From 'Closet to Cubicle': Examining the Experiences of LGBTQIA+ Individuals During the Coming Out Process at the Workplace

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Abstract

Organizations have made Diversity and Inclusion (D&I) central priorities, and yet LGBTQIA+ employee's experiences, particularly during the coming out process, are underexplored. This review explores the challenges and impacts of coming into the professional setting and proposes ways to improve LGBTQIA+ inclusion. This study draws from theoretical models such as Cass's six-stage coming out framework, to provide an exploration of the psychological, social, and professional aspects of disclosure. In non-inclusive, or conservative work environments, the challenges, such as fear of discrimination, legal barriers, and stigmatization, are persistent. As for LGBTQIA+ employees, discrimination compounds this even more when they have multiple marginalized intersecting identities. Conversely, LGBTQIA+ workers in inclusive workplaces have better mental health, increased engagement, and increased career satisfaction in non-inclusive environments they experience stress, social isolation, and hindered career progression. Inclusive strategies are effective when they have a comprehensive anti-discrimination policy, LGBTQIA + employee resource groups, alliance promotion, and leadership representation. Trends indicate an increasing number of LGBTQIA+ people in the workforce, however, there are gaps in understanding sectoral differences, regional variations, and intersection dynamics. It recommends that organizations adopt the whole of the D&I framework that incorporates LGBTQIA+ inclusion and evidence-based approaches to support LGBTQIA+ employees, increase equity, drive innovation, and the success of the organization at large.

Keywords: LGBTQIA+ inclusion, workplace diversity, coming out process, intersectionality, diversity and inclusion, anti-discrimination policies, employee well-being

1. Introduction

1.1 Workplace Diversity and Inclusion Background

Workplace diversity and inclusion (D&I) are central to contemporary organizational strategies to produce equitable organizations where employees with diverse backgrounds and identities feel appreciated. Until recently, D&I initiatives have been concentrated on the disparities of gender, race, and disability. In recent decades, organizations have started to realize the importance of including LGBTQIA+ people in professionalizing efforts so that they can tear down systemic barriers that prevent LGBTQIA+ people from growing both professionally and psychologically. (Dolan *et al*.,

2020; Maji *et al.*, 2024) Although much has been achieved, LGBTQIA+ employees are not exempted from discrimination, stigmatization, and leadership representation. According to research, inclusive workplaces do not only create individual well-being but also organizational success through innovation and collaboration (Elias, 2023). Critical to this is embedding LGBTQIA+ inclusion into wider D&I frameworks, and these benefits underline why this inclusion is needed.

1.2 LGBTQIA+ Representation in Workplaces

One of the cornerstones for a workplace culture of authenticity and equity for LGBTQIA+ representation. Those who feel comfortable being who they are unharmed by judgment or discrimination are more engaged, more productive, and more satisfied in their jobs. Also, diverse teams provide very different viewpoints that spur innovation and other problem-solving (Bowker, 2021). It's not just about numbers, it's also about visibility in leadership, mentorship, and being included in the decision-making process. Unique struggles of LGBTQIA+ individuals — however — tend to lack inclusive policies, and are held by societal stigma that often does not permit them to come out. These challenges need to be addressed to guarantee that workplaces become real champions of diversity (Gardberg *et al.*, 2023).

1.3 Objectives of the Review

This review aims to:

- Explore LGBTQIA+ employee experiences of the coming out process, in terms of both psychological, social, and professional impacts
- Understand LGBTQIA+ employees' challenges in diverse workplace environments, whether industry-specific or cultural

2. Theoretical Frameworks And Key Concepts

2.1 The Coming Out Process – an Understanding

Coming out is a key stage of LGBTQIA+ identity development comprised of stages of self-awareness and out as an identity to those in society. Cass's model highlights six stages: Identity Confusion, Identity Comparison, Identity Tolerance, Identity Acceptance, Identity Pride, and Identity Synthesis. This contact with the world, may not be linear and can be influenced by individual experiences and societal factors (Cass, 1975; Hart & Richardson, 2024; Coleman & E, 2022).

