

## CAREERS

# LGBTQ+ inclusion: Miles to go

Respecting the rights of all people to live with dignity is the cornerstone of the industry, write Reji Varghese and Deepa A Agarwal



**O**n September 6, 2018, the Supreme Court repealed Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code, a law that criminalised homosexuality. Community members and campaigners waiting outside the Supreme Court cheered and danced joyfully while some cried.

As the community now awaits the verdict on same-sex marriage, the question that's being asked is what has changed in the workplace in five years. Are members of the community experiencing inclusivity in society and within their organisations?

Zoya, Lead of diversity, Inclusion and Employer Branding at a real estate firm, says, "It has improved relatively to what it was before. But the legal status of acceptance and the social acceptance of being seen as an equal is another aspect altogether."

Shyam Konnur, Founder and Managing Director of MIST LGBTQ+ Foundation, says, "This has encouraged many community members to live confidently post-377. But this is more true for the younger members of the community. We also find that while more people are 'coming out' at the workplace, we still handle cases where people see only token allyship."

Evidently, while there is a definitive positive shift, the changed law has not naturally translated to a holistic positive experience.

### Gaps in inclusivity

Community members say that a big gap that exists is the lack of safe workplaces, which facilitates the process of 'coming out' for an LGBTQ+ member. Having to constantly navigate an environment to remain hidden and

avoid potential biases against them is emotionally draining. It also impacts the levels of engagement with the organisation. 'Coming out' is a crucial step forward, as it creates the right platform to self-edit responses or avoid questions. It also drives commitment.

"Organisations fail to see this as an important aspect in creating a safe environment for all their employees," says Shyam.

Deloitte's Global 2023 LGBTQ+ inclusion at work report reveals that many LGBTQ+ employees feel uncomfortable being out in the workplace and face non-inclusive behaviours such as microaggressions and harassment. The study, which covered 5,474 LGBTQ+ people in workplaces from 13 countries, reveals that while most respondents believe it is important to come out at work about their sexual orientation, less than half feel comfortable being out with all their colleagues. Another third reported that they are only comfortable being out at work with select colleagues.

"The fact that there is a need to 'come out' itself means there is an issue. Still, many workplaces are not accepting of LGBTQ+ folks. I have never liked the term 'coming out'; I prefer 'inviting in' because I let people know additional information about me because I trust them," says Zoya.

"Coming out" is an ongoing process,"

says Harish Panchabhai, Senior Associate, Diversity, Equity and Inclusion at a consulting firm. "Coming out" was simple for me because of our progressive culture." He explains how his firm has inclusive policies, such as insurance covering same-sex and live-in partners and medical costs for gender transition.

### Mitigate discrimination

Inadequate intervention to mitigate discriminatory experiences is yet another gap. Harish says, "It is always the subtler aspects of exclusion. Someone who holds biases may not express them openly, but their actions can make their colleagues feel left out or unheard. Shifting mindsets is not easy, and change doesn't happen overnight."

The Deloitte report alludes to the positive impact that employers have when they demonstrate their commitment to LGBTQ+ inclusion, which drives career decisions amongst community members. "During interviews, if I experience a less than enthusiastic response or sense that the organisation is not committed towards Diversity and Inclusion, I do not feel comfortable taking the conversation further. I hear that in such a workplace, I may experience discrimination," says a gay man preferring anonymity.

Organisations not only play an important role towards LGBTQ+ inclusion, but they also have benefits to be accrued - a larger talent pool, a more

engaged workforce, and a positive brand image, to name a few.

"Most inclusive companies are performing well," says Shyam. But he also has a word of caution: "Don't limit it to just becoming a business gimmick as the world is watching."

### Building a culture of allyship

Zoya advises, "Be an equal opportunity employer and focus on increasing representation for marginalised groups. Review policies from an equality, equity and inclusive lens. Make process changes to be inclusive of diverse groups and their needs."

Allyship in the workplace refers to the actions, behaviours, and practices that colleagues and leaders take to support, amplify, and advocate with others, especially with individuals who don't belong to the same social identities as themselves. Building a culture of allyship is an important step organisations need to consider.

Harish says, "At my organisation, we actively promote open communication. Our people are encouraged to connect with affinity group leads or the DEI team if they're eager to learn more about allyship. These steps not only help allies connect more effectively with the community but also expand their understanding of the obstacles that members of the community face."

"The first step is to believe in human rights and unlearning to hate. Embrace equality and learn," says Shyam. He says these are important steps to take towards becoming allies and not just passive observers.

"True allyship is active, not passive. Elie Wiesel, a Holocaust survivor who advocated human rights, said, 'We must take sides. Neutrality helps the oppressor, never the victim. Silence encourages the tormentor, never the tormented. Sometimes, we must interfere.'"

As a country, we still have a long way to go. Inclusivity can no longer be seen as a 'good-to-do' activity. Respecting the rights of all people to live with dignity and equal access to resources and opportunities is the cornerstone of inclusivity.

(Reji Varghese is an industrialist and a writer. Deepa A Agarwal is a diversity, equity and inclusion expert)

## Five fascinating public policy careers

HARINI SANTHANAM

**I**n today's rapidly changing world, the field of public policy is experiencing a profound transformation driven by technological advancements, evolving societal needs, and pressing global challenges. For individuals with a deep interest in shaping the policies that shape our societies, now is the perfect time to explore emerging and impactful career paths in the public policy domain.

These careers, including the below-mentioned, offer a chance to make a meaningful impact and come with competitive salaries that reward expertise and dedication.

■ **Data-driven policy analyst:** With the advent of big data and advanced analytics, policy-makers now have access to unprecedented information. Data-driven policy analysts are crucial in analysing complex data sets, identifying trends, and extracting insights to inform evidence-based policy decisions. These professionals possess strong quantitative and analytical skills, utilising tools like data visualisation and machine learning algorithms to enhance policy formulation and evaluation.

■ **Digital government strategist:** As governments worldwide embrace digital transformation, there is a growing demand for professionals who can navigate the complexities of technology in the public sector. Digital government strategists work at the intersection of policy and technology, leveraging innovative solutions to enhance citizen engagement, streamline government operations, and improve service delivery. They play a vital role in shaping policies related to cybersecurity, privacy, open data, and emerging technologies like artificial intelligence and blockchain.

■ **Sustainability policy expert:** Addressing environmental and

sustainability challenges is a global priority. Sustainability policy experts work on designing and implementing policies aimed at promoting eco-friendly practices, renewable energy adoption, waste reduction, and climate change mitigation. These professionals collaborate with governments, international organisations, and stakeholders to develop comprehensive strategies that balance economic growth with environmental stewardship. As sustainability gains prominence, opportunities in this field are expanding rapidly.

■ **Social impact consultant:** Social impact consultants bridge the gap between the public, private, and non-profit sectors, helping organizations develop and implement strategies for positive social change. They work on various policy areas, such as education, healthcare, poverty alleviation, and community development. Social impact consultants conduct research, facilitate stakeholder engagement, and recommend impactful policy interventions. This role requires a deep understanding of social issues, strong communication skills, and navigating complex systems.

■ **Policy entrepreneur:** Policy entrepreneurs are individuals who are passionate about identifying and addressing policy gaps and advocating for change. They are pivotal in driving policy innovation by pushing for new ideas, influencing decision-makers, and mobilising support. Policy entrepreneurs may work within government agencies, think tanks, or non-profit organisations, employing their research, analysis, and strategic communication expertise to bring about meaningful policy reforms. This career path requires resilience, creativity, and the ability to navigate political landscapes effectively.

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### FEEDBACK

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