



When is the Right Time to Bring Your Whole Self to Work?

How five professionals with different sexual orientations and gender identities dealt with their coming out and developed their careers.

By Claire Harbour and Antoine Tirard

With Diversity, Equality and Inclusion higher up on the agenda of most organizations these days, we wanted to explore the topic of the invisible difference of sexual orientation, preference and expression. Our particular focus was on discovering how and when those who come out in their professional lives choose to do so and how their difference might impact their career. A Harvard Business Review article in 2018 made the claim: “It’s becoming clear that when workers can bring their authentic selves to work, they are more productive and

engaged. Research shows that coming out increases job satisfaction, intention to stay, and emotional support from co-workers, whereas staying “in the closet” has costs — both for the individual and the company.” The selection of subjects we present to you in this article took their time before being fully out at work as the introspection, planning and courage required to do what they did was substantial. Let’s see what you can learn from their stories, and how this might help more workplace authenticity and openness.

Michel – The gay French organizational psychologist who found himself in the US

When Michel's photo appeared on the front cover of the New York Times, alongside his domestic partner Rob, he knew there would be no going back. His colleagues at the company, where he had started only four weeks previously, would no longer need to guess at his sexuality, or his marital status. The photo was the hard-earned result of years of campaigning for equal rights in immigration. Over the preceding years, he had revealed his preferences with varying openness, according to the context he found himself in, as well as the prevailing attitudes of the country and culture.

Growing up in rural France and sticking out as part of a multicultural, multilingual family, Michel was comfortable with his own early recognition of his sexual orientation. Yet he chose not to reveal this to anybody except his best friend in high school, until he went to university, in Paris. His parents “had always known” but did not learn officially of their son's preferences until he had met his then-future-husband, at the age of 20. Both aspired to have children and create a family, which, in the early 90's, was relatively unheard of. Their relationship took off fast, which motivated Michel to move to join Rob in the US, all the while continuing his studies in psychology.

While moving to the US, Michel had taken the conscious decision to be “completely out” on arrival, using the geographic shift as a catalyst. Working in New York City in the early 1990's was enjoyable and stimulating intellectually. Michel took on Human Resources and consulting jobs, while completing a PhD in Organizational Psychology at Columbia. During his internship at the Manhattan Borough President's office, he was fortunate to be supported by a progressive organization and leader, who encouraged his efforts to get involved in the NY Pride month, both personally and on behalf of the organization.

Michel frequently wondered what made him stand out more: his French accent or his sexual orientation? However, being by nature an open



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individual, he embraced and displayed both with confidence, and would no more have wished to switch his name to Michael than he would have feigned heterosexuality to avoid inconvenience. Authenticity has always been his choice, as has choosing companies, teams and clients, who suit his personality in every sense. Michel feels that his journey with identity has allowed him to be more intentional in all aspects of his life. As he says: “Being intentional about who I am, what I say and how I say it has been crucial to me, though possibly to the detriment of listening at times.” He contrasts this to “the comfort of the majority”, who don't need to explain or underline anything.

Role models have consistently inspired Michel both at work, where he learned from openly proud and powerful gay family men, both bosses and colleagues, and within his campaigning and advocacy work. Being a divorced parent of three children, Michel has been on a double journey, first of being relatively unusual in the gay community, and then actually finding himself more aligned on many fronts with the straight suburban parents he met at the school gate. But even in the less easy earlier years, when struggling to find his “tribe”, Michel has carved out a niche for himself.

In many ways Michel has found that being foreign has been just as helpful to his career advancement as his being gay; in the right

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context – multi-cultural projects and teams or Diversity and Inclusion projects – he can lean in with his individual characteristics. Despite this ability, there have been times when he was painfully aware of not having the same “in” to the in-crowd, because of not being a “white, male, straight golfer.” However, Michel is quick to add that this has not held him back nearly as much as it has for his female or/and black colleagues.

