterosexual but not faking a heterosexual identity. Closeted individuals usually are covering their GLBT identities.[21]

Individuals who are *passing* are not disclosing their sexual identity in order to ensure they are viewed as heterosexual.[22]

Coming out, outing

Coming out refers to the "process through which lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered and transsexual people recognize their sexual preferences and differences and integrate this knowledge into their personal lives. Coming out is a complex, selective and ongoing process."[23]

The phrase *implicitly out* means being honest about one's life and activities and not using GLBT labels. The phrase *explicitly out* means being open about one's sexual identity, including telling other people.[24]

Outing is the "public disclosure of another person's sexual orientation without that person's permission or knowledge. Outing is very disrespectful and is potentially dangerous to the outed person."[25]

Reclaimed language and symbols

Reclaimed language is taking terms or symbols that have been used in a derogatory fashion and using them in a positive way to describe one's experiences or self. *Queer* is a reclaimed term. "The triangle is a reclaimed symbol; pink triangles were used by the Nazis to identify gay prisoners, whereas the inverted black triangle was used to identify lesbians and other political prisoners."[26]

History and legislation

Promotion of equality in law

"The promotion of equality entails the promotion of a society in which all are secure in the knowledge that they are recognized at law as human beings equally deserving of concern, respect and consideration."[27]

J. McIntyre

The gay and lesbian population has been traditionally marginalized. However, significant legal events on equality have increased this population's profile.

Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms

The Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms states "Every individual is equal before and under the law and has the right to the equal protection and equal benefit of the law without discrimination and, in particular, without discrimination based on race, national or ethnic origin, colour, religion, sex, age or mental or physical disability." In 1996, the federal government passed Bill C-33, adding sexual orientation to the list of prohibited grounds of discrimination under the *Canadian Human Rights Act*.[28]

Bill C-250, *An Act to Amend the Criminal Code (Hate Propaganda)*

Bill C-250 was passed in the House of Commons in February 2004, amending Sections 318 and 319 (Hate Propaganda) of the *Criminal Code of Canada* to include sexual orientation within the listing of identifiable groups against which hate propaganda is deemed a criminal offense.[29]

Civil Marriage Act

One of the last pieces of the legal framework necessary to guarantee full equality is the recent (2005) passage of the *Civil Marriage Act*, which includes same-sex couples in the definition of civil marriage.[30] Before the passage of the Act, some provincial courts had already struck down the opposite-sex definition of marriage.

Under the *Alberta Human Rights Act*, the definition of *marital status* is now "the state of being married, single, widowed, divorced, separated or living with a person in a conjugal relationship outside marriage."[31] Previously the word *state* was *status* and the word *person* was followed by *of the opposite sex*.

Alberta Human Rights Act

The previous Act, *Human Rights, Citizenship and Multiculturalism Act*, recognized that all persons are equal in dignity, rights and responsibilities with regard to the protected grounds of race, religious beliefs, colour, gender, physical disability, mental disability, age, ancestry, place of origin, marital status, source of income or family status. This Act did not include sexual orientation as a protected ground. As of April 2, 1998, sexual orientation had been "read in" by the Supreme Court of Canada as a protected ground of discrimination in Alberta.[32]

As of October 1, 2009, the *Human Rights, Citizenship and Multiculturalism Act* was renamed the *Alberta Human Rights Act*. Under this Act, sexual orientation is written in as a protected ground. Protected grounds based on sexual orientation include "protection from differential treatment based on a person's actual or presumed sexual orientation or his or her association with a person who is homosexual, heterosexual or bisexual."[33]

Discrimination

Although protection from discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation is guaranteed in the federal Charter of Rights and at the provincial level, that guarantee has not always held true for persons belonging to sexual minorities, either in the workplace or in society. "The outright prejudice and discrimination against gays [and lesbians] has a long history…and its influence today remains pervasive… Despite the Canadian ideal of respecting diversity, polls still indicate that many Canadians view gay individuals negatively…Twenty percent of gay men have been physically assaulted…and the vast majority have experienced verbal harassment…."[34] Discrimination continues to be a fact of life for the GLBT community.

Discrimination against transgendered people

"…Discrimination against transgendered persons is systemic. Human rights violations are both varied and widespread across geographic and class boundaries…Transgendered persons have been an especially marginalized group."

