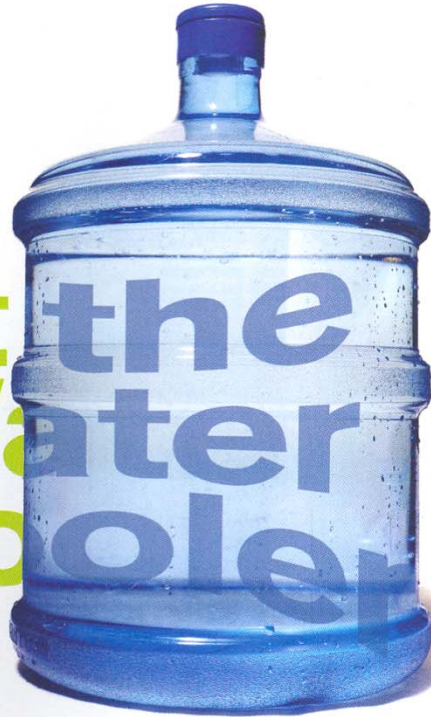


# At the Water Cooler



By Deena Fidas

The trend from corporate America is clear: Private businesses have led the way in extending fair policies and benefits to lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender workers.

But what is less clear is if beyond the policies, the actual work environment for LGBT people has become more inclusive. Are LGBT employees able to work comfortably and be productive, without having to hide who they are at work? And are employers reaping the rewards of implementing inclusive policies – attracting and retaining LGBT employees?

To answer these questions, the Human Rights Campaign Foundation conducted a groundbreaking study on the experiences of LGBT people across the country. It carried out the largest-ever national poll of LGBT employees, held a number of in-depth interviews and organized more than a dozen focus groups with a wide range of participants (including LGBT union

workers, LGBT African-American workers, transgender workers and more).

Here's what it found: Despite the prevalence of inclusive policies, just over half of the LGBT workers surveyed hide themselves at work. They are "out" or open to just a few people or to no one at all, they said. (See *graph, p. 29*) Continually dodging simple questions like "What did you do over the weekend?" takes a substantial toll on LGBT workers' ability to forge strong working relationships.

Closeted workers may appear anti-social or, worse, thought of as untrustworthy

when they hesitate at work to answer basic questions about their social lives. In the national poll, 90 percent of LGBT workers say social lives come up at least once a week with their co-workers and 79 percent say spouses or relationships are discussed with the same frequency.

For those LGBT employees who answer honestly that, for example, they saw a movie with their partner, the reception from co-workers can be chilly – participants in the research describe looks of surprise or conversations ending abruptly when they talk about their partners or families in the same way their non-LGBT co-workers talk about their lives outside of work.

Participants mention break-room conversations that include discussing LGBT people or specific comments about the sexual orientation of public figures. Events like Ellen DeGeneres getting married and press around the movie *Brokeback Mountain* become water-cooler topics.

These conversations, particularly among closeted LGBT employees, can be uncom-

## Most LGBT Employees Still Hide Themselves at Work, New HRC Foundation Study Finds

fortable and sometimes become outright hostile. Nearly half of LGBT employees (48 percent) say at least once in a while they hear people at work expressing negative views of a news story related to LGBT issues. LGBT workers also report that jokes about LGBT people (cited by 61 percent of poll respondents) happen at least once in a while.

A significant portion of those polled reported problems, in the past year, of working in an environment that is not always accepting of LGBT people. More than 40 percent of the respondents said they have had to lie

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Reality Check, cont'd from page 21

**CONVENTIONAL WISDOM:** "The president is committed to diversity on the court."

**YES.** President Obama has made diversity a core component of his administration. The diversity he has sought within his Cabinet and other vital administration positions underscores his commitment.

**CONVENTIONAL WISDOM:** "Once we have another LGBT-supportive justice on the court, change will occur quickly."

**NO.** The judicial system rarely moves rapidly; cases can take years to make their way up to the U.S. Supreme Court. More importantly, we are often discussing relative support on LGBT civil rights. A justice who voted to overturn sodomy laws in *Lawrence v. Texas* might not be willing to support marriage equality or end the military's "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" policy, at

least until there has been more activity in the state courts and legislatures.

**CONVENTIONAL WISDOM:** "The next Supreme Court justice is the make-it-or-break-it decision."

**YES AND NO.** The U.S. Supreme Court matters. A great deal. This can't be understated. But it isn't the only game in town. President Obama will have the opportunity to nominate more than 60 lower federal court judges in the next year or two. These nominations matter enormously, too. Circuit court decisions can stand for years, if not permanently.

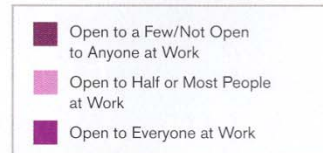
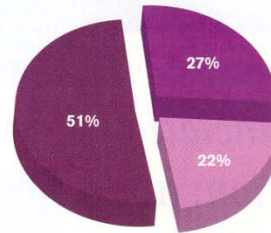
*Warbelow, an attorney, is a fellow with HRC's Justice for All, a project funded by the Open Society Institute which explores the relationship between the federal courts and civil rights.*

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to co-workers about their personal lives; 34 percent said they have felt unhappy or depressed. Nearly 30 percent said they've "avoided certain people at work."

As a result, employers may be losing the full participation of their LGBT employees and experiencing some loss of productivity for both the individual and the wider organization. Further, there are indications that retention may suffer as well. In the national poll, more than 20 percent of the respondents said they have searched for a new job in the last year because of the uncomfortable working environment. The inability to participate honestly in "everyday" conversations greatly hinders LGBT workers' cultivation of trust and cohesion with co-workers — in boardrooms or on factory floors. This directly affects employees' ability to be productive, work well together and advance within an organization.

And it hurts companies themselves, especially as they try to stay afloat in these dire economic times. Having cohesive, productive working teams is a top priority.



Later this year, the HRC Foundation will release a number of resources to help equip managers and employees with inclusive language and training tools to sensitize them to the effects of an uncomfortable workplace.

It's one more vital step in creating a more inclusive workplace. 

*Fidas is the manager of the HRC Foundation's Workplace Project.*