



# LGBT+ Diversity and Inclusion in the context of COVID-19

The year 2020 started out with well-developed plans to advance the LGBT+ Diversity and Inclusion (D&I) agenda, and celebrate accomplishments. The year marks the 50th anniversary of the first Pride march in New York City. In the case of the EY organization, it is the 25th anniversary of the founding of Unity – the first LGBT+ employee resource group – in the UK and the 15th anniversary of Unity in the US.

The COVID-19 pandemic and global recession have upended those plans, while presenting new opportunities and threats to D&I efforts directed toward the LGBT+ community. In addition, Black Lives Matter activism has elevated awareness of racial justice issues and is influencing D&I initiatives more broadly.

In 2016, EY published [Making it real globally: A practical guide for advancing lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender diversity and inclusion across global companies](#). The guide was then updated this year. Has everything now changed?

This note reflects on how the COVID-19 pandemic, economic shocks, and racial awareness are shaping the global LGBT+ D&I agenda.



# The global context: variation + change

The work and social environment for LGBT+ people around the world varies tremendously. As noted in *Making it Real*, there are several key drivers of this variation that global companies must navigate: the legal environment, societal cultures, and the culture and practices within the company. The COVID-19 pandemic has added to this variation and complexity.

Some countries and regions have been greatly affected by the pandemic, while others have managed through the health crisis more effectively. Healthcare systems around the world have been reoriented to coronavirus response, and many “non-essential” services have been curtailed or have shifted to alternative facilities and caregivers. As a result, transgendered people in the UK and elsewhere have found it more difficult to access gender-affirming services and medications. Moreover, as some countries have sought to reopen their economies, surges in infections have created more questions about the future and added to business uncertainty and social stresses.

The global health crisis has catalyzed a global economic recession which has upended business plans. In June, for example, the International Monetary Fund forecast that the UK, the Eurozone countries, and Mexico would experience economic contractions of over 10 percent in 2020 – something not seen since the Great Depression of the 1930s. On the other hand, China and a handful of other countries in Asia are expected to grow modestly.

In addition, governments have taken vastly different approaches to combating the pandemic – in terms of both public health and economic measures. Policy variation is especially significant across Europe, Latin America, and the United States. Of note, politicians in Poland,

Turkey, Uganda and elsewhere have scapegoated LGBT+ people in the pandemic or used the crisis as an opportunity to persecute them.

The varying duration and intensity of lockdowns have had tremendous impacts on the workplace and people. While some offices and operations have reopened under new health and safety regimes, others are expected to remain closed or operate on only a limited basis well into 2021. This will make D&I planning and implementation much more difficult.

To make the moment more complex, the death of George Floyd, a black person, in the United States, has elevated awareness of racial inequality and the need for more assertive diversity and inclusion efforts focused on race and ethnicity – not only in the US but in many countries around the world. Such dialogues also elevate the significance of intersectionality – the recognition of many people’s multiple identities, such as race and gender expression – on the D&I agenda. But how those discussions play out is hardly consistent around the world.

Finally, the pandemic is raising new questions about the future of work and the workplace. The pandemic has clearly accelerated some long-term trends such as the shift to more virtual work practices and it has dramatically elevated the role of technology in the workplace and daily lives. For large organizations, such as the EY organization in EMEA, the office will be one of a number of options for collaboration, cohesion, and community, but many of our people are saying that they intend to continue to work virtually for some of their working week.

Accounting for and managing across these variations and making sure no one is left behind is difficult, but essential for sustaining LGBT+ D&I efforts and relevance in these times.

# Implications for advancing LGBT + policy and practice

*Making it Real* outlined nine leading practices to advance LGBT+ Diversity and Inclusion in a global organization. These all remain valid in the current context. Below, we revisit several of those in the context of the pandemic and we add some additional issues to consider.



## Utilize social media and other technology, locally and globally

Many offices around the world have reopened, but telework will remain imperative in many jurisdictions for the foreseeable future – perhaps until a vaccine or therapies are developed and deployed. In-person meetings, events, and celebrations have been central to planning and executing LGBT+D&I programs. They are essential for outreach and engagement, forging trusted relationships and networks, and celebrating success.

