

involve

**what can LGBT+ networks
and groups do to better
engage with lesbian, gay
and bisexual+ women?**

in

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about INvolve

INvolve is a global membership organisation and consultancy championing diversity and inclusion in businesses. Through the delivery of events, programmes, thought leadership and advisory services, INvolve helps firms drive cultural change and create inclusive workplaces where any individual can succeed. We also publish annual role model lists recognising and celebrating business leaders and future leaders who are breaking down barriers at work and inspiring the next generation of diverse talent

methodology & background

The main objective for this research revolved around identifying the barriers to the engagement of LB+ women in LGBT+ networks, and then providing recommendations on how to remove these obstacles.

INvolve used a mixed methods approach in this study. A survey was released, which captured over 500 responses. INvolve then built on this with in-depth interviews with LB+ women.

Throughout this report, direct quotes from LB+ women sharing their real life experiences have been used. These are in purple throughout.

In this research, the term 'LB+ Women' refers to anyone who identifies as a woman, and also identifies as Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Pansexual, Queer or Polysexual+.

where are the LB+ women?

In order for an LGBT+ Network to be as effective as possible, it is important that they embrace and cater to every group within the LGBT+ community. Even within a minority group, we need to amplify the less heard voices.

LB+ women are facing the dual burden of being LGBT+ and a woman. However, like any minority within a minority group, they face the cyclical and self-perpetuating problem of being an 'only' within their network.

Respondents in our research agree that there is a lack of engagement between LGBT+ Networks and LB+ women. Whilst 82% of LB+ women whose organisation has an LGBT+ Network are part of it, respondents reported that there is still very limited engagement:

'I definitely felt like there weren't a lot of women in the network when I first got involved. Now I'm not the only lesbian in the network, but the representation isn't where it should be.'

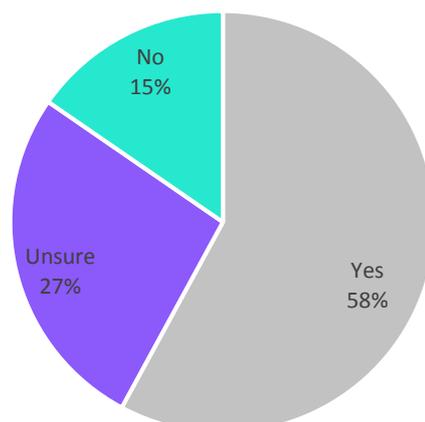
'I could take that role model that I needed from my gay brothers but it did feel like there weren't a lot of LB+ women engaged in the network at that point.'

34% of LB+ women stated that they left the organisation's LGBT+ Network because it was too male dominated. LB+ women who were interviewed by INvolve said that:

"There was a bit of an organic LGBT coffee group that was here when I first joined, but I was the only female in that group. The group was all men, all white, all gay, and then me. I thought, it's better to have this group than no group at all."

'The attendees [at the Network] were mas much more gay men and then female allies. That was the representation when I was there.'

We asked: Do you feel that an LGBT+ Network would benefit you?



Of LB+ women who work at an organisation without an LGBT+ network, 58% stated it would benefit them to have one.

It is important that LB+ women have a network they can connect with, represents them, and gives them the tools they need to excel.

why?

If we know that LB+ women would benefit from an LGBT+ network, why is there such a lack of engagement?

Previous research indicates that this could be part of a wider societal problem, and this is reflected by the opinions of our participants:

'Lesbian clubs are closing down, you don't see many of those any more. You don't have these spaces that we used to have. We don't have the engagement that we used to have.'

'It used to be great. There were libraries and drop in centres that were full of women and lesbian and bi women that came together and engaged and organised protests and did all of these great things. We don't do that anymore.'

If spaces no longer exist for LB+ women to engage with the rest of the LGBT+ community, LB+ women may feel a disconnect with the community, or unwelcome in LGBT+ spaces.