Table 1. Stages of the Coming Out Process

Stage	Description & Impact on the LGBTQIA+ Individual
Stage 1: Identity Confusion	The initial stage is where individuals feel their sexual or gender identity being questioned, leading to confusion and a sense of separation. They may experience a lack of certainty about their identity.
Stage 2: Identity Comparison	Exploration and rationalization of one's identity. During this stage, individuals may begin to acknowledge their identity, considering its implications and how it fits within their personal and social contexts.
Stage 3: Identity Tolerance	Increased interaction with LGBTQIA+ communities, helps validate one's feelings and gradually promotes self-acceptance of the identity.

Stage 4: Identity Acceptance	Acknowledgment and affirmation of one's LGBTQIA+ identity. This stage often involves creating connections with others and realizing personal growth through acceptance.
Stage 5: Identity Pride	A heightened awareness of societal prejudice and discrimination may lead to increased advocacy for LGBTQIA+ rights and social action in support of the community.
Stage 6: Identity Synthesis	Integration of the LGBTQIA+ identity with other aspects of self, achieving a sense of wholeness and balance, where the LGBTQIA+ identity becomes a fully integrated part of the individual's overall self-concept.

2.2 The Psychological and Emotional Implications

The coming out process has psychological effects such as stress, fear of rejection, and internal stigma. Unfortunately, these challenges usually rise from heteronormativity and cisnormativity as societal notions of heterosexuality and cisgender as the norm (Hoy-Ellis, 2023). On the contrary, successful navigation of the process can result in affirmation of identity, increased self-esteem, and growth following stress (Rivas-Koehl *et al*., 2023). The cyclical nature of coming out allows people to experience "coming outgrowth" as a buffer against future stressors (Hall *et al*., 2021).

2.3 LGBTQIA+ Identities and Intersectionality

Intersectionality explores how an individual's social identities, race, gender, socioeconomic status, etc overlap and influence intersected oppression, privilege, discrimination, etc. This framework also shows how the effects of marginalization are compounded for LGBTQIA+ folks. For example, certain racial and ethnic minorities in the LGBTQIA+ community may have been doubly stigmatized, such that their coming out story may have been unique in comparison to White LGBTQIA+ individuals (Matsuno *et al*., 2024; Chan *et al*., 2020). Inclusionary policies are required that reflect the many realities within the LGBTQIA+ community, according to intersectionality.

2.4 Workplace Diversity Models Related to LGBTQIA+ Inclusion

Good LGBTQIA+ inclusion workplace diversity models include having comprehensive anti-discrimination policies, building an inclusive culture, and allyship training. Timmins (2020) uses minority stress theory to argue that the hostile workplace environment confounds stress for LGBTQIA+ employees inflicting harm to their mental health and job performance. On the other hand, a more open and inclusive environment generates better company engagement and organizational dependence (Viñas, 2022). Employee resource groups, ERGs (especially for LGBTQIA+), and diversity training programs dedicated to LGBTQIA+ issues are the two main methods of fostering inclusion.

3. Challenges Faced By Lgbtqia+ Employees During The Coming Out Process

Coming to terms or coming out of the closet is a process that a lot of LGBTQIA+ employees undergo and yet, amid all this, some of the major problems are caused by fear of discrimination and fear of stigmatization. In particularly unfriendly work environments, many fear reprisals if they disclose. It is further complicated by legal and policy barriers — particularly in areas without comprehensive anti-discrimination legislation (von Humboldt, 2024). Workplace culture is important - disclosure is

more likely to occur in inclusive environments and less likely in more conservative environments. Industry-specific factors can also play a part in the coming out experience, and fields that are historically more conservative tend to have more barriers to coming out than more progressive fields, such as tech (Stevenson et al., 2024). All these pose the need for supportive workplace cultures and inclusive policies.