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**Virtual can dilute enthusiasm; it is harder to sustain efforts. We need people to stay connected. You have to have the human connection to reenergize the team and keep cohesion.**

**Catherine Vaughan**

The cancellation of D&I events, including Pride marches in 2020 has motivated innovation and the search for new forms of engagement as LGBT+D&I programs have had to fill gaps and go virtual. A top priority is to make sure the LGBT+ community continues to feel connected and supported by their organization.

Going virtual has many upsides: increasing the frequency of interaction and lowering logistical costs and complexity associated with events. Virtual has also lowered barriers to entry and opened doors to new members and allies: Personnel in countries or regions that do not have their own employee resource group or LGBT+-oriented activities suddenly have gained an opportunity to join the many virtual discussions, webinars, and events hosted by distant groups. For illustration, EY LGBT+professionals in the UK and Asia-Pacific region have energetically embraced digital D&I initiatives and this has helped transcend the region's many different cultures and working environments, knitting together a broader corporate culture of inclusion. As a result of



such learnings, online activities will play a larger role in the D&I toolkit in the future, says Moriaki Kida, EY Japan Regional Chief Operating Officer and Unity Global Sponsor.

There are however limits. Without periodic face-to-face meetings, professional and social cohesiveness and the motivational energy of initiatives degrade over time. A sense of “videoconference fatigue” has emerged across businesses and this goes for D&I efforts as well.

For many young LGBT+ people, isolation is a mental health risk. In Asia, tight living arrangements make going to the office or out on town important social outlets. Personal support networks in real life are especially important for helping younger professionals work through issues. Seeking support online through chats or talk therapy, for example, may not be an option for those in unsupportive or hostile living arrangements.

Further, high-context cultures communicate more using gestures, body language or non-verbal messages. Virtual meeting software do not typically identify those who express discomfort through facial expressions of body language. In addition, virtual meetings can be relatively effective for those who already know one another, but creating new relationships can be a significant challenge. Therefore, there may be an unquantifiable and significant loss to productivity or decrease the sense of community for LGBT+ ERGs.

As a result, it is important for managers to be aware of the shortcomings of remote communications and be attentive to how the crisis and telework are affecting team members differently.



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Black Lives Matter has enabled some really challenging conversations to happen about both racism and broader discrimination. Let’s all support each other and use this catalyst to foster a broad, intersectional culture of inclusion.

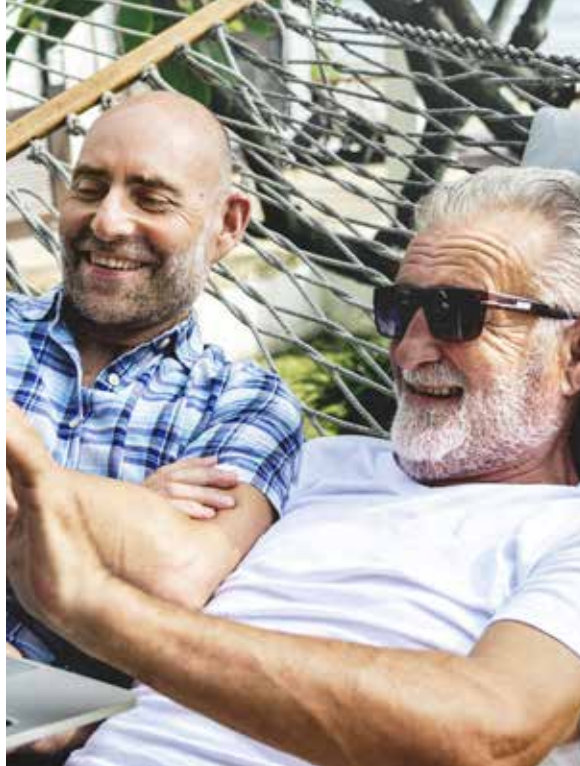
Tim Jarman

## Create opportunities for reverse mentoring and education of management

In the absence of face-to-face communications, meetings, and “water-cooler chat” in the pandemic, management have had to resort to intense use of online webinars, discussion forums, and team meetings – to keep people up to speed on fast-paced developments, sustain culture and cohesion, share personal news and experiences, and provide support. Video conferences from the home – with family pictures, partners, and rambunctious children in the background – have made all kinds of business discussions less formal and more personal.