Keith Norton
Former Chief Commissioner, Ontario Human Rights Commission

Sexual identity formation

"Sexual identity development can be defined as the process of changing one's current dominant heterosexual cultural beliefs, values, attitudes, behaviours and identification to those of a minority lesbian or gay culture and identification. Furthermore, it is the process by which a person overcomes or manages internalized and externalized homophobia and heterosexism, resulting in the development of a positive sense of self as lesbian or gay."[35]

A number of models related to the formation of sexual identity have been proposed. A widely accepted model is the one developed by psychologist Vivienne Cass, who incorporated a social constructionist perspective. Her model explains the identity formation process for both male and female homosexual persons and bisexuals.

Cass's model includes the following six stages:

1. *Identity confusion*. The person experiences increased awareness of same-sex or bisexual thoughts, feelings or behaviours. This awareness creates confusion because these thoughts, feelings or behaviours do not fit into a heterosexual mould.

2. *Identity comparison*. The person begins by exploring the gay world, seeking out further information and contact with GLB people.

3. *Identity tolerance.* The person experiences increased contact with GLB individuals, but still mostly identifies as heterosexual.

4. *Identity acceptance.* Conflict begins to surface with non-GLB individuals while the person simultaneously develops increased comfort with the idea of being GLB. Most people at this stage continue to use passing as a management strategy.

5. *Identity pride.* The person feels strong pride and seeks immersion in the GLB community, while also experiencing anger and isolation from heterosexuals.

6. *Identity synthesis.* The individual accepts gay culture and the heterosexual community.[36]

"This model differs from most others in its rejection of the commonly held assumption that people perceive the acquisition of a homosexual identity in a negative light. Within each stage, several different paths of development are proposed. Where the other models were applied to either male or female homosexuals, this model is intended to explain the identity formation process for both groups."[37]

A place of acceptance

"It is important to let GLBT clients know right up front that sexual orientation is only one part, although an important part, of who they are and that this is a safe place to talk about it. Seeking help is hard enough for anybody and, in my experience, most people take a long and winding road before going to a counsellor. Often, they feel that they have no more options and the problem may have snowballed so that they are not feeling hopeful or comfortable. I don't always know if I can help them, but I can listen and not judge."

Marcia Taylor
Lethbridge Community College

Barriers and challenges

Frequently when GLBT individuals come out to their families and peers, temporary conflicts arise, leaving GLBT individuals with very little support. When this event coincides with the timing of important career decisions for GLBT individuals, it may influence their self-esteem, self-efficacy and general well-being and, in turn, negatively impact their career decision-making process.[38]

Coming out and coming to terms

Coming out is a continual and lifelong process that is always influenced by issues of safety, vulnerability, individual comfort and perceived levels of support and acceptance. Coming out experiences are linked to this larger coming to terms process that involves both the individual who discloses a non-heterosexual identity and the recipient of that disclosure. Researchers suggest that coming out and coming to terms processes are critical to mental health of all GLBT people.[39]

Substance abuse and suicide

GLBT persons are likely to be at higher risk than the general population for substance abuse and self-harm, including suicide. Both males and females who reported a same-sex attraction are over-represented in statistics regarding substance misuse, suicidal behaviour and depressed mood compared with their counterparts who reported opposite-sex attraction only.[40]

Lesbian and gay persons who did not attempt suicide differed in two ways from those who did attempt suicide:

• They experienced less stress in coming out to their parents/family.

• They experienced less ridicule for their sexual orientation or gender identity.[41]

Responding to Challenges: Strategies and Practices

> **What do I wish I would have known when I first started working with persons belonging to sexual minorities?**
>
> "I wish I would have known to just trust the process. That people are people and that I can be comfortable being myself and using my skills. I can't be everything to everyone, but I can help clients find other resources if I don't know the answer. I have found that taking part in workshops to gain more information on working with persons belonging to sexual minorities has been really helpful. Becoming aware of my values and beliefs has been an important part of feeling comfortable. When we work with clients in a holistic manner, many of the counselling skills we use are the same regardless of the issues that clients bring."
>
> Marcia Taylor
> Lethbridge Community College

Multicultural counselling approach

A common suggestion is to approach career counselling for sexual minorities by applying the concepts of multicultural counselling. The rationale for applying multicultural counselling approaches with GLBT clients is that these client groups represent a minority in our dominant heterosexual population.

