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Out in Tech: What it's like to be LGBT in an industry struggling with diversity

BY MOLLY BROWN ([HTTPS://WWW.GEEKWIRE.COM/AUTHOR/MOLLY-BROWN/](https://www.geekwire.com/author/molly-brown/)) on June 25, 2015 at 10:30 am



Microsoft employees march in the 2014 Pride Parade. (Photo by Nate Gowdy, via Microsoft GLEAM. (<https://www.microsoft.com/en-us/diversity/inside-microsoft/glb/>))

Liz Rush was excited to put her new coding skills to the test when she took her first internship at a Seattle-area company. But then the graduate of Ada Developers Academy (<http://adadevelopersacademy.org/>) arrived on the job.

"I experienced things like having to pair all day with someone who would make comments about how I should be more open-minded about having sex with men," said Rush, a lesbian who previously worked as a translator.



Liz Rush

Rush, who was just beginning her new career as a developer, said she didn't have the emotional bandwidth to confront the homophobic remarks during her six-month internship.

"I was struggling at an internship with sexual violence jokes and team members making disparaging remarks about women in tech programs," she said. "For me, it felt like I had so much shit to overcome." <https://twitter.com/intent/tweet?url=https://www.geekwire.com/2015/gen-con-salesforce-protest-indiana-gov-mike-pences-law-that-discriminates-against-gays/>

Stories like Rush's are not unusual in an industry that is still struggling with diversity. It was only last year that major companies, including Microsoft, Google, Facebook and Amazon, released numbers addressing male/female ratios and ethnicity — numbers that were predominantly male and white. One of the year's highest profile lawsuits, the Ellen Pao case, involved sexual discrimination in Silicon Valley (she lost).

While there are many talented LGBT people working in tech, there is no industry-wide data, according to LGBT groups who follow the industry. And while many tech companies are inclusive, there are still many hurdles to overcome to support LGBT tech workers.

Yet visibility is growing. The past year has been a busy one for headlines in LGBT and tech: Apple CEO Tim Cook's penned a letter (<http://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2014-10-30/tim-cook-speaks-up>) in *Bloomberg Businessweek* in which he wrote: "I'm proud to be gay." Salesforce.com's Marc Benioff, along with countless other tech executives, took a stand (<https://www.geekwire.com/2015/gen-con-salesforce-protest-indiana-gov-mike-pences-law-that-discriminates-against-gays/>) against Indiana's anti-gay business law. At this weekend's Pride Parade in Seattle (<http://seattlepride.org/events/parade/>), T-Mobile is the biggest sponsor, in addition to supporting LGBT Pride in 21 other states.

As Seattle gears up to celebrate Pride this weekend, GeekWire decided to explore what it's like working in tech for many in the LGBT community. Experiences vary vastly by person and company, but there are some underlying issues that the tech world has yet to address to be more welcoming, including letting go of the "brogrammer" mind-set, benefits that support LGBT workers' needs and eliminating the chilling effect of "don't ask, don't tell" that many in the LGBT community encounter.

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After the disparaging remarks, Rush thought about leaving the tech world, returning to her job as a translator. But she stuck it out, graduating from Ada Developers Academy and taking a job at Nordstrom's Innovation Lab before moving on to Seattle dating startup Siren.

"I felt my being a woman was more a barrier to being in tech than being gay," she said. "Now, going to conferences, meetups and being part of the tech community, I often find that men are willing to act as if I'm one of the guys in that they like to express their objectification and misogyny toward women around me because we both like women."

Rush's experience fielding sexual innuendos and comments seems to be a fairly common occurrence for lesbians in tech.



Killer Infographics co-founder Amy Balliett at the 2013 GeekWire Awards

Killer Infographics (<http://killerinfographics.com/about-us/meet-the-team>) co-founder Amy Balliett said similar things have happened when she's at conferences and events once men find out she's a lesbian. Balliett also says that she is often overlooked if she's standing next to a man, be it her business partner or an employee.

Balliett simply addresses the situation head-on, reminding people that she's the decision maker at her company.

