

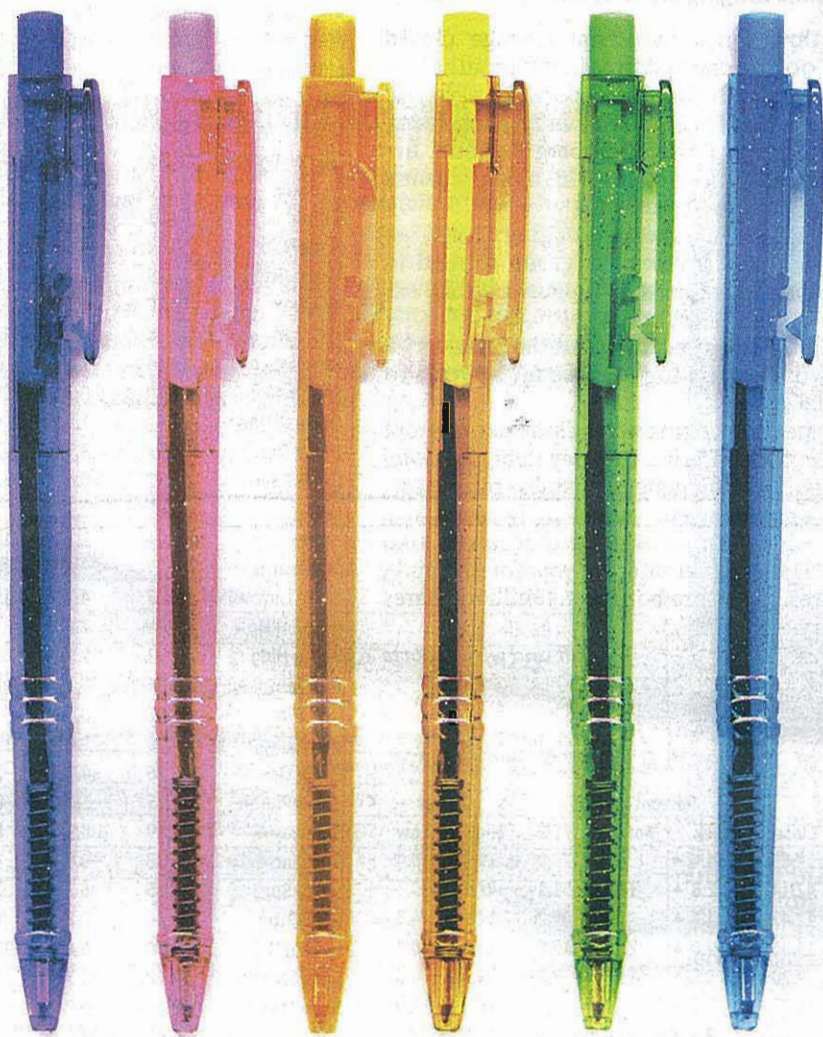
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Workplace » CAREERS AND OFFICE CULTURE



WORKING

'Coming out' at the office

By VICKIE ELMER

Adrian Colborn favors the show-up-and-share approach to coming out with co-workers.

When he attended a client's wedding not long ago, he brought along a gift — and his partner. And with that, several wedding guests, members of his client team, learned he was gay.

He took a similar approach years earlier when he came out to his first team at Booz Allen, bringing his partner, Mike Fournier, to his boss's cook-out.

Sometimes, he considered telling people of his sexual orientation beforehand, but the right moment didn't come. "There weren't any big announcements — just show up," said Colborn of Ellicott City, Md., a senior associate at Booz Allen Hamilton who works with NASA teams in systems engineering and information technologies. He said most co-workers and clients were matter-of-fact or glad to meet the man he's shared his life with for nearly 20 years.

So for National Coming Out Day, on Monday (Oct. 11), Colborn said gay workers should consider how coming out can strengthen their leadership and build trust with colleagues. "There's no right or wrong answer. People need to observe their own workplace and trust their own intuition," said Colborn, 47. He suggests that gay workers should consider whether they're overly cautious or have observed something or someone that requires them to hide their sexual orientation at work.

While three-quarters of gays are open with siblings and two-thirds are out with parents, only half consider

TIP SHEET

Do your homework first

Considering coming out more at work? Here are three tips:

1. Check employee policies and handbooks to see if there are any protections offered or a nondiscrimination statement that covers sexual orientation.
2. Find a network of other lesbian and gay staffers to guide you. And develop a mentor — "a straight ally," as Adrian Colborn calls them. Discuss risks and potential repercussions as well as rewards of being openly gay.
3. Read up on coming out in the Human Rights Campaign's online guide, at www.hrc.org/ncod/

themselves open about their sexual orientation with their boss, according to a new survey conducted by Harris Interactive. More trust their co-workers — 62 percent have come out to colleagues, according to the poll for Witeck-Combs Communications and Out & Equal Workplace Advocates.

"Your boss has a lot to say about whether you're promoted or whether you keep your job," said Wesley Combs, president and co-founder of Witeck, a D.C. marketing and communications firm. He noted that it's still legal to fire some for being gay in more than half of states, including Virginia. He said it makes sense to come out first to a smaller group you trust. "The more you come out, the more it provides you strength," said Combs, who first came

out to one person at IBM in 1987.

Almost six in 10 of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender individuals surveyed said gays are treated "fairly and equally" in their workplace, though only 44 percent of heterosexual staffers agree. The online survey contacted 2,334 heterosexual and 362 gay or transgender adults. Count Colborn among those who feels fairly treated. Booz Allen is among 337 employers that had perfect scores on the Human Rights Campaign's annual Corporate Equality Index.

Even when he works with military and ex-military types, he said he is more open and has not felt any negative consequences. "I distinguish it between coming out and living out," he said. "I'm just showing up and letting people have the visibility in my life."

Coming out also has strengthened his leadership abilities, with what is known as authentic leadership, he said. "I think the most effective leaders are the ones who can build trust and rapport among their team members, and lead with integrity. Being out, I think, necessarily adds to a level of transparency and integrity," he said.

When he occasionally must have candid conversations with his crew, "being out encourages a level of confidence and safety with employees that better allows those frank conversations to happen," he said.

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Vickie Elmer is a freelance writer who specializes in workplace issues.

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