This approach identifies the importance of a counsellor's competence in three dimensions: counsellor's self-awareness, knowledge of other world views, and counselling skills.[42]

Counsellor's self-awareness

Culturally aware counsellors focus on their own belief systems by

- examining their own assumptions on human behaviour, values, biases, preconceived notions and personal limitations
- becoming aware of how sexual minorities fit into their own world views
- understanding how their own cultural experiences relate to their beliefs and attitudes about GLBT people
- examining how their own world views impact their interactions with GLBT clients[43]

Counsellors need to be aware that their cultural background may, at times, result in their beliefs and world views contrasting with those of their clients. The process of professional reflection about personal culture supports the development of self-awareness, identified as a core competency in the domain of multicultural counselling.

> **Attitudes and knowledge**
>
> "If counsellors have the attitudes [accepting, non-judgemental, open] and the knowledge about sexual minorities, that is the main thing."
>
> Kevin Alderson
> Professor, University of Calgary

Kevin Alderson provides a number of questions that may help counsellors explore their own attitudes and beliefs regarding GLBT persons. Counsellors may wish to reflect on their responses to these questions:

1. Would you use the services of a physician or dentist who was openly GLBT?
2. How would you feel if your son or daughter became explicitly out?
3. How would you feel about sharing a hotel room with a GLBT person of your gender?

4. Would you allow yourself to become close friends with someone who is GLBT?

5. Would you invite open GLBT individuals to your wedding and encourage them to dance with their same-sex partners?

6. Do you believe that gay people are equal to heterosexual individuals in every respect?

7. If you were GLBT, or are GLBT, how open would you feel (or do you feel) about it where you live and where you work?[44]

"If you feel some hesitancy or reluctance in answering the first six questions, you have some work to do before you are ready to work effectively with GLBT individuals. Largely out of necessity, GLBTs become very sensitive to the views that others hold of them. Often this is communicated very subtly, and it is this subtleness that GLBTs become adept at discerning."[45]

Knowledge of other world views

The importance of knowing about GLBT culture

"Living in communities that routinely discriminate against gay men and lesbian women makes it difficult if not virtually impossible to avoid internalizing negative stereotypes or attitudes about this sexual minority culture. Because misinformation or misunderstanding will quickly be evident to sexual minority clients, and may cause them to seek help elsewhere or not to get help at all, counsellors must be familiar with gay and lesbian culture so they are credible and congruent in their attitudes."[46]

Mark Pope
Past President, American Counseling Association

There is evidence of heterosexist biases in counselling practices with persons belonging to sexual minorities. Some of this bias is a result of lack of information regarding GLBT clients, their issues, lifestyles and resources.

Culturally aware counsellors may broaden their knowledge of GLBT clients by

• attempting to understand their world view without making negative judgments
• talking to career counsellors who are experienced with GLBT clients
• attending workshops or training events
• seeking out resources in the community
• reading books, journal articles and information on websites

Counselling skills

Teaching others to have an open heart

"Counsellors with an 'open heart' can be instrumental not only in helping these individuals, but also in teaching others about them and the issues that they face."

Kevin Alderson
University of Calgary

Culturally aware counsellors seek skill development by

• practising appropriate, relevant and sensitive intervention strategies and skills
• acknowledging the cultural values and life experiences of clients
• incorporating the values of clients into the counselling process, as appropriate[47]

Other counselling approaches and concerns

Counsellors may want to consider professional ethics, successful counselling strategies, referrals, and special concerns related to bisexual clients and to GLBT members of cultural minorities.

Professional ethics

The Career Development Association of Alberta's Code of Ethics, Guidelines for Professional Conduct, includes this statement: "Career development professionals will be aware of their personal values and issues, and will strive to remain impartial when assisting clients in a career decision making or problem solving process. They will strive to avoid all types of stereotyping and discrimination."[48]

Although professional counselling associations identify equal treatment for all clients as ethically correct for their members, many counsellors continue to demonstrate subtle or more obvious signs of discrimination against GLBT clients. Such discrimination may take the form of avoiding topics that are uncomfortable for the counsellor, minimizing the importance of sexual orientation related to issues and so on.[49]

Successful strategies

These counselling tips come from practitioners who work with GLBT clients:

- Reflect on your own experiences with GLBT persons and try to understand more of their experiences.

- Consider these questions: What are the GLBT clients like? What is their experience? How are they dealt with?

- Re-examine your own beliefs and values. Reflect on how they may affect your counselling process with GLBT persons.

- Accept that you may not have all the answers and let clients know that.

