OUT & EQUAL
WORKPLACE ADVOCATES

What's Your Pronoun?

Strategies for Inclusion in the Workplace

Can everyone do a quick round of introductions with your name, job title, and pronouns?

As recently as the last few years, this request would be rare, if occurring at all, in most workplaces. As more companies invest in LGBTQ inclusion and gender-inclusive workplaces, pronouns have become a significant focal point. From pronouns listed on email signatures and business cards to pronoun buttons worn by retail employees, the business community has quickly embraced these practices. The following guide supports employers' understanding of the intersection of daily communications, pronoun usage, gender identity, and expression at work, as well as practical strategies for inclusion.

Pronoun use is so embedded throughout everyday interactions, it is easy to take for granted how much we rely on signals and assumptions for statements such as the following:

The meeting with Mr. Gonzalez is at 10:00am. He requested time with the entire team.

Simone's application looks great. Could we set up an interview with her next week?

Pete was right when he said the client would ask for more time on this contract.

On the phone, in-person, over email—pronoun references like these and others permeate our everyday conversations. In addition, many people fall back on gendered language to express respect, formality, and/or convey a customer friendly tone:

- *Ladies and gentlemen, welcome aboard and thank you for flying with us this morning.*
- *Sir, did you want to see this phone or the newer model?*
- *Ma'am, I can help you at this counter.*

While most people are well-intentioned in such interactions, making the wrong assumption about someone's gender identity or expression, and, by extension their pronouns, can be insulting, harmful, and, if done repeatedly, constitute workplace bias or harassment. *Note that in this previous sentence, the word "their" was used to articulate a hypothetical person without assuming gender.*

Much like our individual names, pronouns are tied to our deepest sense of identity. They articulate who we are and how the outside world should recognize and address us. Consider the feeling you encounter when someone calls you by the wrong name despite having introduced oneself. In this situation, most of us are often racked with a sense of invalidation: *Didn't I tell them my name already? Why did they forget? Did they not care enough to know me?* Unfortunately, many of those who know the importance of correct pronoun usage are often those who have most experienced the pain and discomfort associated with being misgendered.

Utilizing inclusive pronoun practices in the workplace is vital in building organizational cultures of respect and belonging not just for the LGBTQ community, but for anyone who in some way challenges the traditional model of gender identity and expression.

In 2019, Merriam-Webster added the singular use of the pronoun ***they*** to its dictionary to acknowledge the increased adoption of the word by the non-binary community. In 2019, the dictionary named they as its word of the year after internet searches for the term rose by 313% from the previous year (Locker, 2019).

While the non-binary community's embrace of ***they*** is a relatively newer concept, the use of they in singular form is not. In fact, they has been used in singular form for over 600 years because the English language "famously lacks a gender-neutral singular pronoun to correspond neatly with singular pronouns like everyone or someone (Locker, 2019)."

A culture that utilizes inclusive pronoun practices also supports a wide cross-section of employees and customers. Respectfully introducing pronouns is vital for the CFO who is a cisgender woman, but constantly misgendered over the phone because of her low voice. It is vital for the feminine presenting cisgender male flight attendant who is tired of being referred to as "ma'am." It is vital for increased global cultural competency when interacting with employees or clients in different countries or employees who are non-native speakers and unfamiliar with traditionally gendered names.

It may not always be obvious how an employer can successfully implement practices and norms around pronouns to facilitate greater inclusion. This guide has been designed with that in mind and articulates specific, practical guidance on how to implement more inclusive practices and procedures regarding pronouns in the workplace.

Pronouns: One Piece of the Workplace Culture Puzzle. Companies should take careful consideration to ensure that foundational standards of LGBTQ and gender workplace inclusion are implemented in addition to the policies and practices outlined in this document—inclusive non-discrimination policies and LGBTQ 101 training being two important first steps. See Out & Equal's 20 Steps to an Out & Equal Workplace for guidance.

The recommendations outlined in this document are best coupled with educational efforts to cultivate an organizational culture that is inclusive of transgender/Gender Non-Conforming (GNC) individuals so as not to inadvertently expose these employees to uncomfortable and hostile situations. In other words, do not operationalize practices around pronouns if your company does not have fundamental support systems in place to protect and support its transgender/GNC colleagues.

The Imperative for Inclusion Now

Current research demonstrates a clear imperative for implementing inclusive pronoun practices in the workplace. Demographic trends illustrate new and accepting perceptions of gender identity and expression, particularly in younger generations.

