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## ARTICLE GENDER

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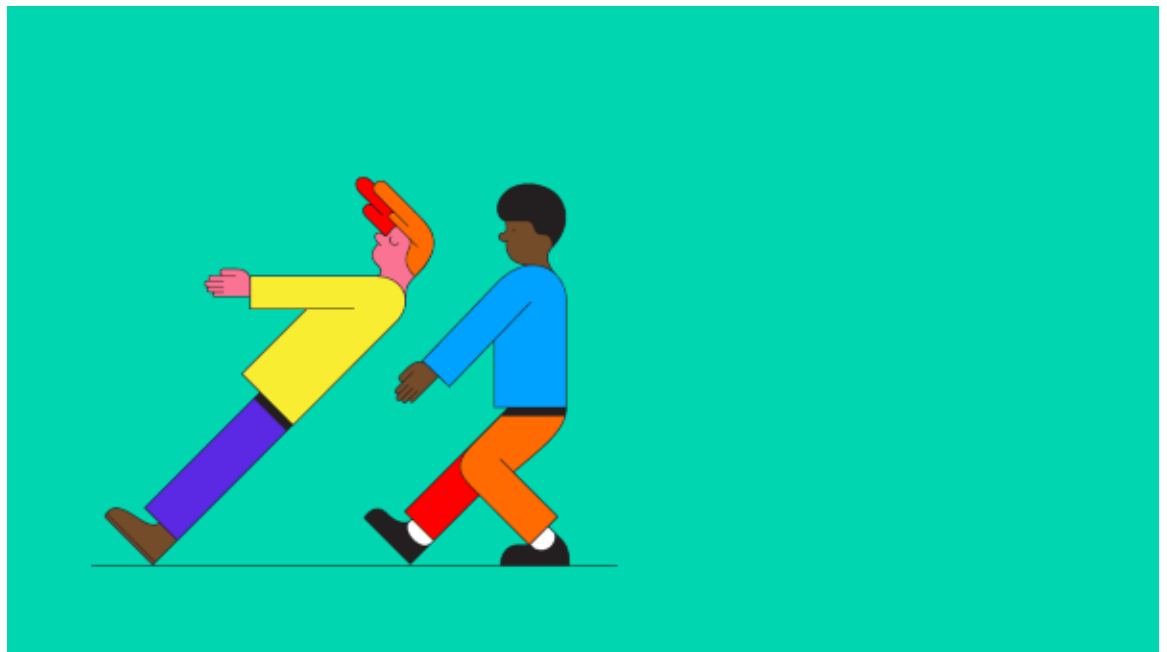
*by Christian N. Thoroughgood and Katina B. Sawyer*

GENDER

# Research: Why Employer Support Is So Important for Transgender Employees

by Christian N. Thoroughgood and Katina B. Sawyer

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Sarah\* is a high school teacher in a school district without much understanding or acceptance of transgender individuals. For years, she remained closeted about her gender identity due to fear over how her colleagues would respond. When Sarah finally decided to come out at work, the emotional and social consequences associated with being her true self became almost unbearable:

*“At school, I’m walking on eggshells, watching my back, being very protective, and having to stake out everything. There are days I call in [sick] from the parking lot because I get there and say ‘I can’t do this.’ I feel like I’m being put under a microscope by a lot of people. There was an evening where we all had to go to a student awards ceremony. I had to be on stage to give out an award to a couple of my students. I started having an anxiety attack, and I walked out and went home because I couldn’t stand to be there anymore. I could see people kind of look at me... it felt like these people didn’t want me there and they knew they were getting rid of me. I don’t think I realized how much it would hurt, how much it really, really hurt. I felt like my whole reputation was being attacked, like they were just ripping me apart.”*

Imagine for a moment what it would feel like if you had to conceal one of the most fundamental aspects of who you are as a person—your gender identity—because your perception of your gender did not align with the behavioral expectations of the body you were born into. Also imagine what it would feel like if you finally came out as your authentic self, only to be ostracized at the place you spend most of your time: work. For many transgender employees like Sarah, this is a daily reality.

She is one of about 40 people across the United States we had the opportunity to interview as part of our research on the workplace experiences of transgender individuals. As non-transgender people with only an academic understanding of the job-related challenges that this population faces, our work was prompted by a desire to become better educated on these issues. We became regular attendees at an annual transgender health conference, where conference-goers can learn about everything from surgical advances in gender transition procedures to mental health treatments uniquely suited to transgender individuals’ experiences. Over the past five years, we spoke with and surveyed people from a range of professions—from doctors and teachers to truckers and mechanics. While their experiences are as diverse as the industries they represent, our research points to the need for employers to better understand and support the need for authenticity among their transgender workforce, namely those who elect to undergo gender transitions at work.\*\*

Although many initiatives should rightly focus on the transitioning employee (which we discuss in the sidebar below), our research suggests senior leaders cannot neglect the importance of promoting a larger culture of support during and after the transition process. In fact, perhaps the most important thing employers can do to ensure the success of a gender transition is to create an atmosphere where coworkers validate the transitioning person’s gender identity and understand how the transition process helps their colleague achieve greater health and happiness.