- Review confidentiality policies and reassure clients your counselling conversation is between you and them. Building trust is key.

- Explore clients' support systems. Many GLBT clients live in isolation without support from their families or friends.

- Be inclusive in speech by being sensitive to the use of terms, such as husband or wife.

- Be sensitive to terminology that is or is not used in the GLBT community. Some lesbian women may take offence at being called gay. Avoid terms historically targeted for discrimination.

- Be sensitive to clients who may be at different stages of their sexual identity formation.

- Don't make generalizations about the GLBT population. Remember that what GLBT clients tell you is about them and not about all GLBT persons.

Referrals to other counsellors

Counsellors need to have clear understanding of their own personal and professional boundaries.

- If you have beliefs and values that might conflict with working with GLBT clients, refer the clients to an appropriate counsellor.

- Be sure you do not make it known that you have a bias regarding the sexual orientation of clients.

- If you don't have expertise with the GLBT community, refer clients who are exploring their sexuality to other counsellors who do. It is important not to minimize the issue.

- Reassure clients whom you are referring to other counsellors. Explain that the reason that you are referring them is to make certain they receive help from someone who is appropriate.

- Explain to the client what to expect from the referral.

- Follow up with the client, and if necessary, find additional sources of support.

Testing biases

Counsellors are encouraged to evaluate any testing instruments they are considering for use with clients belonging to sexual minorities. A consensus in the literature examining the use of career assessment instruments with GLBT clients is that the results of tests may not be reliable and/or valid.[50]

Bisexual clients

One of the causes of stress in bisexual clients is the polarization of sexual orientation into heterosexual and homosexual categories. Because of the polarization, bisexuals are considered to be in a transitional stage of development, and therefore some think they must be guided to choose a dominant preference. "Contemporary research refutes the notion of sexuality as a binary choice. Counsellors are encouraged to adopt a more complex understanding of sexuality that sees physical, emotional and erotic attractions as fluid, relational and situated."[51]

Cultural minorities

When working with GLBT clients who are also members of ethnic, cultural or religious minorities, consider some of these factors:

- importance of family, community and religious connections
- degree to which the client believes in North American values regarding sexuality, sexual orientation and gender identity
- client's history of discrimination and or oppression
- local community's beliefs about same-sex relationships

- different attitudes toward the disclosure of sexual orientation and gender identity. For example, non-disclosure does not necessarily indicate shame, denial or lack of pride in one's sexual identity.[52]

Providing a GLBT-affirming environment

Counsellors are encouraged to assess their offices and practices to find ways to make their GLBT clients feel comfortable and respected.

GLBT-friendly offices and centres

Here are some suggestions for providing a welcoming environment for GLBT clients:

- Display and house GLBT-affirmative artwork, pamphlets and books.
- Display a small rainbow flag, an internationally recognized symbol of the gay and lesbian movement, or an inverted pink triangle.
- Use inclusive language in all printed materials, such as intake forms.
- Use inclusive language in oral discussions and presentations. Do not assume heterosexuality.
- Model the same language and terms that the client uses to identify himself or herself.
- Be familiar with GLBT career resources and referrals.[53]

GLBT-friendly services

Here are ways to offer inclusive services to GLBT clients:

- Develop partnerships with GLBT groups in the community.
- Include a section on your website with links to sites that relate to career development and sexual orientation.
- Offer information sessions and panel discussions that include GLBT individuals as guest speakers.
- Host professional development sessions to encourage and discuss the understanding of belonging to sexual minorities.
- Create and offer opportunities to examine attitudes and beliefs and how these might affect counselling interactions with GLBT clients.
- Provide books, articles and other resources regarding GLBT issues.[54]

Helping GLBT clients with career strategies

The importance of sexual identity

"When you believe it's possible to achieve professional success based on your personal identity, you acknowledge that you are worthy of success. Who we are as human beings is the most important career asset we possess and sexual orientation is part of our identity."

Kirk Snyder
University of Southern California

There is a relationship between the stage of sexual identity development and the career development process. It is difficult for clients to focus on career-related matters when clients are preoccupied with issues related to sexual identity. Authors of literature in this area are almost "unanimous in admonishing career practitioners to recognize that sexual identity development influences career development for GLB clients."[55]

Chloe House discusses the relationship of sexual identity development to career development of lesbian women. She cites extensive evidence that shows sexual identity development and career development are related and suggests that career development for these individuals can be delayed.[56]

Clients' values and beliefs

Values and beliefs held by individuals have a major impact on their occupational choices. This factor is particularly significant for clients belonging to sexual minorities. The experience of discrimination, both past and anticipated, may also be a factor in considering various occupational sectors. Counsellors have an important role to play in facilitating client exploration and awareness of their values and beliefs.