Michel’s advice to anyone contemplating coming out at work is simple and categorical: “Take the time to pause and ask yourself why you are not out today. What is keeping you in the closet? Then consider your purpose in life and how much more being out would amplify that purpose. How does being out or not contribute to or hinder that purpose? And if you are going to change, then plan it, and lean on your friends and network, just like you would do with any significant change in your life, in or outside of work.”

Steve and Joe – The long standing dual-career married couple riding choppy waters together

Steve and his husband Joe are both from traditionally “upstanding” catholic American families. Despite being aware of their orientations since middle school, they each dated women through high school and college. This was the early 80’s, when the AIDS crisis was at its height and there were few incentives to reveal themselves fully.

Steve met Joe while in graduate school at Boston University, having already begun experimenting with dating men, but never having been publicly out at work. He experienced a first brush with homophobia and discrimination when an angry managing partner at the law firm where he worked berated him for attempting to raise funds for an AIDS awareness march. Not surprisingly, he

was “let go” a few months later. Joe, who had just recently entered Steve's life, soon became a source of support and solidarity in this time, and Steve soon found the energy to continue his career, moving more into business and marketing, and away from the stuffiness of most law firms.

Joe, on the other hand, had started out his career in contrasting experiences, as a graduate trainee at Macy’s, and teaching. While it was tempting to be “out” in the retail industry, it was “absolutely inconceivable” in education and he remained discreet for years, only revealing his reality to close friends and selected peers. He spent the next few years in Corporate Training, at Bank of America, where he was out to colleagues but not management, and then at Deloitte. This was the point at which he took the plunge and asked for his relocation package for the new role to include “his partner”. He was delighted to find a warm, welcoming response to the news and to the challenge of moving the two of them to New York City.

Joe appreciated the inclusive environment at Deloitte, and he was able to become involved in various initiatives to enhance diversity and inclusion there. “I wanted to be out at Deloitte, because they made it easy, and they included Steve naturally in everything.”

In New York, Steve interviewed for a management role with the fashion brand Nautica. During the interview, he immediately sensed that his interviewer was gay himself, and he mentioned that he had “a partner” and used the masculine pronoun to talk about Joe, to create the connection and to drive the message home. This was the first time Steve was openly gay at work, though he occasionally felt a need to “tone down” if visiting a business partner in the deep South, where views were still lagging. Most of his colleagues were supportive, however and Joe’s inclusion in work socials raised only a few eyebrows. Things were changing societally, even if same-sex marriage was not yet a reality.

With society opening up in the early 2000's and following initial reservations and personal health challenges, the two got married on New Year's Eve 2006 in Massachusetts. The following year, Joe left Deloitte and moved to medical devices manufacturer Covidien (now Medtronic). He hinted at Steve's existence in the interview, and then sealed it by introducing him to a top leader of the company who "could not have cared less - in a good way!" At this stage in his career Joe was, once again, able to lay the foundations of a Diversity and Inclusion initiative at Covidien. This was against a background where a colleague's fiancée commented, "I've never met anyone gay before", to which Steve replied, kindly but firmly, "Oh yes, you have, but you just didn't know it."

There are endless anecdotes such as this, about which the pair seem to prefer to laugh, rather than to lament. These are what others have described as "death by a thousand cuts" or "microaggressions". One of these instances occurred more recently, when Joe had recently joined IBM, in a meeting with his newly-formed team. One woman, in introducing herself, proffered: "...and my husband's name is Steve." Joe's knee-jerk retort? "So is mine!" The woman's shock was followed by embarrassment, then confusion, laughter, and finally an apology. As Joe reflects, "After all, I don't lead with 'I'm gay'." Both groan over an observed tendency for people to assume that gay men are more promiscuous or "saucy" in general, with Steve still bothered by having been grabbed inappropriately by men years ago at drunken company parties.

It "definitely helps that they can ride the choppy waters together, not only in brushing off the hurts, but also by supporting each other practically". It has not been so long since gay couples could enjoy the right to share a healthcare policy, but now they know that this security is in place.