1 **Gender is More Expansive than Ever Before.** In the US today, there are an estimated 1.4 million transgender Americans, and one in three adults (ages 18-29) know someone who uses gender-neutral pronouns (Geiger & Graf, 2019). Notably, nearly half of Americans now see gender on a spectrum and feel comfortable using gender-neutral pronouns, figures which are expected to continue to rise (Sosin, 2020; The Harris Poll, 2018). Millennials now represent the largest share of the US labor force—a generation notorious for its open-mindedness, inclusive values, and higher rates of LGBTQ identity—while members of Generation Z enter adulthood and are poised to be the most diverse and gender-fluid generation yet (Cilluffo & Cohn, 2019).

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(Geiger & Graf, 2019)

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(Sosin, 2020; The Harris Poll, 2018)

2 **Employees Seek Gender-Inclusive Practices.** A majority of Americans now support gender-inclusivity in the workplace. Pew Research demonstrates that 59% of Gen Zers believe that forms and/or online profiles should include gender options outside of 'man' or 'woman.' A 2018 Harris Poll survey commissioned by Out & Equal and Witeck Communications found that 74% of respondents believe that employers should learn and use employees' pronouns and chosen* name in the workplace. Furthermore, 65% of respondents agree that employers should intervene when an employee regularly misuses a co-worker's pronouns or chosen name, while 58% believe that regular misuse is a form of workplace harassment (The Harris Poll, 2018).

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3 **Inclusivity Improves Business and Inclusive Pronoun Practices Are Key.** As a whole, LGBTQ inclusivity boosts business outcomes. Research consistently demonstrates that LGBTQ-inclusive workplace environments generate increased performance, productivity, retention, talent, and well-being (The Human Rights Campaign, 2014). Furthermore, LGBTQ-supportive policies are associated with higher company value, productivity, and profitability. Younger generations actively seek employment at companies that share their own values of inclusion and facilitate connected cultures of belonging (Johansson, 2017).

In addition, an increasingly global workforce is calling for new tools to ensure tenants of respect and cultural competency are built into everyday interaction. Incorporating and normalizing practices to identify pronouns in the workplace is both critical for LGBTQ inclusion and can be helpful in instances of cross-cultural communication where pronouns are less apparent.

*Many transgender/GNC individuals choose to go by a name that is different than the name given to them at birth. A chosen name may be different than the name indicated on official records.

4 **Pronouns Matter.** Using someone's proper pronouns makes a difference in the mental health and well-being of everyone, particularly transgender/GNC individuals.

When a transgender/GNC person is misgendered, it adds to the variety of challenges they may regularly encounter. It can cause a range of difficult feelings, including dysphoria, anxiety, stigmatization, lowered self-esteem, and embarrassment, to name a few.

Gender-affirmative support can have a powerful, if not lifesaving, impact. In the workplace, for example, transgender individuals with supportive coworkers and work environments demonstrate lower rates of suicide thoughts and attempts in recent studies (Herman, Brown & Haas, 2019). Furthermore, studies also demonstrate that gender-affirmative support can also reduce depression, improve self-esteem, and create a better quality of life for transgender/GNC individuals (Temkin & Vega, 2020).

> **Using an individual's correct pronouns is a powerful affirmation of self for transgender/GNC individuals. It validates one's identity, encourages authenticity, and builds truly inclusive and supportive cultures.**

People everywhere thrive when supported and affirmed in who they are.

Sharing pronouns sends a key message to all:

Understanding Pronouns

In place of an individual's name, people use pronouns like *you, she, he*, and *they*, to name just a few, in order to avoid repeating the same word over and over again. When we share our personal pronouns with others, we are communicating the third-person singular pronouns that we'd like others to use when referring to us in conversation. These pronouns may change over the course of one's life and are not necessarily tied to sex assigned at birth.

While the gender-specific pronouns *he* and *she* **typically** refer to male-identified and female-identified individuals respectively[1] gender-neutral pronouns do not associate the subject of a sentence with a specific gender. The majority of gender-expansive individuals, or those who identify as non-binary, genderqueer, gender non-conforming, agender, etc., do not identify with *he* and *she* pronouns. Instead, these pronouns conflict with their internal sense of self and many self-identify with gender-neutral pronouns like *they/them*. For more information on non-binary identity, see Out & Equal's Best Practices for Non-Binary Inclusion in the Workplace.

While the pronoun *they* is the most commonly utilized gender-neutral pronoun in English-speaking non-binary communities, it is only one of many gender-neutral pronoun options available (Gibson & Fernandez, 2018).