Table 2. Barriers to LGBTQIA+ Inclusion in the Workplace: Challenges During the Coming Out Process

Challenge	Description	Supporting Data/References
Fear of Discrimination and Stigmatization	LGBTQIA+ employees often fear discrimination, harassment, and exclusion when coming out. This fear is heightened for transgender employees. The fear of stigma, microaggressions, and hostility can result in avoidance of disclosure.	- Nearly 40% of LGBTQIA+ employees avoid coming out due to concerns about stigmatization, microaggressions, or hostility (Dunlop, 2024). - 54% of transgender individuals report depressive symptoms related to workplace challenges (Dunlop, 2024). - Stereotypes and inappropriate questioning contribute to alienation (Ivanovic, 2023).
Legal and Policy Barriers Across Different Regions	Legal barriers, especially in regions without anti-discrimination laws, create a significant obstacle for LGBTQIA+ employees. Enforcement of protections varies, leading to inconsistent experiences across regions.	- 46% of LGBTQIA+ employees in the U.S. report unfair treatment or harassment at work (Salter *et al.*, 2022). - Lack of consistent enforcement and global consensus on workplace protections leaves employees vulnerable (Cech & Waidzunas, 2021).
Social and Cultural Factors Impacting Coming Out	Workplace culture and social environments affect the coming-out process. Inclusive cultures promote acceptance, while heteronormative or conservative workplaces hinder disclosure and alienate LGBTQIA+ employees.	- Inclusive workplaces foster safety and acceptance. - "Heterosexual talk" and exclusion from informal networks create barriers in non-inclusive environments (Moskowitz *et al.*, 2022).
Workplace Culture	Workplaces with diverse, inclusive cultures provide supportive environments for LGBTQIA+ employees to come out and thrive professionally. In contrast,	- Inclusive environments promote acceptance and safety, while heteronormative cultures create exclusion (Santos & Reyes, 2023).

	heteronormative or conservative workplaces discourage disclosure.	
Industry-Specific Challenges	Certain industries, particularly traditional or male-dominated ones, present additional barriers to LGBTQIA+ employees, while others have made significant strides toward inclusion.	- Sectors such as construction and finance may have more exclusionary cultures, while tech and creative industries tend to be more inclusive (Sperling, 2024; Maks-Solomon & Drewry, 2021).