The following activities help clarify a client's personal beliefs about gender and related stereotypes:

- engage in a guided self-exploration process to identify what is important in their work and non-work roles
- write narratives to explore embedded values
- answer open questions to prompt the prioritization of values
- prepare lifelines, life stories, future autobiographies and guided fantasies to anticipate and contrast possible futures[57]

In general, it will be important for counsellors to facilitate client exploration of their preferred future and related work roles. Counsellors need to ensure that clients are identifying and building on their strengths rather than limiting their choices with historical stereotypes.

Occupational choices

Research on relationships among societal messages, sexual identity and occupational choice has been minimal. The research to date has related to lesbian and gay individuals specifically. In some occupational areas, it appears that occupational choices are influenced by stereotypes based on prejudice. For example, gay and lesbian individuals may perceive that working with children will not be acceptable.[58]

Role models and mentors

GLBT clients may benefit from connecting with other GLBT individuals who are willing to act as mentors and role models. GLBT mentors can provide occupational or lifestyle information regarding their experiences. Counsellors can help establish mentorships by actively seeking out such role models willing to act as resources for persons belonging to sexual minorities.[59] Local GLBT organizations will be a valuable resource.

The increasing numbers of public figures who are out provide outstanding role models. Examples of prominent individuals in the political, cultural and athletic arenas abound. Respected GLBT individuals include Olympic athletes, Members of Parliament, and award-winning artists and entertainers. Counsellors are encouraged to share the names of potentially meaningful role models with GLBT clients.

Focusing on Employment

Many decisions related to a GLBT client's work search might be influenced by the client's choice to be out. Related to this decision is the degree to which clients anticipate discrimination during their work search process and in specific workplaces. Counsellors can assist GLBT clients by helping them think through their search strategies, make informed decisions, anticipate possible consequences and plan accordingly.

Helping clients with work search

Keeping in mind the impact of sexual orientation on potential employment, clients might want to research employers, review their resumés and prepare for interviews.

Research employers

Some GLBT individuals may want to restrict their work search to GLBT-friendly employers. This approach may be more difficult for those living in small or rural centres and unable to relocate. For those in larger centres, however, this option may be preferred.

Some employers intentionally recruit GLBT employees by participating in gay job fairs and conferences. Employers recruit through employee referrals and contacts. They also recruit through internal GLBT resource groups authorized to advise management on GLBT workplace issues. About fifty per cent of Fortune 500 companies have such groups.[60]

Resources featuring GLBT-friendly organizations and advice are widely available. Counsellors are encouraged to become aware of such resources and to assist clients with referrals, as appropriate. Central to pursuing this option for GLBT clients is the resulting freedom to be themselves without having to make ongoing decisions about disclosing their sexual orientation or identity during their work search or while at work.

Counsellors can ask clients to consider using these strategies to research employers first before applying for work:

- Check GLBT-friendly business directories to see if the employer is listed.
- Visit the company or organization's website for evidence of official policies and resources and GLBT employee groups.
- Research specific companies or organizations rather than make assumptions about an entire industry.
- Contact (anonymously, if preferred) the employer's HR department regarding same-sex benefits and support groups for GLBT.
- Contact the employee group for GLBT employees (anonymously, if preferred) for information about the work climate.
- Inquire through their networks about employees or friends of those employed at the company or organization. These employees or friends can act as sources of information.[61]

Resumés

Counsellors can help GLBT clients create resumés that highlight their strengths and accomplishments. They can also help clients consider how to include relevant skills and accomplishments built through participation and leadership in GLBT organizations.

Encourage GLBT clients to use these strategies:

- Use resumés that target specific work opportunities.
- Highlight skills and achievements that are relevant to the position.
- Weigh the pros and cons of including information that may reflect sexual orientation.[62]

If clients choose not to be out during their work search, they may want to list accomplishments and skills that were acquired through GLBT organizations without including the name of the organization.

