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# Tech Pride: Celebrations and Challenges for LGBT Members of the Tech Community

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June is a month for celebrations: not only for weddings but also commemorations of advances in civil rights for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) communities. Just as technology has shaped countless aspects of social and public life, its influence on LGBT rights and relationships has also been substantial—for consumers and producers of social media, for the tech workforce, and for advocacy on LGBT policy issues at the state and national level.

A recent [Gallup poll](#) estimated 10 million American adults identify as LGBT. Although this represents less than 5 percent of the U.S. population, surveys [by city](#) indicate that tech hubs like San Francisco, Seattle and Atlanta boast LGBT populations 2-3 times the national average. Developments in technology and the societal integration of LGBT individuals have co-evolved, often for mutual benefit. Social media has changed public attitudes toward gay and lesbian figures and contributed to [increasing acceptance](#) over the last 15 years. YouTube and Facebook have enabled an entire genre of “coming out videos” that have served to embolden those uncertain about sharing their sexual orientation. Dating apps have been associated with [more risky sexual behavior](#) on the one hand, but in countries where homosexual activity is punishable by imprisonment or even death, these tools have [provided a platform](#) for LGBT men and women to discover one another and meet under safer circumstances than would be possible in public.

For employers, a more inclusive workplace climate expands the hiring pool for tech talent and improves job satisfaction and retention while increasing productivity. LGBT-friendly policies are associated with [higher firm value and profitability](#), especially for companies with extensive R&D activity. Plus, turnover is costly. The recent [Tech Leavers Study](#) by the Kapur Institute estimates “unfairness-based turnover costs the tech industry \$16B per year.”

A variety of industry groups and independent organizations are devoted to improving policies and practices for LGBT employees. [Microsoft](#), [Google](#), [Apple](#) and others have lively employee affinity groups. The nonprofit [StartOut](#) promotes LGBTQ entrepreneurship, and [Lesbians Who Tech](#) and the [National Organization of Gay and Lesbian Scientists and Technology Professionals](#) offer opportunities for professional networking.

Prominent LGBT leaders like Apple CEO Tim Cook, former PayPal CEO and investor Peter Thiel, former White House CTO Megan Smith have used their political weight to advocate against discriminatory laws on the state and national level. In 2015, more than 100 tech executives [issued a statement](#) calling for protection against such laws at a time when dozens of anti-LGBT bills were under consideration. Advocacy efforts have continued in [North Carolina](#) and [Texas](#) against laws targeting transgender students and employees.

Despite widely adopted non-discrimination protections and benefit coverage for same-sex couples, LGBT employees as a cohort may still be under-recognized. Unlike gender, race and ethnicity, sexual orientation is not a visible characteristic, and such data is often not collected or reported, even with the current trend toward transparency and publication of metrics on other under-represented groups. [Slack](#) and [Facebook](#) have taken a lead by including data on LGBT employees in their diversity reports. Even these efforts may under-count actual levels of LGBT employees. The high number of tech workers with family heritage from cultures that disapprove of homosexuality, such as in China and India, may hinder self-reporting and participation in LGBT activities. Engineering as a profession tends to attract members who are problem-focused and [less inclined to discuss personal interests](#) overall, making LGBT employees reluctant to come out at work. At the same time, homosexuality is more readily acknowledged and [accepted among young people](#), a demographic heavily represented in the tech sector.

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As developers of the technology workforce and future leadership in the sector, how are institutions of higher education preparing and supporting students? Several schools with prominent engineering programs [rank among the top](#) of LGBT-friendly colleges and universities. Another [online guide](#) recommends UC Berkeley, Georgia Tech and Smith for their twin excellence in undergraduate engineering and cultures of diversity and inclusion. National organizations [Out in Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics](#) (oSTEM) and [Out for Undergrad](#) also provide training, recruitment and networking for LGBT students.

For companies and universities, consider the following recommendations:

1. Collect data. Add reporting on sexual orientation and gender identity among employees, executives, board members and students to the metrics included in diversity reports.
2. Review benefits, policies and practices, from recruiting to onboarding and performance reviews. Amend binary gender identity boxes on applications and corporate forms.
3. Improve workplace culture by making explicit the organization's commitment to diversity and its institutional expectations of the same from partners and suppliers. Support LGBT affinity groups and their allies and champions, and raise the visibility of LGBT tech workforce and leadership, moving beyond [outdated policies](#) of "don't ask, don't tell."
4. For university engineering and computer science departments, provide space, funds, and staff support for student LGBT programs and other diversity efforts.

This month is an appropriate moment to recognize the tech industry’s role in the struggle for equality: it has embraced legal advances regarding the right to marriage and benefits for same-sex couples, reduced institutional barriers for transgender students and employees, and called out discriminatory practices and legislation. We must continue to strive for an environment that values contributions from all perspectives and backgrounds. At a time when the industry is competing for talent by addressing workplace culture for women and people of color, the sector has an opportunity to harness its power also to improve the lives of its customers, employees and stakeholders along the spectrum of sexual orientation and gender identity—and improve its bottom line. That would be reason for celebration.

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