

Evidence-based research highlights challenges ahead

WORKPLACE PRIDE CHAIR INAUGURAL SPEECH



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Staying in the closet represents a paradox; namely that being in the closet is often used as a method of protection, but at the same time has lots of negative consequences

This was one of the conclusions of Prof. Dr. Jojanneke van der Toorn's recent inaugural lecture at Leiden University. As Workplace Pride's Professor by Special Appointment of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Workplace Inclusion (Sponsored by KPN), Van der Toorn focuses on research into the inclusion of LGBT employees in the workplace. By engaging with scientific methodologies and performing evidence-based research on the subject, the Chair aims to expand the knowledge-base on LGBT workplace inclusion, and to collaborate with others on the subject.

The Inaugural Lecture is an opportunity for newly-appointed Professors to update colleagues in the University and the general public about their research, career, and their current and future research directions.

The Lecture included a detailed description of the trials and tribulations of being LGBT at work including feelings of isolation, outright bullying and harassment, fewer opportunities for promotion, increased likelihood of depression and burn-out, etc. Van der Toorn explained how sexual orientation is far more than just what happens in the bedroom. According to her, sharing who we are, what we do, what is important and what we worry about is hindered when we can't talk about our partners openly. It becomes clear that by hiding parts of ourselves we create distance within a group, or within a working environment.

LGBT issues are considered an invisible difference; it is something that has to be expressed to be known, and so LGBT people spend lots of times correcting assumptions such as 'heteronormativity'; the assumption that all people are

heterosexual. While invisibility may make it easier to "pass" as heterosexual, and thereby avoid homophobia, staying in the closet represents a paradox; namely that being in the closet is often used as a method of protection, but at the same time has lots of negative consequences for closeted people.

While these issues are obviously important to address, both from an employer and a mental health stand-point, the lecture also discussed potential solutions to these issues, and the strengths of creating and being an inclusive workplace.

Working to create an environment where individuals can feel included and can be themselves is much more important than simply being "diverse". Being open and accepting of difference, and even considering difference a strength is the next step up from merely being "tolerant". It is a question of changing policy and mentality; also beyond the walls of the workplace. Generating social change happens by challenging (implicit) bias, combating internalised homophobia and acknowledging issues within our cultural understanding of LGBT issues. Inclusivity isn't easy, but its possible if we are willing to look at ourselves and our views of the world, and acknowledge that perhaps we all have room to learn about our assumptions and beliefs.

Van der Toorn uses a combination of evidence-based approaches, working with both organisations and individuals, in order to ensure that interventions are actually helpful. As she points out, sometimes attempts to promote inclusivity can actually have an opposite effect. With this in mind, she remains optimistic that creating an inclusive workplace will increase productivity and connectivity to organizations and their peers!