Pronouns	Subject	Object	Possessive	Reflexive
He/ Him/ His	He asked	I told him	This office is his	He reminds himself
She/ Her/ Hers	She asked	I told her	This office is hers	She reminds herself
They/ Them/ Theirs	They asked	I told them	This office is theirs	They remind themself
Ze (or Zie)/ Hir/Hirs	Ze asked	I told hir	This office is hirs	Ze reminds hirself
Ze (or Zie)/ Zir/Zirs	Ze asked	I told zir	This office is zirs	Ze reminds zirself

[1] For example, a non-binary individual may not be female-identified but may use "she" pronouns.

Global Context

To generate greater inclusivity, the gender-expansive community is transforming language itself on a global scale. While some languages have no distinctions of grammatical gender and are categorized as genderless[2], others are constructed around binary gender (What are Genderless Languages, 2017). For example, languages like Spanish classify nouns as either masculine or feminine. Other languages, like Russian and Arabic, also conjugate adjectives and verbs based on the gender classification of the noun.

Because these heavily gendered languages fail to recognize those outside of the binary, LGBTQ advocates have championed efforts to incorporate new and inclusive terms, reshaping the face of communication across the world.

Here are a few examples:

Spanish

The pronouns used are "elle" (singular) and "elles" (plural). Nouns and adjectives, when applicable, adopt the ending of "e" (singular) or "es" (plural) instead of the feminine "a/as" and masculine "o/os".

- *Elle está muy cansade.*
- *Elles son mis mejores amiugues.*

Portuguese

The pronouns used are "ile" (singular) and "illes" (plural). In the possessive form, they become "dile" and "diles". Nouns and adjectives, when applicable, adopt the ending of "e" (singular) or "es" (plural) instead of the feminine "a/as" and masculine "o/os".

- *Ile está calme e feliz.* *(Note: "feliz" doesn't change because it is not a gendered adjective.)*
- *Esta é a casa diles.*

[2] A genderless language is one with "no grammatical gender distinctions, and therefore doesn't apply categories like male and female to nouns, articles, adjectives or verbs." A majority of genderless languages are found in Asia.

Laying the Foundations

Employers can demonstrate greater inclusivity in the workplace by building out foundational practices around introducing and referencing pronouns. The following recommendations illustrate opportunities for your company to build organizational competency in this critical area of LGBTQ inclusivity. Implementing these recommendations requires relatively simple changes, yet the impacts can be significant.

A key element of inclusive pronoun practices:
Employers should retain the voluntary nature of the following recommendations so as not to inadvertently cause pressure for someone to reveal their gender identity before they are ready to do so with colleagues.

It is best to **avoid using the phrase "preferred pronouns."** This implies that the use of pronouns is optional versus a requirement. Instead, **simply say "pronouns."**

Meetings

Meetings present key opportunities to socialize pronouns in everyday operations. They can serve as routine mechanisms to build cultures of respect by informing employees—new and existing—of which pronouns to use when referring to colleagues.

At the start of company meetings and events, staff should introduce themselves to the group by sharing their name and pronouns. Here is an example how to facilitate this:

Hi everyone and welcome. To start off today's meeting, we will first go around the room to introduce ourselves. In your introduction, please include your name, pronouns, and job title.

My name is Ali Bassett and I am the manager of Human Resources. My pronouns are she, her, and hers.

Inviting people to share their pronouns is an important best practice. However, an individual's choice whether or not to share pronouns should remain optional, as it can create anxieties for some, particularly those who aren't out or are in an exploration stage around their own pronouns and gender identity.

Naturally, teams that meet regularly need not start each meeting this way. However, these introductions can serve as useful refreshers, especially in instances in which a team member may eventually decide to change their pronouns.

Addressing Groups

Utilize gender-neutral greetings when addressing groups of people. Choose from a variety of greetings to replace gendered introductions like *ladies and gentlemen* which can alienate staff who identify differently. Options can include:

- All of you
- Colleagues
- Everyone
- Valued guests
- Y'all
- Friends
- Team
- Folks

Hiring Process

Ensure there are opportunities early on for applicants and interviewees to disclose pronouns. This may include:

- Providing a designated space on applications to voluntarily list pronouns and an individual's chosen name.*
- Taking the lead in introducing yourself in interviews with your own name and pronouns to set the stage for prospective employees to share their own.

**Examples may include those who use nicknames, or transgender individuals whose names have not been updated on official documentation.*

Internal Forms and Records

Internal documentation affords companies additional opportunities to demonstrate LGBTQ inclusivity.