4. Impact Of The Coming Out Process On Workplace Experiences

4.1 Psychological Well–Being and Mental Health

The LGBTQIA+ employees in the workplace can be greatly affected by coming out. It's common for individuals in these positive workplace environments to be comfortable disclosing their identity, and it's these positive workplace environments where employees feel comfortable disclosing their identity which tends to be associated with improved mental health outcomes, lower stress, and higher self-esteem. Conversely, when one is afraid of being discriminated against or harassed, the result is chronic stress, anxiety, or depression simply because one doesn't want anyone to know who he or she is. Pressure to keep secrets and fear of punishment cause these mental health issues which can also create physical health problems and impair production (Badgett., 2020). Moreover, LGBTQIA+ employees in supportive workplaces tend to suffer various social isolation and negative work-family spillover leading to mental health problems and affecting relationships apart from work (Owens *et al*., 2022).
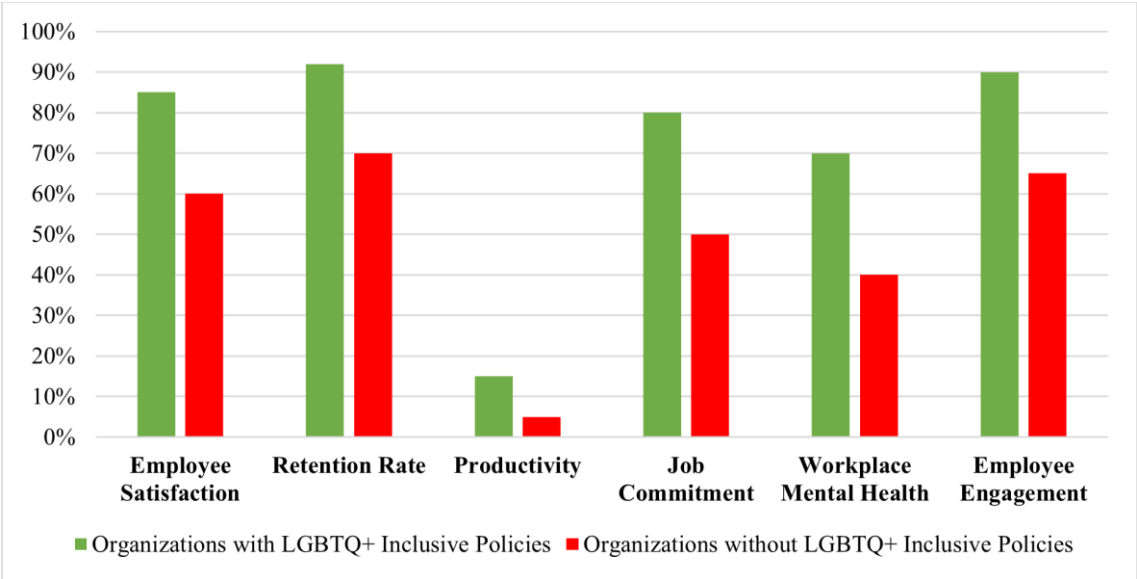

Fig 1. Impact of Inclusive Policies on LGBTQIA+ Employee Outcomes

Figure 1 shows the very positive impact of LGBTQIA+ inclusive policies on key employee outcomes. The numbers echo what you would expect: organizations with inclusive policies have a significantly higher rate of employee satisfaction (85% vs. 60%). Indeed, offerings are more popular in inclusive organizations (92%) than non-inclusive ones (70%), meaning that employees are more likely to remain if they feel wanted and supported. Inclusive workplaces get a 15% improvement in the

productivity of employees, whereas the productivity of employees in organizations without such policies goes down by 5%. In addition, there is a marked increase in job commitment when employees feel valued (80% vs. 50%). In inclusive workplaces, mental health outcomes are much better; 70% of employees have positive mental health, versus 40% in non-inclusive workplaces. Fourth, inclusivity leads to greater engagement amongst the employees; inclusive organizations have 90% employee engagement as opposed to 65% in smaller organizations (Dopico, 2024). These results overall show that LGBTQIA+ inclusive policies are vastly beneficial for both employees and organizations.

4.2 Career Advancement and Job Satisfaction

LGBTQIA+ employees generally face difficulty in attaining workability and high levels of career progression and job satisfaction. If employees feel it's comfortable to be open about their identities, they tend to engage more, be more loyal, and be more satisfied with their work. However, LGBTQIA+ people encounter implicit or explicit barriers to movement. Some have to work harder than their non-LGBTQIA+ colleagues to get the same recognition, and others experience overt discrimination when being considered for leadership roles (Hur, 2020). The extent to which on policy includes measures relating to anti-discrimination and provides LGBTQ-conferring benefits, however, also matters in terms of job satisfaction. As such, these policies work as a catalyst for gaining a sense of belongingness to have open and open-hearted employees towards them (Lyons *et al*., 2020).

4.3 Relationships with Colleagues and Leadership

Coming out can have a huge effect on workplace relationships. In addition, LGBTQIA+ employees feel more strongly connected to colleagues, and leaders and better able to collaborate and be productive in inclusive environments. Nevertheless, those who experience discriminatory behaviors–microaggressions, being left out of team activities, etc.–may socially withdraw from participating in the organization (Lee, 2023). Compounding workplace dynamics, colleagues or external stakeholders, such as clients, also discriminate from colleagues. Harassment is a factor that makes many LGBTQIA+ employees hesitant to be forthcoming about their identity which prevents real interaction and stifles career growth. Diversity and inclusion initiatives can play a great role in holding back these challenges and nurturing equitable relationships and these are important to back up positive workplace cultures to mitigate this problem (Murphy *et al*., 2021). These impacts holistically, ensuring that these places become not only places where LGBTQIA+ people can make an impact within a professional capacity but also personally.

