

Pronouns in the Workplace

Issues and policy tips for employers and managers



What are pronouns?

Pronouns are a basic part of language; they are words we use to refer to someone without using their names. Pronouns aren't just used by 2SLGBTQ+ people, they're used by everybody!

Why should workplaces care about pronouns?

- **Gender is a protected grounds for discrimination** under the Ontario Human Rights Code and the Canadian Human Rights Act, meaning that it is illegal to discriminate against someone on the basis of gender identity or expression. Not everyone uses binary pronouns (“he” or “she”), and organizations that systemically misgender employees with non-binary pronouns are discriminating on the basis of gender.
- **Using someone's correct pronouns is a matter of basic respect.** Not taking the time or putting in the effort to not misgender someone shows that you don't respect them.
- **Transgender and non-binary people are often discriminated against at work.** One 2015 study¹ found that 13% of trans people surveyed had been fired for being trans, and another 15% thought they might have been fired for being trans. Additionally, 17% declined jobs they had applied for and been offered because of lack of a trans-positive and inclusive work environment.

Starting points

1. Enable employees to specify their name and pronouns in their employee records and internal social channels

Changing your name is a complicated and expensive process, and there are many reasons – such as family – that someone may choose not to legally change their name. Empowering employees to update their records and internal profiles without having to consult a manager or HR officer enables employees who transition at work to do so without feeling that they need to ask for permission or approval to do so.



You may need to create a process for recording employees' chosen names and/or pronouns. Many existing systems used to keep employee records use binary only “he” / “she” pronouns by default, or do not allow for employees to have both a legal name and a separate chosen name.

2. Include pronouns in email signatures

Having all personnel include their pronouns in their email signatures gives trans and gender-variant people a low-pressure way to specify their pronouns without requiring them to feel put on the spot. This is especially important for employees transitioning at work; telling people about your new pronouns is stressful and anxiety-provoking, as it requires opening yourself up to possible harassment or ridicule.

Implementing pronouns in email signatures is done best when it is required for everyone, as it normalizes the practice of sharing one's pronouns for everyone. If cisgender people (people who are not trans) do not include their pronouns in their email signatures then the practice can become another way to stigmatize trans and gender-variant people.

3. Also look at recruitment and onboarding processes

Applicant tracking systems commonly require applicants to select between binary “he” or “she” pronouns, and often do not allow applicants to specify a chosen name that is separate from their legal name. If needed, change these processes to allow applicants to share that information. **Then make sure their chosen names and pronouns are respected during the onboarding process.**

Other implementation dos and don'ts

DO train and educate your employees about the change

The goal of implementing policies to respect chosen names and pronouns is to promote safety and inclusion for trans and gender-variant people; however, implementing these changes without first advising employees of the impending change or educating them about why it's important can be counter-productive to that goal. Make employees part of the conversation.

DON'T assume people's pronouns

For trans and gender-variant people, it is very painful being misgendered because someone has assumed your pronouns. So never assume someone's pronouns! **This is especially important for leadership.** Being misgendered at work presents the additional complication of forcing an employee to decide if they feel safe correcting someone.



DO have leadership model respectful behaviour

Creating a trans-inclusive culture means starting with leadership. Supervisors and managers should practice introducing themselves and others by providing their name and pronouns. For example: “My name is Yazmin Khan, and my pronouns are she/her”, or “This is Alex Grey, they’ll be leading our meeting today”.

DO normalize correcting and accepting corrections

When someone is misgendered, the pressure shouldn’t be on that employee to correct the person who got it wrong. Normalize quickly correcting people when they misgender someone to take the pressure off of trans employees. By the same token, also normalize accepting such corrections quickly and gracefully without dwelling or making a big deal out of an apology – which can often feel worse than being misgendered.

DON’T force employees to introduce their pronouns

While it is important to normalize sharing pronouns as part of introductions, please be sensitive to the fact that if there is only one transgender person in a meeting, it might feel awkward for them. It’s possible they might feel tokenized by the attention paid to pronouns. When working with people you know, the best practice would be for the supervisor to ask the transgender person how they would prefer to proceed in such circumstances.

Lastly, pronouns are never a preference

Trans peoples’ pronouns aren’t a “preference”. Their pronouns are their pronouns, and use of any other pronouns is disrespect. As such, don’t use the phrase “preferred pronouns”.

SPECTRUM offers a variety of workshops in 2SLGBTQ+ cultural competency that help organizations along the path towards becoming more welcoming and inclusive to 2SLGBTQ+ employees, clients, and other partners or stakeholders.

Interested? Get in touch: info@ourspectrum.com

¹ Dr. Greta R. Bauer, A. I. (2015). *Transgender People in Ontario, Canada: Statistics from the Trans PULSE Project to Inform Human Rights Policy*. Waterloo: TransPULSE. Retrieved from <http://transpulseproject.ca/wp-content/uploads/2015/06/Trans-PULSE-Statistics-Relevant-for-Human-Rights-Policy-June-2015.pdf>