"It's really annoying to have to do that," said Balliett, whose company does work for LGBT nonprofits often at a discount and has turned away popular chicken chain Chick-fil-A for its past anti-gay remarks. "The minute he finds out I'm gay, he tries to buddy up with me and starts saying stuff like: 'Do you think that girl's cute?' It really annoys me."

Still a straight, white man's world

For those in the LGBT community, getting past stereotypes is a constant battle.

"From my experience and of the other gay technical developers I know, gay men are seen as not as 'technical' as straight men," Rush said. "The almost underlying assumption is that you have to have a heterosexual male brain to be good at technology and innovation."



(<https://www.facebook.com/StartOut/photos/pb.94614194050.-2207520000.1435173253./10153119051609051/?type=3&theater>)

Photo via Facebook/StartOut event (left to right) Chris Sinton, Chair Emeritus StartOut, Andrea Barrica, Co-founder inDinero & Venture Partner 500 Startups, Luis Sanchez, CTO Cleanify

Being a gay man at a large tech company is something Chris Sinton experienced firsthand at Cisco, from 1992 to 2002. At the time, he didn't know any gay people at Cisco.

"It was a straight, white man's game and I needed to be as butch as possible," said Sinton. "I needed to clearly not be gay to succeed ... so that's what I did. I cut my hair a certain way, dressed a certain way... I did amazing things at Cisco, really great things with my ambition, intelligence and drive, but I also know that if I had been straight I would've been more successful there."

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At Cisco in the 1990s, Sinton helped pioneer B2B sales via the Internet. Since, he's left Silicon Valley for San Francisco, and now works mostly in philanthropy and sits on the board of StartOut (<http://startout.org/>), a 6-year-old nonprofit that works to connect and support LGBT entrepreneurs — about 60 to 70 percent he estimates are working on tech companies. StartOut has a network of 14,000 people throughout chapters in Austin, Boston, New York, Chicago, Los Angeles, San Francisco, and it's working on starting chapters in Seattle and Denver.

Sinton admits that he has no idea what it's like to work for a Facebook or Google these days, but he does remain tuned into the tech scene and the progress of LGBT people in the industry.

"Tech seems to be really late coming to the diversity table," he says. "Just last year, men and women at tech companies started exposing pay and disclosing numbers on gender."

StartOut helps LGBT people start companies – a path to "economic empowerment" that Sinton says, while difficult, might be a more attractive option for workers who are discriminated against or worried about being out at their jobs.

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According to the latest report from the Human Rights Campaign, a national organization that works for LGBT equal rights, there is no federal law that protects workers based on sexual orientation or gender identity, and it remains legal in 29 states to discriminate against job applicants and employees due to their sexual orientation, and in 32 states because of their gender identity. In Washington State, it is illegal to discriminate based on sexual orientation and gender identity.



Chris Sinton of StartOut

The federal government's lack in acknowledging LGBT people as an "underrepresented minority" means that LGBT entrepreneurs, especially those in tech, might be missing out on investment dollars.

Sinton cites Intel Capital's latest \$125 million diversity fund (<https://www.geekwire.com/2015/intel-capital-launches-125m-diversity-fund-targeting-women-and-minority-entrepreneurs/>) for women and minorities as an example. According to the company's announcement, it was not considering LGBT startups because they didn't fall under the federal government's definition of "underrepresented minorities."

"We wanted to keep it simple and consistent," Intel's Lisa Lambert told VentureBeat. "There is not a lot of visibility around LGBT. It is murkier because it is not a required disclosure."

Sinton, for one, thinks Intel missed the mark.

"According to Intel, LGBT isn't an underrepresented minority. We disagree," he said.

It's unclear whether startups led by LGBT people receive less funding. "It's murky for us as well, and we'd like to make it less murky," said Sinton.

Making strides

Even with some of the issues, major tech companies tend to score well when it comes to LGBT equality and inclusion. The Human Rights Campaign recently released its 2015 Corporate Equality Index (<http://hrc-assets.s3-website-us-east-1.amazonaws.com/files/documents/CEI-2015-rev.pdf>) report in which 47 tech companies achieved a "perfect" score when it came to supporting LGBT employees.

Companies such as Adobe, Microsoft and T-Mobile all made the list.

Others are making strides as well, with several people saying the perceptions around LGBT people in tech is changing for the better.