The couple reflects that they have been helped by the support of their families and friends as well as by societal changes. They see the 80's and the present time as "night and day". While it made sense to have taken their time to come

Six Recommendations for Coming Out at Work

1. Reflect carefully, and understand yourself, your needs and your context
2. Conduct a risk-benefit analysis of coming out at work
3. If you feel uncomfortable coming out in your current workplace, it's probably the wrong place for you
4. Take advantage of contextual changes if that makes it easier for you: change country, city, industry, company, team...
5. Decide how best to do it: don't rush if you don't want to and be comfortable with not everybody knowing at the same time, if that is easier, but if you do want to do it "in one shot" then plan it, and make it happen
6. Find ways to make your announcement "manageable" for the others, by avoiding imposing surprises

out, both underline that "for the most part as I came more out, things got so much better and I became more sure of myself". And Joe concluded "If you have found your true self and are comfortable with that, and you can express creativity or references to 'family' then you can bring your whole self to the workplace."

Laura – A gender transition which felt like jumping out of a plane without a parachute

Signs that Laura's assigned gender would not be right for her emerged relatively early on. Although the little boy of the time relished playing "dress-up" in the basement, she felt pressure from adults who firmly told her that she should dress as a devil at Halloween and not a witch. Relentlessly bullied at school and unable to fit in, she knew something was "amiss", but could not figure out what.

She started her career between New York and Paris, and began to experience the liberation of being less different than she felt "at home". While her work in banking and consulting fulfilled a cerebral "itch", she loathed the macho competitiveness, and experienced occasional comments about the "feminine tone of her memos". However, gender was not on the radar. As Laura says, "In France, I found the noise of gender got lost in the noise of culture. I could

“Nobody chooses this: it’s a bit like chemotherapy. You know you need it to save your life, but you pray you can survive it.”

dress elegantly without drawing attention, and I didn’t have to worry about body carriage issues like crossing my legs at the knee. I stopped paying attention to gender-based perceptions of how I should behave.”

After an MBA at INSEAD, while consulting in Russia, things became “a bit awkward, because in that culture, men were expected to be dominant, and to just ‘grab’ whatever they wanted.” Despite the difficulty of socializing in such an environment, she did meet her future wife. They moved in together, and eventually returned to the US and married.

Once back in the US, however, things started to feel “off”. The distracting urge to cross-dress, which had gone silent overseas, re-emerged. Adapting to a new job in the deeply “American” city of Boston produced reverse culture shock. She felt “burdened by the expectation that I should behave like the American man I thought I had escaped.” Late-night cross-dressing in secret at home, and more importantly, the inability to express herself authentically, were taking their toll. Eventually, her wife found the Ann Taylor suit collection, left a furious note and walked out. A vicious year-long divorce ensued, during which time she became interested in social justice and the law.

Laura made her first “confession” about gender during a counselling session. She describes being “curled up in a huge armchair wearing an expensive Zegna suit and Church’s shoes.” After a long awkward silence, she blurted out, “I think I have a gender issue” – and then totally broke down. Later, she came out to the woman she’d been dating; her confession was accepted reluctantly but sympathetically, with the elegant touch of a gift of makeup.

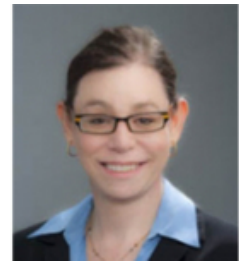
Through the internet, Laura began discovering support resources and found a service in New York where she could have a makeover and step out as a woman in public. When she saw her new reflection in the mirror,

she had the powerful sensation of seeing her true self for the first time. She learned there were clandestine communities of cross-dressers all over America. Connecting with an active chapter in Boston gave her an outlet to explore her identity, and she began to emerge as a leader in that community. Growing up, there had been no transgender role models “other than psychos in the movies”, so she had no clue anything could be done, but now she heard about women who had transitioned successfully and were living as their true selves.

