

ON SECOND THOUGHT
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Private sector's pro-LGBT policies work wonders

Companies are taking the right steps against discrimination in the absence of local laws

A few weeks ago, I was invited to speak at the launch of HSBC Pride Network Asia-Pacific, an initiative to promote workplace equality for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) employees of the bank in the region.

It is heartening for me to see such programmes, not least because it is in line with the Equal Opportunities Commission's (EOC) core value of respecting people as human beings. Although there are signs that Hong Kong is becoming more tolerant on this front, stigma is still hurting many in the LGBT community.

Currently, there is no law in Hong Kong to specifically protect them against discrimination based on sexual orientation. In its absence, any effort by the private sector to push corporate culture towards greater inclusion of the LGBT community and drive social change is worthy of support.

Employers increasingly recognise that "don't ask, don't tell" policies have a negative effect in the workplace. When a company's culture is not inclusive to LGBT, employees' loyalty to the employer is weakened, as they may feel underappreciated and unfairly treated, leading them to look for friendlier places to work.

In Hong Kong, a recent study by Community Business, a non-governmental organisation, found that 85 per cent of LGBT employees say non-inclusive workplaces are impacting their well-being, productivity and engagement.

As diversity and inclusion principles gradually become the norm, news of discriminatory policies could also turn off potential customers, who would prefer to spend their money on a company more in line with their values. A 2010 survey by the advertising agency Leo Burnett found that the LGBT community in Hong Kong had higher-than-average spending power, and that 95 per cent of those surveyed would boycott all products and services of a company or brand that was discriminatory.

This preference for socially conscious consumption extends beyond the LGBT population, with the global trend for employment policy moving towards full

diversity and inclusion. In a 2012 global survey by research company Nielsen, two-thirds of respondents said they preferred to buy from companies who had made a positive social impact.

Indeed, the world is moving fast on this front towards equality and respect for individual dignity. In June last year, the UN Human Rights Commission passed its groundbreaking resolution condemning discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation and gender identity.

I recently received an invitation from the US consulate in Hong Kong to speak at their forum on LGBT issues, because respect for such rights has become a priority area for US foreign policy.

The EOC has been advocating for legislation to give equal protection against discrimination for the LGBT community. We are aware that the LGBT community faces both conscious and subconscious discrimination and stereotyping in the workplace, on school campuses, in the popular media and in their daily lives.

Given our experience over the past 15 years in implementing the anti-discrimination ordinances, the EOC has learned that legislation does indeed serve as a positive tool to correct long-standing prejudices and stereotypes, aside from its noticeable deterrent effect on those least receptive to public education efforts.

For those who suffer from discrimination, such legislation also gives them confidence to face the situation rather than withdraw.

In addition, a specific legislation would provide a tangible platform to demonstrate Hong Kong's collective will to respect diversity and, most importantly, to respect each other.

But more is needed. As an open city that holds respect for human rights as its core value, Hong Kong must practice what we preach and enable all people to lead a life of dignity, without hurtful stigma and discrimination. The private sector's backing and actions would be a positive and necessary step towards this goal.

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