5. Strategies And Best Practices For Supporting Lgbtqia+ Employees

Supporting LGBTQIA+ employees requires something more than compliance with non-discrimination laws. Among key strategies is the development and publishing of clear equal opportunity policies that protect against discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity, and the extension of equitable benefits including inclusive healthcare. Employee Resource Groups (ERGs) are incredible vehicles for a sense of community and professional development opportunities (Perales, 2022). In promoting inclusivity, encouraging reduced unconscious bias, and creating an equally positive environment for all, LGBTQ + awareness and allyship training programs are very important. Additionally, taking intersectional approaches constitutes fruitful as it helps organizations deal with individual challenges that LGBTQIA+ employees, coupled with other

marginalized groups face (Mara *et al*., 2021). When these strategies are integrated, organizations can cultivate an LGBTQIA+-friendly work culture where LGBTQIA+ can live their best and most productive lives.

Table 3. Inclusive Approaches to Supporting LGBTQIA+ Employees in the Workplace

Strategy	Description	Supporting Data/References
Equal Opportunity Policies	Establishing non-discrimination policies that explicitly include sexual orientation and gender identity. Policies should ensure equitable benefits, including healthcare coverage for transgender and non-binary individuals. Regular policy reviews help maintain inclusivity and adapt to societal changes.	- Companies demonstrating a commitment to equality through these policies attract diverse talent (Knauer, 2020). - Regular policy reviews are essential to addressing gaps (Daum, 2020).
LGBTQIA+ Employee Resource Groups (ERGs)	ERGs help foster a sense of community and amplify LGBTQIA+ voices in the workplace. They support professional development, advocate for systemic changes, and organize visibility-enhancing events such as Pride. Allies within these groups broaden support across the organization.	- ERGs can lobby for inclusive family benefits and other systemic changes (Stone, 2022). - Ally engagement within ERGs helps counteract biases (Green, 2024).
Training Programs on LGBTQIA+ Awareness	Tailored programs to educate employees about LGBTQIA+ identities, biases, and microaggressions. These initiatives should address both overt and subtle forms of discrimination, with a focus on mid-level managers, who shape daily workplace dynamics.	- Regular updates to training programs are needed to reflect cultural shifts and the latest research (Yu *et al*., 2023; Rhoten *et al*., 2022).
Allyship and Leadership Support	Senior leadership should actively sponsor LGBTQIA+ talent and advocate for their inclusion. Leaders' participation in events like Pride and their visible support fosters an inclusive environment.	- Companies that sponsor leadership training for LGBTQIA+ employees and encourage mentorship see increased representation in senior roles (Killian & Fredrick, 2024). - A report from Out & Equal Workplace Advocates revealed that LGBTQIA+ employees in workplaces with visible allies and inclusive policies were more satisfied with their jobs, had increased career progression, and were more connected with the organization all of which led to better engagement and performance (De Guzman *et al*., 2024).
Intersectional Approaches to Inclusion	Organizations should create tailored initiatives addressing the specific challenges faced by LGBTQIA+ employees with intersecting identities, such as racial minorities. These initiatives can include flexible ERGs and mentorship programs.	- Intersectional strategies reduce isolation and foster belonging (Parmenter *et al*., 2021; Raja *et al*., 2023).