Gaining admission to a top law school known for its pioneering racial inclusivity offered a safe environment to take a major step. She consulted with school officials to see “whether I can begin law school presenting as female”. When day one arrived, she put on her favorite Ann Taylor suit, strolled across the Boston Common and joined the Dean’s Reception. She hasn’t looked back since.

While law school provided a relatively safe space in which to transition, other social situations were more awkward. Coming out via email to her business school alumni community, where Laura had been president, was relatively easy. Re-appearing at events was more difficult. As she points out, she could not just appear at a conference after multiple appearance-changing surgeries and say, “Hello, remember me?”.

Physically and emotionally exhausted after her last surgery, Laura took some time out. She doubted her ability to “find a white-collar job ever again”. She began a new path, teaching English and tutoring students for GMAT tests, developing her expertise in business school admissions. After a brief corporate job in Singapore, cut short by the financial crisis, she got her coaching certification and launched a consulting business for



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international business school applicants, eventually emerging as a leader in her industry. “What I do today would have been impossible in my old gender” she says. “Authenticity is at the heart of what I do. Being confidently and authentically ‘who I am’ encourages my clients to discover and embrace their own stories in the same resonant way.” She feels free to put her empathy front and center in a way that never seemed possible in her old workplace.

Laura’s advice? “Get to know yourself, ignore the background noise and trust your instincts. That’s the only way to find a path that’s right for you.” She concedes that her transition felt like “jumping out of a plane without a parachute” and acknowledges that “nobody chooses this: it’s a bit like chemotherapy. You know you need it to save your life, but you pray you can survive it.” She knows companies where friends and other transgender people have gotten strong management support.

James – Finding the confidence to come out slowly and carefully as a cross-dresser in the workplace

As far back as he can remember, James has been interested in “clothing that belongs to women”. He is and always has been heterosexual as well as confident in his assigned gender, but his difference was evident to him from the outset. Having grown up in the 70’s and 80’s he would not have been comfortable with coming out or expressing himself sartorially then, and so the first time he actually found the courage and bought women’s clothes for himself was at university, and shared the pleasure with his girlfriend, in the privacy of their own space.

As times became increasingly tolerant, he reflected further on the difficulty of defining his own personal style and aesthetic. He was unable to express himself fully in public, and therefore deprived of the sort of reactions that most people use to inform their choices. That peer group feedback was not available to him while he was still hiding behind chinos and button-down shirts.

The first more public indication James gave of his predilection for feminine lines was when his



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sister, then a Paris-based fashion designer, created a skirt, and he asked her to make him one. After realizing he was serious, she not only made the piece, but encouraged him to continue to open up and to “be himself”. His revelation began in 2007, but slowly and carefully, and only among his social contacts; never at work. During this process, James was more anxious when he met someone new if he felt he was not authentic to his preferences. This was partly due to the fact that “my personality changes, because I am more flamboyant and stylized when I dress in women’s clothing... It takes a lot of work to get past a lifetime of peer pressure, whether perceived or real.”

Buoyed by increasing confidence in the times, James became bolder as his role transferred him to a new team at the head office of his company in Zurich city, in 2016. Initially he was “out” only socially, but he remained anxious: “what if my work colleagues were to bump into me when out one evening?” He would curtail or deny himself the pleasure of a work social life, so as to be able to maintain his balance, but it still felt risky, so he finally decided to “just get it out of the way”.

Initially, James had discussions with the HR

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and D&I teams, exploring what the reactions might be legally, culturally and practically. He made sure to take these conversations slowly, with the background of a new line manager sending strong messages about everybody in his team being “authentic and bringing their whole selves to work”. He wished to avoid surprises. All parties with whom he exchanged ideas were welcoming and encouraging. Finally he felt that the trust was in place to begin a plan to show up in women’s clothing. Discussions had happened to ensure he would not be breaching any codes or cultural expectations of “what was appropriate dress”, though he admits that his company, the leading insurer Zurich, took on that aspect with substantial trust, because he had not revealed whether he would show up as a glittery drag-queen, or in more subtle attire.