- Ensure all relevant documentation includes opportunities to voluntarily declare pronouns on relevant written documentation. *Examples include but are not limited to company profiles and directories, HR records, Applicant Tracking Systems (ATS), etc.*
- Include gender identity options outside of male and female on relevant documentation.
- When asking employees to list honorifics, include the option Mx. (pronounced "mix"), the gender-neutral honorific used by members of the gender-expansive community.

Displaying Pronouns - Email Signatures

It is increasingly common to see the addition of pronouns in email signatures, as more companies are implementing efforts to share pronouns in this way. Email signatures are simple, cost-effective ways for individuals to communicate their personal pronouns to colleagues. Below are two different examples of how one might list pronouns within an email signature.

Ali Bassett | Human Resources Manager (She/Her/Hers)
Inclusivity Matters Inc.
1234 Smith St., San Francisco, CA 94104

Ali Bassett | Human Resources Manager
Inclusivity Matters Inc.
Pronouns: She/Her/Hers
1234 Smith St., San Francisco, CA 94104

Adding pronouns to your email signature is simple. However, if you work at a larger company or one with stringent policies around email signatures, you may need to work with your HR department in order to implement this practice.

Businesses that undertake companywide initiatives to incorporate pronouns in email signatures should develop communication plans to thoughtfully inform individuals and address initial questions about pronoun inclusivity. Take for example Southbank Centre's messaging which was recently highlighted in Forbes:

> *"As part of our ongoing efforts to be inclusive of all gender identities, we are pleased to confirm that anyone wishing to do so may add pronouns to their email signature. Adding these words to your email signature has the practical benefit of making clear how you would like to be referred to, while also normalizing to the recipient that you will respect their gender identity and choice of pronouns. It is an effective way of normalizing discussions about gender and creating an inclusive work environment for transgender and non-binary people."*

Additional Areas of Display

There are a number of creative ways to share pronouns throughout business operations. In addition to including pronouns in email signatures, Walmart recently launched an initiative to allow employees to wear pronoun pins on vests, badges, and lanyards. Other companies have undertaken client-facing initiatives to allow consumers to share their pronouns as well. For example, Lyft embarked on a "Two is Too Few" campaign, adding gender-neutral pronouns to its app, making it the first ride-sharing service to do so. Your company may also consider displaying personal pronouns in the following areas:

- Company directories
- Staff bios
- Company presentations/
- PowerPoint templates
- Human resources and payroll management platforms
- Nametags and name plates
- Slack profiles
- Business cards
- Social media profile
- Zoom participant names

Tips for Everyday Interaction

Avoid Assumptions and Utilize Curiosity

People often make assumptions about gender identity when assessing how to interact with new individuals. In fact, people intuitively seek to better understand unknown individuals by identifying clues on how to relate and connect in new social interactions. While this may be a relatively natural process, these unconscious social cues are often based on stereotypes that can limit our abilities to connect with, understand, and respect those we encounter.

Gender assumptions are habitually based on one's appearance, behaviors, voice (especially in phone communications), and name (most commonly in emails, resumes, and other written documentation.) Gender identity, however, is not always outwardly apparent. It is a deep internal sense of identity that may not be demonstrated through any external means. Thus, it is critical to challenge inclinations to make assumptions about gender. Instead, embrace what can be a fulfilling social process of allowing others to reveal who they truly are to you.

What's Your Pronoun?

If you don't know which pronoun to use when referring to someone else, here are a few basic tenants to follow:

Listen

First, listen to the pronouns others use when to referring to the individual. People who know the person well may likely use the correct person. While this is not a foolproof mechanism of learning an individual's pronouns, it can provide useful clues on how to address someone respectfully.

Introduce Yourself

If you have not yet met the individual, be proactive in introducing yourself with your name and pronouns. This gives the other person a space and opportunity to share their own name and pronouns.

Ask
In introductions, it is also okay to ask the individual how they would like to be addressed. For example, you might say, "Hi, my name is Sarah. I go by she/her pronouns. How should I refer to you?" If you have already met the individual and asked what pronouns they use, but are still unsure, it is okay to ask again to gain clarity. However, it is better to do so in-private versus a group setting so as not to draw additional attention to the conversation.