We asked LB+ women who are part of their workplace's LGBT+ Network why they wanted to initially engage within their LGBT+ network, and they stated their top reasons as:

- I'm passionate about LGBT+ rights (31%)
- I wanted to meet other LGBT+ people (24%)
- Access to resources/events (20%)
- Be part of Pride celebrations (13%).

We also asked LB+ women who are **not** part of their workplace's LGBT+ network why this is the case. The most common reasons for not being part of an organisation's LGBT+ Network were:

- I don't have time (27%)
- It's too male dominated (17%)
- Other (20%)

Among 'other', the 2 most popular self-expressed reasons were only recently being out, or not being out at all (25%), or location being restrictive (33%). The idea that location is restrictive was reflected throughout INvolve's interviews with LB+ women:

'Even here, in some of the offices that we have, it's harder for them when you are the only LGBT+ person in the office. Does that mean you don't need a network? I don't think so.'

Recommendation

Leverage the passion for a larger cause and networking. Make sure everything the network produces works towards LGBT+ rights, and that there are plenty of networking opportunities within this.

network objectives

Our research indicates that one of the key areas to consider when engaging LB+ women, or any minority group, in the LGBT+ network is clear objectives. Samantha, a gay woman who struggled to gel with her LGBT+ network, explained that:

'They didn't really have a clear goal- what I would get out of it. Really, the mission, or what they were out to achieve, it felt like more of a social club perhaps.'

25% of LB+ women agree that the LGBT+ Network does not have clear objectives. Some reasons for this could be that the network is sometimes seen as an exclusive social club, rather than a group to increase LGBT+ inclusion in the workplace.

'Perhaps there's a self-fulfilling prophecy that you've only got young men, who are given this budget to run a network, and the first thing that comes to mind is 'let's have drinks', and that perpetuates itself. It doesn't attract a new demographic to getting more meaningful things out of the ERG. That just goes on.'

'I don't want it to be a group of gay white men going to clubs in London. They go out, have a drink, but nothing gets accomplished. That kind of thing can happen, and what was happening, and we weren't getting a lot out of it or helping people.'

The objective of the network creating a more inclusive workplace is the most important:

'People have said 'this has really helped me', and that is really heart-warming. It means we have achieved what we've set out to achieve.'

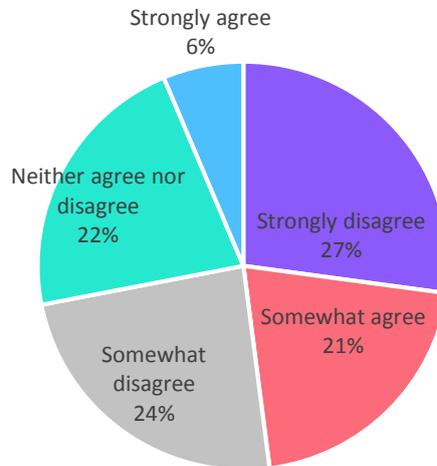
'I found the network really invaluable. People I can be myself with.'

Recommendation

Make sure events run by the network are inclusive, with clear objectives working towards a fairer workplace more inclusive of LGBT+ people.

Make sure that non-alcoholic beverages at all events, and a variety of locations are used if you leave the office.

We said: "I do not feel that the LGBT+ Network/ERG/BRG is visible to new joiners".



Visibility is key to an effective network. It enables the network to be seen by people who are not in particular social groups. So often, LGBT+ individuals feel isolated in at work. An LGBT+ network can serve as a beacon, so it is important that the beacon is visible.

27% of LB+ women either strongly agree or somewhat agree that the LGBT+ Network/ERG/BRG is not visible to new joiners.

'When you go on the HR website, there's a paragraph that says 'we're so welcoming of LGBT+' but the group itself needs to be visible - exposure is key. The knowledge that the group existed was missing. We didn't have the same traction.'