Interviews

As for all clients, preparation for interviews is critical. GLBT clients may benefit from considering the following strategies:

- Research the organization.
- Be prepared to speak to all skills, strengths and accomplishments, including any developed through participation or leadership in GLBT organizations.
- Consider the pros and cons of coming out during the interview process.[63]

Work environments

Work environments vary in terms of the level of tolerance extended to GLBT employees.

Discrimination in the workplace

Research on discrimination against GLBT employees suggests that discrimination is pervasive.

Distinctions are made between formal and informal discrimination in the workplace. In *formal* discrimination, discriminatory decisions are made regarding conditions of employment, such as hiring, hours, same sex partner benefits and wages. In *informal* discrimination, hostility is demonstrated in the workplace environment or climate, such as verbal harassment, damage of personal property and disrespect.[64]

A 2009 research report on workplace experiences of GLBT employees finds that despite the supportive legal climate in Canada, workplace barriers persist for GLBT employees. Respondents cited three factors that affected their career advancement and the formation of critical relationships in the workplace:

- a lack of awareness regarding GLBT issues
- discriminatory behaviours
- exclusion from important connections with others[65]

GLBT employees at organizations with diversity and inclusion programs, policies, and practices, as well as those with broader talent management programs, were more satisfied and committed, described their workplaces as more fair, and had more positive relationships with their managers and colleagues.[66]

Workplace policies for GLBT employees

Many organizations now have written policies that are meant to protect GLBT persons. Such policies as same-sex partner benefits and leave for family-related events are positive steps in acknowledging and valuing GLBT persons in the workplace.

Some employers use the Employee Resource Group (ERG) strategy. ERGs are groups of employees formed around shared characteristics, such as race, ethnicity, gender, age, disability, sexual orientation or other identities important to employees. ERGs support the employer's diversity strategy by

- providing a forum for discussion and support among their members
- acting as an advisory council
- organizing events that promote understanding
- developing programs or supports for members
- hosting social or networking activities for members
- assisting in outreach and recruitment in their communities[67]

Many unions support their members who are GLBT. The Canadian Auto Workers' Union (CAW) has a PRIDE policy statement on equality in the workplace and in the union for its gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered members.[68] The United Steelworkers also supports diversity and has subcommittees representing various diverse groups, including a group representing gay and lesbian issues.[69]

Many businesses recognize how the GLBT community represents a large market share. These businesses promote themselves as gay-friendly by advertising on GLBT websites and listing in business resources and directories.

> **Unintended consequences of GLBT-friendly policies**
>
> "In some cases where policies formally protect GLBT individuals, discrimination and prejudice has gone underground and become no less damaging but slightly more subtle."
>
> Kevin Alderson
> Professor, University of Calgary

Ideal work environments

In a report from a public service employer, a GLBT employee was asked to describe his idea of the best possible work environment. Here is his answer: "The ideal work environment for GLBT persons is the ideal environment for all employees. A place where respect for diversity is not just a nice-sounding motto, but also a value that is put into practice on a daily basis. A place where managers and employees all refuse to accept intolerance."[70]

Disclosure and non-disclosure in the workplace

Whether to be out or not in the workplace is clearly a client decision and is an ongoing process. Frequently, the decision is dependent on the client's stage of sexual identity formation.

A range of degrees of disclosure is possible:

- passing by deceiving others into thinking they are heterosexual
- covering by attempting to appear to be a heterosexual but not faking heterosexuality
- implicitly out by being honest about life and activities and not using GLBT labels
- explicitly out by being open about sexual identity, including telling other people[71]

Research reveals that concerns about past, present and anticipated discrimination is a key factor. There is a dynamic tension between fear of discrimination and personal integrity in making decisions about identity management in the workplace.[72]

Counsellors can help clients explore the consequences of their decisions as they are highly personal. Clients will weigh the same factors differently as they explore possible solutions.

Knowing the following may assist you as you counsel clients in this area:

- Some GLBT clients prefer to be out at work as it relieves the stress of maintaining a heterosexual facade and allows GLBT persons to speak of their families and social activities or to invite co-workers to their homes.[73]
- Clients may face increased discrimination after disclosure.[74]
- Disclosure may be related to higher job satisfaction.[75]
- Disclosure for lesbian women may result in changed relationships at work, some improved, some less supportive.[76]

In Conclusion

Counsellors are encouraged to be open to, and continue learning about, persons belonging to sexual minorities. As is the case with all clients, acceptance, support and a listening ear will provide a base to explore and clarify their issues as well as celebrate their achievements.

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