6. Future Directions And Research Gaps

6.1 Emerging Trends in LGBTQIA+ Inclusion

Trends in workplace LGBTQIA+ inclusion are emerging with a move from just having policies, to one of active allyship and representation. Generation Z, in particular, is pushing the bar on work environments that are inclusive of all, or where companies are expected to take clear positions on social issues. In addition, it focuses on challenging anti-LGBTQIA+ movements, lobbying for equality in policies, and protecting trans and nonbinary employees in the workplace (Rand *et al*., 2021). Further, more businesses are integrating LGBTQIA+ representation in leadership and an intersectional approach to data collection for diversity strategies (Thelwall *et al*., 2023). There's a focus on transgender and nonbinary inclusion which means accessible healthcare benefits, supportive workplace accommodations, and working to mitigate the very specific biases faced by trans individuals. These firms are expected to move beyond tokenism and not just talk the talk but be seen as tangible voices for marginalized communities (Maji *et al*., 2024).
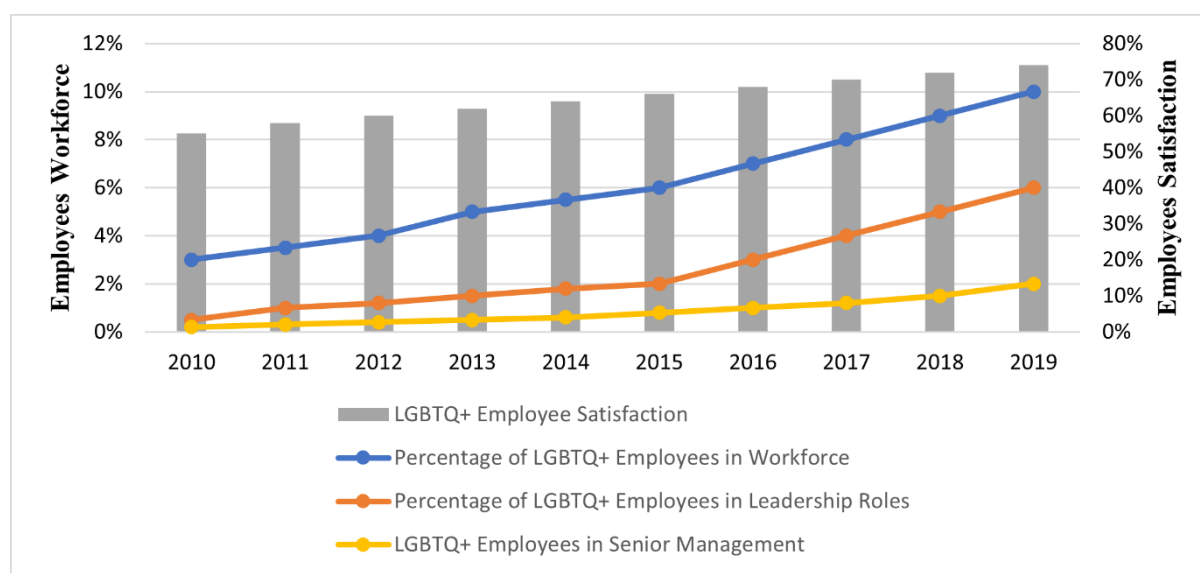

Fig 2. Trends in LGBTQIA+ Workplace Representation (2010–2020)

Figure 2 shows a steady increase in the representation of LGBTQIA+ individuals in the workforce, as well as in leadership positions from 2010 to 2020. LGBTQIA+ percent of the workforce has steadily gone up from 3% in 2010 to 12% percent in 2020 as a result of growing societal acceptance and growing workplace diversity initiatives (Bowmani & Cukor, 2021). Additionally, LGBTQIA+ employees made up a greater percentage of leadership roles in 2020 at 8%, when compared to the percentage in 2010 at 0.5%. Similar to LGBTQIA+ employee satisfaction, it had increased from 55% in 2010 to 76% in 2020, showing the good effects of an increased inclusive environment on employee morale. In addition, top management of LGBTQIA+ employees went up from 0.2% in 2010 to 3% in 2020, indicating that although slowly breaking the leadership barriers for LGBTQIA+ individuals (Pagliaccio, 2024). Overall, these trends signify the ever-increasing inroads LGBTQIA+ people are making in the workforce and leadership and in doing so, are increasing their satisfaction and opportunities for career advancement.