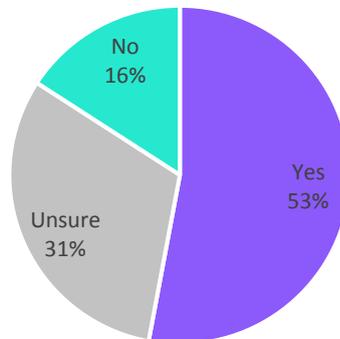
'We've got to get LB women in a room, get them together, get them to network, and do what cis white gay men have been doing for a while now. It's just needed- but they're hard to reach. How do you get in? How do you contact them and get into their events? Once you're in you've just got to keep on pulling them in.'

Recommendations

Make sure that your network is visible through social media, newsletters and posters. Make sure that all employees are made aware of the network upon joining.

Ensure that images of LB+ women are used in all outreach, or their positive stories from the network.

We asked: Are any of the senior roles in your LGBT+ Network/ERG/BRG held by LB+ women?



Although only 16% of respondents saying that senior roles in their LGBT+ network are not held by LB+ women is fairly positive, 31% saying that they are unsure highlights a large amount of uncertainty around who is leading. Strong leadership from the top is key to having clear objectives and goals.

Speaking on senior LB+ leadership in their organisation, many qualitative responses highlighted that this is lacking. A recurring theme in the qualitative responses is that in leadership positions there are cisgender gay men and cisgender female allies. There is a lack of engagement of LB+ women, and heterosexual trans women.

'It would be great to see more queer women in leadership positions in Pride Networks! I'm involved in other organisations' Pride networks and it seems I'm almost always interacting with gay men or straight female allies'.

'Probably, funnily enough, the generally come in pairs. It tends to be a man and a woman. The man is always a gay man, but there isn't always an LGBT+ woman. More often than not, the woman is an Ally. We always have a gay man raising their hand to do things, but with women that's not the case.'

'There were a lot of gay men, and a lot of bisexual men, and women allies, there weren't a lot of LB+ women. For a long time, I felt like I was the token lesbian'.

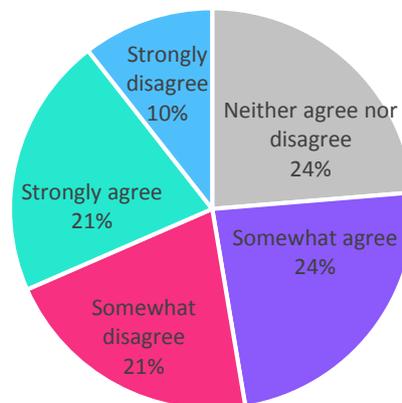
Recommendation

Have tenures for chairs and co-chairs, to ensure that leadership roles are changing and diverse.

pride

An topic which recurred throughout the research was that Pride Month, June, was where the LGBT+ network got the vast majority of its attention. However, so often this messaging wasn't representative of LB+ women. This lack of consistency is also concerning, as LGBT+ employees don't only exist at pride season.

We said: "There is only LGBT+ visibility in my organisation around Pride Month".



45% strongly agree or somewhat agree that 'there is only LGBT+ visibility in my organisation around Pride Month'.

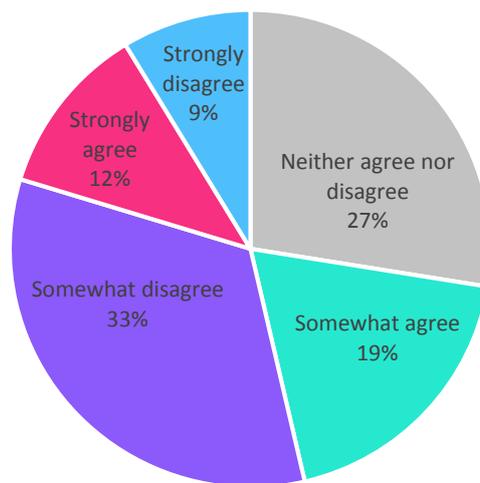
This demonstrates a huge issue within LGBT+ inclusion within organisations, something which was picked up by one of the LB+ women interviewed by INvolve:

'It's too easy now for people to say 'Pride Month is coming up, what we are going to do and how are we going to have those added on sales and get that extra money.''