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### Preparing Employees for the Transition Process

HR can prepare employees for the process by discussing medical coverage options; providing information about the steps involved (i.e., hormone therapy, cosmetic surgery) and the risks; increasing awareness of support groups, coaching, and other resources; and developing strategies to help individuals manage issues of work and family that may arise during the process. Including supervisors in these discussions can also help in promoting knowledge and empathy surrounding the process (e.g., side effects of hormones, time needed to recover from

surgery, implications for one's personal life) and, in turn, allow managers to make reasonable accommodations and plans.

The goal is to provide the transitioning individual with a realistic schema for how the transition process will unfold at work. By gaining an understanding of what to expect, both in terms of the physical changes they will undergo and the various challenges they may face, individuals will be more psychologically prepared for the various ups and downs that are involved in the transition process. Large companies, such as [Chevron](#), [Cigna](#), [Starbucks](#), and [Google](#) have all implemented similar initiatives in order to ensure smoother transitions for their transgender employees.

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This is especially important because the transition process can be a time of great vulnerability. In our conversations, we found that individuals often experienced fear about how to talk about their transitions to employers due to the potential for backlash. During and after their transitions, many also reported severe rejection and pressure from coworkers, and even friends and family, to deny their gender identities and to express gender in ways that align with their birth sex. These experiences, in turn, often contributed to depression, anxiety, and even suicidal thoughts. According to 2009 findings from the [National Transgender Discrimination Survey](#), the largest survey dedicated to transgender individuals' life experiences, a staggering 97% of respondents reported some form of mistreatment or discrimination in the workplace. Half of participants reported being harassed, 32% felt forced to act "traditionally gendered" to keep their jobs, and 22% were denied access to appropriate bathrooms. In [a recent quantitative study](#), we found that experiences of discrimination at work tended to undermine transgender employees' psychological wellbeing, in part by promoting greater levels of hypervigilance and rumination.

At a basic level, the effective management of transition processes requires an inclusive culture that explicitly promotes awareness of transgender issues from the top of the organization. Many of our participants stated that they would not have felt comfortable inquiring about transition benefits, much less been successful in their transitions, without the trickle down support of senior leaders who created an culture of empathy and acceptance through their words and actions. They described leaders being present or presenting at diversity trainings that include transgender issues; attending or presenting at affinity group meetings; using proper gender pronouns; championing transgender bathroom usage initiatives; instituting gender neutral dress codes; and placing symbols of inclusion in their offices or on their person (e.g., wearing LGBT affinity group pins or clothing to company events).

Additionally, our research points to the role that coworkers play in the transition process. Although [recent studies](#) suggest that perceptions of coworker inclusivity are critical to promoting positive work outcomes for transgender employees, no prior studies have examined the role of coworker reactions in the gender transition process specifically. Along with our coauthors Larry Martinez, Enrica Ruggs, and Nicholas Smith, [we used interview and survey data from 389 transgender employees](#) to quantitatively and qualitatively assess the effects of transitioning on various employee outcomes, and the reasons why it may promote such outcomes. We found that those who were farther along in

the transitions were more satisfied with their jobs, felt a greater sense of “fit” at work, and reported less discrimination. These effects were explained by their enhanced feelings of relational authenticity – or the degree to which they believed others at work perceived their gender in the same way that they defined their gender. In other words, the benefits of transitioning were, in large part, attributable to whether individuals felt recognized by their peers for who they really are. The following quotes from our interviews point to this theme:

*“There was a point where people started seeing me as just one of the guys. And I think that at that point I started feeling like I fit in a lot better...it’s the individuals [coworkers] who make that possible. So, in terms of fitting in, it’s actually more about the people that are there than about my exact gender presentation.” –Transgender man, museum curator*

*“I have no problem living full time as a woman because I’m pretty much accepted as one. And I think acceptance is also related to self-acceptance...A lot of your feelings of being complete and who you are as a person comes from the responses of others. You can’t help but feel good about yourself when people respond in a positive manner rather than a negative manner.” –Transgender woman, office administration*

*“Nothing makes you happier during and after your transition than people calling you by your proper pronoun and assuming that you are who you present to be...that’s what you want.” –Transgender woman, finance*

*“I didn’t feel authentic at work because of not being reassured from other people. I think that did play a part in not feeling like myself. When I was affirmed in a different setting, then I was happier.” –Transgender man, retail*

To promote these supportive reactions, coworkers should be informed about when they should begin using the transitioning person’s chosen name and pronoun and why these simple acts are vital to the process. For many employees, it may be their first exposure to a transgender individual, much less the transition process. Some may not yet be mentally prepared to respond to these situations thoughtfully and may need some time to process the complexities involved. As such, providing information is crucial to ensuring coworkers’ comfort throughout the process.

Ultimately, the transition process is not simply about one person. It is a collective effort on the part of many people, and it’s not always easy. Championing initiatives to help transitioning employees often requires self-reflection and courage on the part of non-transgender members of an organization. Senior leaders and HR managers, in particular, must be willing to stand up for the rights and welfare of their transgender employees and to avoid the temptation to simply remain passive. In our view, the transition process should be something that all employees can support and identify with because it is a way of achieving what we all desire as human beings: to be who we are and to be accepted by others.

*\*Names have been changed to protect the identities of our research participants.*

*\*\*Although we focus on people who transition from one gender to another, it is important to note there are individuals who express their gender in ways that do not align with the male-female binary (e.g., gender queer or androgynous individuals), yet who similarly benefit from inclusive organizational policies related to gender expression.*

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