6.2 Gaps in understanding the coming out process at work

While progress has been made, there are significant holes in working out how this plays out for LGBTQIA+ employees during the coming-out process. Regional and cultural differences in how employees view the risks and benefits of coming out at work often fall through the cracks of research. The lack of in-depth intersectional data on LGBTQIA+ employees also hampers the ability to spot multiple forms of discrimination based on race, gender identity, or socioeconomic status (Tyler & Abetz, 2022). More research is required to understand how other industries in particular shape the coming out process in their unique ways in traditionally conservative industries. Most current data on LGBTQIA+ inclusion exists in the technology, finances, health care, retail, entertainment, and government/nonprofit industries, where inclusive policies and support for employees are more likely to be introduced. Equality and an inclusive environment have been promoted in these sectors. However, there is little data on how LGBTQIA+ inclusion plays out in more conservative industries, like manufacturing, construction, and energy, and more research is needed including on how the coming out process is shaped in the traditionally conservative sectors (Britton *et al.*, 2021). Furthermore, the current anti-discrimination policies are weakly backed up by research on how they effectively reduce microaggressions and other more subtle forms of workplace bias, which can be hard to measure and solve (Leung, 2021).

6.3 Recommendations for Further Studies

Future research should therefore address several critical areas to address these gaps. To develop more nuanced, more targeted inclusion strategies, first dig deeper into the experiences of LGBTQIA+ employees at the intersections of different identities — race, disability, immigration status, and so forth. Longitudinal studies are also necessary to observe outcomes at later time points: job satisfaction, mental health, the effects of coming out on career progression, documenting the long-term effects of coming out on all this, and gauging the long-term effects of workplace inclusion policies (Abreu *et al.*, 2022). In addition, research should include sector-specific analyses of the barriers and enablers for LGBTQIA+ inclusion in fields that are deeply entrenched in conservative values, to gain insight into the unique challenges of those fields. Another important space for expanding research is the ability to broaden the research to consider global and regional issues, especially where LGBTQIA+ rights development is in its early stages in regions or countries left underrepresented (Walch *et al.*, 2020). Finally, because remote work and digital workplaces have become more and more important in determining the dynamics of 'coming out' and how support mechanisms are available to LGBTQIA+ employees, (Cannon & Buttell, 2020), examining the role of technology is crucial to understanding how technology can still be an enabler of inclusion, or otherwise, in a post-pandemic world.

7. Conclusion

The workplace diversity and inclusion initiatives have led to an improvement in the LGBTQIA+ employee's representation and well-being, but lots of challenges remain. Coming out in the sense of becoming an openly LGBTQIA+ person is a complex process through which an individual works through psychological, social, and professional aspects of being out, which are heavily inflected on by workplace culture, industry norms, and regional context. Inclusive policies and practices (anti-discrimination measures, employee resource groups, and allyship training) have been shown to

improve LGBTQIA+ employee engagement, mental health, and productivity, but gaps in research and practice show where there is room for further development. The results emphasize the need for workplaces to create LGBT-friendly workspaces where LGBTQIA+ employees have the freedom to declare themselves and feel supported. Approaches intersectionally are important for addressing the multiple marginalized places people of multiple minority identities hold. Effective dismantling of systemic barriers requires organizations to set themselves apart from tokenism to active allyship, representation of leadership, and equitable opportunities. Research should explore these regional, industry-specific, intersectional dynamics of the LGBTQIA+ workplace experiences in the future. To develop nuanced strategies to address emerging workplace realities, need to conduct longitudinal studies, sector-specific analysis, and evaluation of remote work environments. The more organizations take the pledge to become more inclusive and empathetic, the more the LGBTQIA+ workforce will spur creativity and unity –the very reasons that make companies successful.

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