If organisations want to show a genuine commitment to LGBT+ employees, LGBT+ visibility should happen all year. Only demonstrating this at Pride Season makes employees feel as if the organisation is doing it to 'keep up' with other organisations, rather than genuinely caring about LGBT+ rights. Additionally, only addressing LGBT+ issues at Pride Season doesn't feed into a larger, more inclusive culture.

55% of LB+ Women whose workplace doesn't have an LGBT+ Network says their organisation also doesn't celebrate pride, with 18% stating that it does but only slightly. Of those who said their organisation doesn't celebrate pride, 67% of LB+ women said that they would want it to.

We said: "Pride coverage is not visible in my organisation"



'There are distinct regional differences in ERG/Pride visibility across my current employers.'

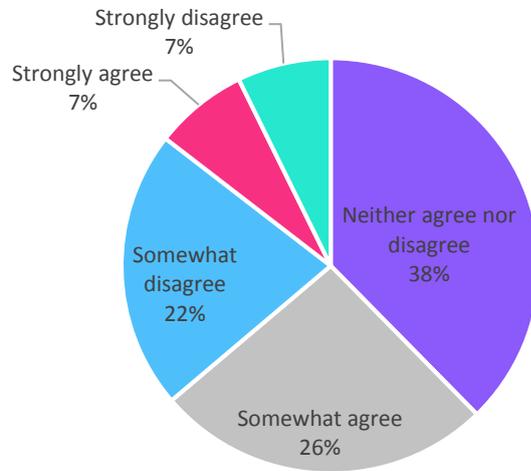
Dispersed populations within organisations can cause disparity in inclusion. It is important that Pride is celebrated to the same *extent* across all regions.

Recommendation

Make sure that your LGBT+ Network has coverage all year round, and not just around Pride Month. Although this date is important to the LGBT+ community, your LGBT+ community needs support throughout the year.

However, if your organisation is new in their inclusion journey with no LGBT+ network, Pride visibility in a great way to start.

We said: "The content my organisation produces for Pride benefits me."



29% disagree that the content their organisation produces for pride benefits them, whilst 33% agree the content their organisation produces for pride benefits them.

'A lot of organisations, when they're looking at the LGBT community are getting it wrong.'

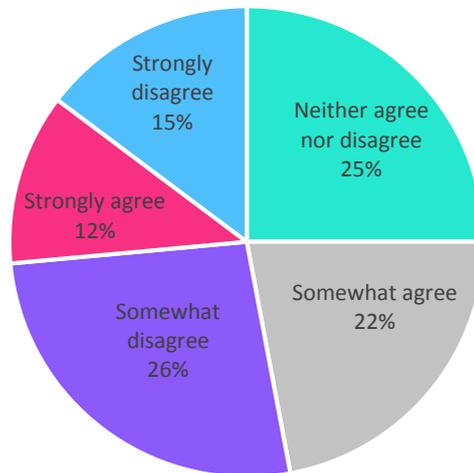
'I'd never gone to Pride because I'd seen the pictures and the videos, and it always appeared to be a load of guys in chaps, loads of alcohol, a big party, not my kind of scene. I'd never gone.'

'From the outside it comes across as something that's not inclusive for LGBT+ women. It felt very much like guys in leather outfits, lots of muscles, rainbow unicorn outfits and alcohol. It didn't feel like me or my people.'

Recommendation

Even if your organisation is too small for an LGBT+ network, or doesn't have the resources to do so, ensure that you still celebrate Pride wherever you can. Ensure that LB+ women are represented and included within these celebrations.

We said: "I feel represented by the organisation's Pride content"



'I'd never gone to Pride because I'd seen the pictures and the videos, and it always appeared to be a load of guys in chaps, loads of alcohol, a big party, not my kind of scene. I'd never gone.'