In any of these cases, be prepared to provide an explanation as to why sharing pronouns is important, as some people may be less familiar with the concept of sharing personal pronouns. For example, you might say, *"Sharing pronouns is an important practice because we often assume an individual's pronouns based on appearance and behavior. However, these assumptions can be incorrect and limiting—so, the only way to truly know and ensure we are respecting our colleagues is by asking and/or implementing foundational and inclusive practices around pronouns."*

Keep it Optional
Sharing pronouns should be a voluntary activity as some individuals may not be ready to do so.

Addressing Mistakes

Misgendering occurs when you refer to someone with a pronoun that does not align with their gender identity. It often occurs more frequently in initial verbal interactions than in written communication. Whether it happens intentionally or accidentally, misgendering can create intense moments of distress for those being misgendered.

It is important to know how to react when making mistakes. If you've misgendered someone, here are a few critical steps to take:

1. Acknowledge your mistake sincerely and calmly. Take accountability for your mistake and avoid defensive behavior.

2. Apologize and correct yourself. You may say something along the lines of, "I'm sorry, Tori—I should've said she," or "She mentioned—I'm sorry, they mentioned…"

3. Do not draw additional attention to the situation by spending a lot of time on the mistake or making it the focal point of discussion. Furthermore, do not attempt to justify or defend your mistake. This can cause additional harm and discomfort to your colleague. Instead, apologize and move on. *Depending on the situation or if you realize your mistake after the fact, you may choose to later approach the individual in private, acknowledging your mistake and reaffirming that you will work to do better next time.*

4 If you have been corrected for misgendering someone and thank the individual who has corrected you. Doing so reinforces healthy habits of giving and receiving constructive feedback, taking accountability, and respecting fellow workers.

5 Take time to self-reflect after the fact and determine how you can make a concerted effort to do better next time. Retraining your brain to use gender-neutral language takes time. Practicing out loud on your own time can help you to avoid these mistakes in the future.

Anticipating Obstacles and Being Proactive

It may be difficult for some staff members to grasp why and how they should use inclusive practices regarding pronouns. Utilizing pronouns in this context has only recently become more prevalent. Thus, it is natural to encounter questions, confusion, and, in some cases, initial resistance. To successfully implement the recommendations defined in this guide, it is important to anticipate obstacles and have mechanisms in place to address them.

Organizational Level

There are a number of actions that companies can take regularly to be inclusive. These practices are especially important when rolling-out any new policy or procedure:

- Provide information and training that specifically addresses transgender/GNC identities and issues in the workplace.
- Execute thoughtful internal communication plans to explain changes in policy and procedures around pronouns and connect initiatives to company values.
- Offer spaces for follow-up conversations to provide more clarity and direction, as mastering even simple changes in language can take time and practice.
- Prepare managers to address questions and issues around pronouns by providing additional support and resources.

Interpersonal Level

In addressing internal confusion and resistance, utilize the following:

Utilize empathy. When searching for ways to better connect to unfamiliar concepts or situations, empathy is an important pillar to lean on. In creating spaces of belonging, empathy can build trust and a sense of relief, whereas the absence of empathy can disrupt a deeper understanding of an issue. It is important for individuals to build in time to for self-reflection and to work on finding common ground with others.

Can I identify with their needs and interests?

Have I experienced something similar or also encountered moments where I needed to be better acknowledged or more seen?

What emotions do I see in the other individual that I too have experienced?

Connect to past experiences. While gender-neutral pronouns may feel like a new concept, many often utilize the singular form of they often without realizing it. Consider a situation in which a staff member sees a folder left behind by a coworker after a large meeting. It is unclear who owns the folder. Thus, the staff member might ask nearby coworkers, "Does anyone know who left *their* folder on the table?"

Looking back on past interactions with the singular use of *they* can be helpful in familiarizing oneself with the pronoun's new context.

Learn. There are a variety of online resources to utilize in learning more about transgender/GNC identities. Out & Equal's Best Practices for Non-Binary Inclusion guide is useful in better understanding these concepts and includes additional resources to employ in building knowledge.

Practice. Getting pronouns right can require practice and concerted effort. However, in little to no time at all, individuals can develop increased familiarity and comfort levels with utilizing the correct pronouns. Practice on your own time. Pay attention to pronouns in your conversations and how they are used by others.

Application

By utilizing the best practices described in this guide, employers, individual leaders, and employees are better positioned to create cultures of belonging for both LGBTQ and non-LGBTQ employees alike. Simple changes, concerted effort, and regular practice can go a long way to set an important precedent of respect among colleagues and encourage employees to seek to better understand and connect with those around them. Please stay in touch with us at hello@outandequal.org to share your application of these practices and any feedback you have on this resource and/or your employer's experience.

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May 2020

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