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Talking About Pronouns in the Workplace

What's in a Pronoun?

Pronouns -- we all use them as part of everyday conversation. A pronoun is a word that refers to either the people talking (like “I” or “you”) or someone or something that is being talked about (like “she,” “it,” “them,” and “this”).

Gender pronouns (such as “he/him/his” and “she/her/hers”) refer to people that you are talking about. Gender pronouns are the way that we constantly refer to each other's gender identity - except we often don't think a whole lot about them. Usually we interpret or “read” a person's gender based on their outward appearance and expression, and “assign” a pronoun. But our reading may not be a correct interpretation of the person's gender identity.

Because gender identity is internal -- an internal sense of one's own gender -- we don't necessarily know a person's correct gender pronoun by looking at them. Additionally, a person may identify as genderfluid or genderqueer and may not identify along the binary of either male or female (e.g. “him” or “her”). Some people identify as both masculine and feminine, or neither. A genderqueer or non-binary identified person may prefer a gender-neutral pronoun such as the “they” (e.g. “I know Sam. They work in the Accounting Department”).

The Persistence of Gender Norms

Gender norms are persistent and highly enforced across societies. Think about babies coming home from the hospital where baby boys get blue caps, and baby girls get pink. Individuals that stand outside of traditional gender norms are highly scrutinized, often becoming fodder for mockery and ridicule. In the U.S., pop culture images like “It's Pat,” “Mrs. Doubtfire” and Tyler Perry's “Medea” highlight the omnipresence of gendered assumptions by displaying characters who buck gender norms as the basis for humor.

Transgender activist Riki Wilchins¹ describes the pervasiveness of gender and ongoing enforcement of gender norms when noting that we never fail to notice the transgression when someone does not visually conform to accepted male or female standards. This is the entire premise of Saturday Night Live's “It's Pat” sketch. By making Pat's gender so androgynous that no one can tell whether Pat is male or female, the sketch highlights how our society does not easily allow for a lack of adherence to strongly held gender norms.

¹ Riki Wilchins is an advocate and activist whose work has focused on gender norms. Wilchins founded the first U.S. transgender advocacy group “GenderPAC” in 1995 and was active in founding or running many other advocacy organizations. In 2001, Wilchins' work resulted in her being selected one of just six community activists named by TIME Magazine among its “100 Civic Innovators for the 21st Century.”

Transgender and gender nonconforming people are subject to others consistently try to “read” or “figure out” their gender. If their gender presentation is not either male or female “enough,” they may be subject to misunderstanding, bias and discrimination.

Why Pronouns Matter

Nothing may be more personal than the way in which people refer to us through our name and pronouns. Using a person’s chosen name and desired pronouns is a form of mutual respect and basic courtesy.

In the workplace, employees should have the option of articulating their preferred name and the way this is articulated may vary across settings -- formal vs. informal, email vs. in-person meetings, name badges, business cards and so on. But what about pronouns?

The experience of being misgendered can be hurtful, angering, and even distracting. The experience of accidentally misgendering someone can be embarrassing for both parties, creating tension and leading to communication breakdowns across teams and with customers.

It’s important to remember that gender identity is not visible -- it’s an internal sense of one’s own gender. While most people align across their birth-assigned sex, their gender identity, their gender expression and how everyone else interprets their gender -- some people do not. A culture that readily asks or provides pronouns is one committed to reducing the risk of disrespect or embarrassment for both parties.

Pronoun Policies: Background and History

The practice of having an established pronoun policy is rooted in campus life and the advocacy community. Recognizing that not all people identify along a binary gender identity and that people’s gender identity is not necessarily known from the way their expression is “read” by others, pronoun policies intend to create a way for people make make their preferred forms of address known instead of relying upon assumption.

At U.S. colleges and universities, students have lobbied for the adoption of “personal pronoun policies” that include having one’s chosen pronouns appear in the student profile in the database and on class rosters as well as asking that professors be held accountable to use the indicated pronouns.

As LGBTQ and ally-identified students matriculate to the workforce, many will come with an understanding of the importance of honoring personal pronouns and allowing for gender-inclusive pronouns such as “they, them, theirs.” Some may even have an expectation that the company has adopted a pronoun policy or other protocol for disclosing one’s self-ascribed pronoun. To date, while formalized policies such as those on college campuses remain less common in the workplace, some employees are finding ways to communicate their pronouns.

Companies seeking to be LGBTQ inclusive need to be aware of the importance of pronouns to the community and explore appropriate solutions for their workplaces. Whatever approach we take to

address pronouns, the bottom line is that everyone deserves to have their self-ascribed name and pronouns respected in the workplace.

Creating Opportunities to Ask for (or Offer) Pronouns

For the workplace, it may be best to explore where opportunities to ask for or offer one's pronouns may exist. The best practice may vary depending on the nature of the workplace - for example, corporate office vs. dispersed retail locations.

Here are some examples of opportunities to ask for or offer pronouns:

- Interviewing process: Create a place to declare preferred name and pronouns. Many Applicant Tracking Systems (ATS) are driven by legal name. Creating an opportunity to disclose preferred names is a recommended best practice not only for transgender people, but for anyone who uses a preferred (or "nick") name.
- Onboarding process: Create a place to declare preferred name and pronouns. Use these as basis of introducing new employees.
- Corporate social networks or platforms, digital directories: Allow employees to self-ID preferred name and pronouns as part of their profile.
- Include personal pronouns in email signature lines.
- Make offering personal pronoun part of introduction process at the start of meetings or events.

Example:

"We're going to go around the room to introduce ourselves. Please say your name, the department you work in and, if you want, your personal pronouns."

"My name is John Smith. I work in Quality Control. My pronouns are they, them, theirs."

- Role model appropriate pronoun when introducing people to their new workgroup. Ex:
"Everyone I am pleased to introduce John Smith who is transferring over from Quality Control. They will be the lead person on the new product development project."

"Pronouns are important because that's the essence of who I am or who a trans person is. It's how we identify ourselves. I prefer she and her. There might be someone else that prefers something else. I understand that this might be a little weird for you because you don't have a trans person in your life so here's what you do, you stop, you take a deep breath, and you ask. That's all you have to do. Not hard, just ask. And let me tell you something by asking that will go so far, so far and so well with that trans or gender neutral non-conforming person who's going to be sitting across from you because that tells them that you care, that you want to do the right thing, that your intentions are honest and I think if you do that if you're you know find yourself in an uncomfortable uneasy situation, you'll be fine."

- Stephanie Battaglino, Consultant, [Follow Your Heart LLC](https://www.followyourheartllc.com/)