'From the outside it comes across as something that's not inclusive for LGBT+ women. It felt very much like guys in leather outfits, lots of muscles, rainbow unicorn outfits and alcohol. It didn't feel like me or my people.'

Whilst 45% of women we surveyed who are part of an LGBT+ network also said they are also part of a women's network, our research demonstrates that LB+ women are stuck between a rock and a hard place, where LGBT+ networks do not fully embrace LB+ women, but women's networks do not provide LGBT+ women with the tools they need to navigate the workplace.

The fact that such a significant percentage of women are part of both the LGBT+ network and women's network could imply that a lot of both networks are not intersectional. This is reflected by our qualitative findings, where women have said:

'In the Women's network, they're all talking about their heterosexual relationships and their children. That doesn't necessarily exclude anyone, but it's just not very aware of itself.'

Recommendations

Ensure that the LGBT+ Network and Women's Network liaise with each other to ensure content is intersectional.

¹within the LB+

Experiences of LB+ women vary widely. Grouping them together can be helpful for discovering trends within the group. However, it is key to understand that experiences will be different for lesbians, gay women, bisexual women, pansexual women, polysexual women, asexual women and more. Additionally, experiences of trans LB+ women and cisgender LB+ women differ, and so will the difficulties faced by LB+ women from an ethnic minority background.

Homogenising this group can over simplify complex issues, and erase identities. Therefore, within this research, splitting the responses up is key for uncovering specific issues.

A stark example of this is that 32% of bisexual respondents did not feel that all aspects of their identity are embraced by the LGBT+ Network/ERG/BRG, compared to 23% of gay women/lesbians.

This was reflected by bisexual women interviewed by INvolve, who said:

'I have had my bisexual identity questioned in my previous LGBT networks. People will ask me about it.'

'You find that coming out as bisexual in LGBT spaces, there becomes a certain stigma. I mean, I know an incredible amount of bisexual women, but it's other people's opinions that then stop those people from truly being out in the spaces that they're in.'

LGBT+ networks should champion the visibility of women who identify as bisexual, pansexual, asexual, polysexual and demisexual and more. This can be done by several methods:

- Ensure your LGBT+ content doesn't just revolve around starting conversations about the gender of your partner, or desired partner. Conversations around **identity** are more inclusive, and just as important.
- Encourage allyship within the LGBT community through your network.
- Share information/resources on queer visibility that isn't just related to being gay.

Further to this, 8% of gay women/lesbians say that they do not feel welcome at Pride Celebrations, compared to 11% of bisexual women and 25% of pansexual women.

As we discussed previously, Pride is not always the most welcoming to LB+ women. However, when we deconstruct this even further we can see that some LGBT+ women are included more than others.

¹ It should be noted that there are other categories which will affect the engagement of LB+ women which have not been included in this research. For example, neurodiversity, disability and mental health experiences will all effect the experiences of LB+ women in networks.

'I would say that I've never been to Pride with my partner, which is a semi-conscious decision. In that he feels uncomfortable being there because he's worried he makes me look like a straight person. Because it's such an expression of my identity he doesn't want any comments to be thrown at me because we appear straight.'

'Some people in my B network here, they've had it said to them. People who think straight is commercial for allies, I worry that they would think it's the case.'

'Pride is a huge beacon where people can see that they're not alone. Even if it's only one day a year, people can go and see that they're not alone'

- 46% of bisexual women agree they feel represented in the LGBT+ Network.
- 74% of Lesbian/Gay Women agree that they feel represented in the LGBT+ Network
- 48% of pansexual women agree they feel represented in the LGBT+ Network

'Bi visibility was overlooked quite a bit. It was often overlooked as being the same as the L and G experience, and it was all swept up in that one experience. I think the difficulties that I've had, and it's taken a while to explain why visibility is important.'