When he did eventually make a Monday morning appearance dressed as came naturally to him, there was not a single negative comment. The women applauded his style choices, and the men were generally congratulatory of his courage. He deliberately staggered the times he appeared dressed as he pleased, increasing the frequency gradually, until his manager told him to “just go for it”. Now James is open about his choices, even away from his home office, though he is always careful about where his preference might breach a law, such as in Saudi Arabia or Bali. The funniest reaction he had was in the US, where his feminine style was perfectly accepted, but he was asked to go out and find some skirts with a more “modest length” in order to fit in with the company’s local dress code. He was more than happy to oblige.

James’s career continues to develop apace, and his company has given him high visibility, as a way to encourage all employees to be more authentic. His opportunities to open dialogue have expanded, which he admits is largely due

to his unique approach and openness. He is heartened by the progress and the positive steps at Zurich, and appreciative that the company recognizes diversity and inclusion as not just important, but fundamental, noting that the company culture further helped him to embrace variety. While his coming out happened gradually, he likes to call it a “journey”, highlighting that change cannot happen overnight, but he is happy to contribute to the discussion, and to be shown as a positive example. He is also conscious that he has had the luxury of “choosing to express his diversity”, as opposed to those whose diversity is non-negotiable, whether that is ethnicity, those with different physical skills or whatever.”

His inspiration comes from a broad range of sources, from the position that the young Jaden Smith took on experimenting with gender expression, to Andrej Pejić, the Bosnian-Australian transgender model, whose success on both men’s and women’s runways impressed him. He also refers to Freddy Mercury and RuPaul as being “part of the small minority of eccentrics that society will tolerate if they are truly brilliant”.

Would he still have pursued the same career if he were starting out now? Perhaps not, but at the time, his attraction for the sciences was stronger than his desire to express his personality differently. And as for his advice to anyone coming out in the workplace: “If you are afraid to have a conversation with HR or D&I, then you are not ready to come out. Take the time to explore before rushing into a surprise you may later regret. And if you find that the reception you encounter is not supportive, then you may not be in the right culture for you. Even in a corporate environment, if you find the right company like I did, you will never have to feel unsure about being accepted and will be able to be who you truly are.” He also adds that “the biggest barrier was my own confidence, and I

Six Ways a Minority Sexual Identity May Benefit Your Leadership and Career

(Based on the work from Stevin Veenendaal "Out of the Closet, Into the Boardroom")

1. Your outsider status and bicultural perspective result in more creative and out-of-the-box approaches
2. Constantly assessing possible threats and dangers gives you a heightened emotional intelligence in business
3. Having experienced being in a minority first hand, you can actively promote diversity and inclusion in your company
4. A non-normative sexual orientation is giving you a greater determination and drive to prove yourself
5. Your awareness of what is considered 'masculine' or 'feminine' behavior influences, and at times changes, your leadership style
6. Life experience is teaching you that authentic leadership is key — personal façades are always bad for business

probably could have chosen to come out sooner.”

As we observe the warm, supportive environment in which James did his coming out, it is tempting to assume that this is the norm in 2020. But the other three stories and many others show us this is not quite a cut and dry case. While Diversity and Inclusion are an increasing and assumed part of “decent” companies, we know there is still a long way to go. We can only speculate on the “cost of concealment”. In no way would we wish to suggest that our own subjects have had “compromised” careers, but we do genuinely

hope that the cost of hiding one’s authentic self becomes smaller and smaller, with the upside that all will really be able to bring their “whole selves” to work. These stories reinforce our conviction that making it psychologically safe for LGBTQ+ professionals to be out of the closet at work should be a priority for companies striving to win the war for talent and retain their employees.

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