These moments offer rich opportunities for LGBT+ to bring their ‘whole selves’ into the picture and provides a common frame of reference for colleagues to share experiences and show solidarity in crisis together. On videoconferences and calls many managers create time for emotional check-ins and discussions of the challenges of working from home, and this creates opportunities for LGBT+ employees to share their unique experiences, build awareness, gather management support, and foster a culture of compassion and solidarity.

Anecdotal evidence indicates that younger LGBT+ people have been at greater risk of isolation and harassment in the pandemic. Thanks to D&I programs, many have been able to come out at work while still being closeted at home. A closeted LGBT+ person who lives in an unsupportive environment with family or in shared housing might not be able to be themselves online when working from home, for fear of being overheard, for instance. In a sense, working from home can literally push people back into the closet, says Moriaki Kida.



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**EY LGBT+ professionals in the UK and Asia-Pacific region have energetically embraced digital D&I initiatives and this has helped transcend the region’s many different cultures and working environments, knitting together a broader corporate culture of inclusion. As a result of such learnings, online activities will play a larger role in the D&I toolkit in the future.**

**Moriaki Kida**

EY Japan Regional Chief  
Operating Officer and Unity  
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## Keep making the business case for diversity

If D&I is not already ingrained in a firm's culture and strategy, a crisis such as the pandemic, creates the risk that programs get deferred in lieu of health and safety or business continuity concerns.

As illustrated in *Making it Real*, there is a lot of data available in the public about the competitive gains from D&I that can be used to get management's attention at a time when there is intense focus on the bottom line.

If D&I is in peril, connect with peers in similar organizations to understand how they have navigated challenges in the past. Community organizations can also provide external support and guidance, for example, in making the business case for D&I advises Tim Jarman, former Assistant Director for Diversity and Inclusiveness at EY in the UK and Ireland. Storytelling is also compelling: The LGBT+ community (and other historically disenfranchised groups) has a long history of dealing with adversity. They can serve as models of resiliency during times of crisis, says Catherine Vaughan. "It is a huge untapped resource [that] translates into business resiliency."

In recent years, Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG) has risen on the business agenda at companies, asset managers, and investors. The pandemic and Black Lives Matters movement have drawn attention to the "S" in ESG measurement and reporting efforts to improve management and investment decision making and boost accountability.

Accordingly, ESG metrics can be used to focus management on the longer term and help sustain D&I programs through the near-term ups and downs of the business.

## Racial Justice and Intersectionality

The prominence and mix of workplace issues related to race and ethnicity varies greatly around the world. Similarly, Black Lives Matters activism in the US has varying salience in other countries. That said, Black Lives Matter movement has pushed businesses around the world to have difficult conversations about conscious and unconscious bias and discrimination of all types. (Indeed, anti-Asian sentiment has increased as a result of the pandemic.) As more people understand the breadth and intensity of racism in society and the workplace, they may also gain a greater understanding of homophobia and transphobia. Such broad-band learning and awareness is especially important for organizations that are newer to the D&I journey.

The year 2020 marks the 50th anniversary of the first Pride march in New York City, which was born out of protest. In that spirit, many LGBT+ have emphasized solidarity and formed coalitions in recognition of the importance





of fighting racism at this time. (Indeed, the Black Lives Matter movement in the US was catalyzed by three black queer women.) For LGBT+people and their allies, Black Lives Matter has reinforced awareness of intersectionality that touches so many people. Around the world, reports of harassment of Asians have increased in the pandemic. These moments, highlight the additional challenges LGBT+ people that are Black, Asian, and other ethnic minorities and those with disabilities, face in the workplace and beyond.

There are challenges to note. For firms where D&I is not broadly and deeply embedded in the organization's culture or values of its leaders, there is a risk of a zero-sum approach to inclusion. LGBT+ issues can get overlooked in a rush to demonstrate attention to racial diversity. Over the years and decades, LGBT+ advocates have had to constantly beat the awareness drum, but allies and onlookers can feel exhausted or threatened by all the messaging about diversity and disengage – especially in light of stresses brought on by the pandemic.



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## Additional resources

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[LGBT+ Embassy Model](#)

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EYG no. 007391-20Gbl

BMC Agency

GA 1016573

ED None

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