'I feel like if you are the L or G it's really straight forwards. But then as you start to delve into bi visibility, that's been an issue for a while. Perhaps you might ask yourself: what am I going to get from this? The ERG itself is welcoming, it's just for the people to see what's in it for them. What is the value proposition of me being in an ERG?'

'I found that a lot of the content was either L, G related, just because those are the most accessible, it hits on transphobia and homophobia, but I have to push quite hard to get the bi put in as well.'

Recommendation

It is important the LGBT+ network represents identities that fall into the '+' of LGBT+, and delves into the nuances between identities.

'When I look around the room, our LGBT network is only white. The network isn't sure how to engage with the BAME community. Maybe they could add the brown and black stripe to the LGBT flag.'

LB+ women attending LGBT+ networks may already feel like they are a minority as one of the only women in the room. When you take into consideration that they may then be the only LB+ BAME woman in the room, they would then feel even more isolated and excluded. Additionally, the content produced is even less likely to benefit them.

9pp more respondents from an ethnic minority background than white LB+ respondents either somewhat or strongly agree that they do not feel all aspects of their identity are embraced by the LGBT+ Network/ERG/BRG.

'The whole patriarchal BAME representation plays out within the LGBT world as well. It's not something we can hide from, just because we're our own little minority.'

There is a slight difference between the number of white LB+ respondents and LB+ respondents from an ethnic minority background who feel welcome at Pride: 2pp.

'That's really disappointing because there a lot of people with a lot of platforms within the LGBT community who more specifically in terms of privilege In wealth in terms of the G, and if the G really came and stood up for women, women of colour, trans and non-binary, we'd be a lot further along in our community than we are.'

Recommendations

Start conversations between ethnic minority networks and LGBT+ networks to create engaging, intersectional content. Additionally, ensure that your events aren't excluding individuals who don't drink.

39% of women who identify as trans agree that not all aspects of their identity are embraced by the LGBT+ Network, compared to 27% of respondents who do not identify as trans.

'There are a lot of people with a lot of platforms within LGBT who more specifically in terms of privilege in terms of the G, and if the G really came out and stood up for women, women of colour, T and non-binary, we'd be a lot further along in our community than we currently are.'

'As LGBT people, we are awful at supporting each other. We are going through situations now where we are at war with certain parts of the wider community don't believe we have the right to exist.'

'At the moment, we are mostly men. We have some women...not a lot. We don't have any trans*, queer or non-binary. We might do...we just don't know'.

Recommendations

Cater your events to address the intersectional aspects of LGBT+. For example, understand that women and men can be LGB+ and Trans. Do not assume that just because someone is trans that they should only engage with the trans topics.

Make it clear within your network that intolerance and transphobia is not tolerated under any circumstances, even from those within the LGBT+ community.

key findings

- 34% of LB+ women who left their organisation's LGBT+ network stated that they did so because it was too male dominated.
- 45% of LB+ Women 'strongly agree' or 'somewhat agree' that there is only LGBT+ visibility in their organisation around Pride Month.
- 32% of bisexual women did not feel that all aspects of their identity are embraced by their LGBT+ Network/ERG/BRG, compared to 23% gay women/lesbians.
- 8% of gay women/lesbians state that they do not feel welcome at Pride Celebrations, compared to 25% of pansexual women.
- 74% of lesbians agree they feel represented in their LGBT+ network, compared to 46% of bisexual women.

key recommendations

- Make sure that your LGBT+ Network has coverage all year round, and not just around Pride Month. Although this date is important to the LGBT+ community, your workplace's LB+ community needs support throughout the year.
- It is important the LGBT+ network represents identities that fall into the '+' of LGBT+, and delves into the nuances between identities.
- Make sure that your network is visible to LB+ women through social media, newsletters and posters. Make sure that all employees are made aware of the network upon joining.
- Make sure events run by the network are inclusive of LB+ women, with clear objectives working towards a fairer workplace more inclusive of LGBT+ people.