(<https://www.facebook.com/lesbianswhotech/photos/pb.563557486990974.-2207520000.1435242793./1105023786177672/?type=3&theater>)

Photo via Facebook/Lesbians Who Tech at Pride Parade, Portland

Azuqua's director of demand generation Alexis Mohr has found the Seattle tech scene quite welcoming after working for tech companies in Ohio.

"It took me a long time to come out in the professional world because it was so conservative there," says Mohr of her time in Ohio. "I didn't want it to affect my professional life in any way. When I came (to Seattle), I was immediately comforted by the number of people I saw in each of these companies who were already living out, and it made it easier to be myself."

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Todd Feldman also has noticed changes. He began at a startup, then worked at Amazon for 15 years before becoming a director of engineering at Redfin.



Todd Feldman of Redfin

As a gay man, he says that he's never felt "directly" discriminated against. However, it used to be that the LGBT customer was ignored when discussing product features years ago.

While developing Redfin's shared search (<https://www.geekwire.com/2015/redfin-unveils-shared-search-to-make-it-easier-for-house-hunters-to-collaborate-on-homes-to-buy/>) feature, Feldman says the team used language to be inclusive for LGBT people buying homes.

"We spent many hours discussing it with the executive team, from CEO Glenn Kelman on down," Feldman said.

To help foster a more inclusive environment for LGBT people in tech, groups are forming.

Mohr recently attended an event hosted by Lesbians Who Tech (<http://lesbianswhotech.org/>), a group that does social and educational events for LGBT workers. Based in San Francisco, Lesbians Who Tech now has 9,000 members worldwide, with 16 chapters in the U.S. and five overseas. The Seattle chapter has over 400 members and is growing fast.

The group recently partnered with Microsoft's LGBT resource group, GLEAM (<https://www.microsoft.com/en-us/diversity/inside-microsoft/glb/default.aspx#fbid=kuBD0vLZrkA>), on an event.



Lesbians Who Tech founder Leanne Pittsford talks at Microsoft

GLEAM community director Staci King says it was the “biggest turnout” they’d ever had for a women-focused event on Microsoft’s campus, with more than 100 people attending.

But despite Microsoft being a large company with a good track record of supporting human rights, its GLEAM membership is only around 2,000 people worldwide. King says getting numbers up is one of her greatest challenges — including getting Microsofties to march in this weekend’s Pride Parade.

“It’s a very important initiative right now, defining it not only as racial diversity, but diversity across the spectrum,” King says. “That’s another part of it, ensuring that we have not only strong representation from lesbians but also the trans community.”

Yet finding and connecting with other LGBT people who work in tech is not all that simple.

“I don’t see a tight-knit group of gay entrepreneurs in Seattle,” Ben Elowitz, co-founder of Wetpaint and Blue Nile, told us when asked about other LGBT techies he knew. “Except the people I’ve worked with, I don’t know who the others are.”



Ben Elowitz, Wetpaint CEO (Erynn Rose photo)

“My sense is both Silicon Valley and Seattle have a tech scene that is pretty dang progressive,” Elowitz says. “When you are so competitive for great talent, you don’t have time to worry about things that get in the way of getting great talent. There’s room for diversity, sure. I’m gay and happy, and I wanted that culture of inclusivity to be strong at Wetpaint.”

At Killer Infographics, Balliett and her team work hard to ensure a culture that celebrates diversity. In addition to making sure health care is inclusive to all in the LGBT communities and their families and having a strong “mission, vision, values” statement, she implemented a tool from Seattle startup TINYPulse (<https://www.tinypulse.com/>) that allows for candid feedback.

Another step toward diversity? If your company has an employee resource group, make sure it’s not just there for lip service, says Leone Kraus, Seattle’s co-organizer of Lesbians Who Tech.

“Most companies have this group, but no budget to post an event or do anything,” she says. “One of the easiest things companies could do is invest in that group.

“Sure, they may invest in Pride Month,” Kraus continues. “But LGBT is an everyday thing, not just during the month of June.”

The Seattle Pride Parade (<http://seattlepride.org/events/parade/>) kicks off on 4th and Union downtown Sunday at 11 a.m.

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