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## Change is rapid on sexual diversity

But some say there is still a long way to go before discrimination will die out. Maxine Boersma reports

hen Lord Browne left his role as BP chief execu-tive, amid rumours about his sexuality, be said it business?

The remark was made in 2007. But is the workplace of 2012 any more gay

friendly?
Attitudes do seem to be changing in the corporate world, with 88 per cent of Fortune 560 firms now banning discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation. In the UK, leading companies are included among the 2012. Workplace Equality Index of Britain's most gay friendly employers produced by Stonewall, the campaigning organisation.

sation. There is a legal imperative too the 2010 Equality Act brought existing equalities legislation together and introduced "the public sector equality duty", requiring public bodies to deal with inequalities experienced by staff

According to Colleen Humphrey, Stonewall's director of workplace diversity: "It's hard to believe but 10

years ago it was perfectly legal for an employer to dismiss gay staff just because of their sexual orientation. That only changed in 2003, when stonewall helped secure protection for gay people in law.

"Stonewall later established the Diversity Champions programme—Britain's employers' forum on sexual orientation. We know from working with more than 600 diversity champions in every sector that people perform better when they can be themselves. Today, a fifth of the UK's workforce is employed by diversity champions.

However, recent comments by Lord Browne neveal there is still much more to be done for business to accommodate the needs of Britain's 1.7m leabian, gay and bisexual employees. Speaking at the launch of a lesbian and gay, bisexual and transgender network set up by Arup, he said business is still less tolerant than other areas of life and called for "concrete targets" to measure progress.

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Plymouth Business School, and pub-lished by Bloomsbury Academic. It reveals how lesbian, gay and bisexual employees are much more likely to



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'Diversity champions fill report ill-treatment, particularly from managers.

They experience humiliation, intimidation and hints that they should quit. In the largest study of its kind, LGBT employees were shown to be 12 times more likely than straight colleagues to be given hints to leave and four times more likely to be threatened. Gay or bisexual employees were also five times more likely to report violence at work compared with heteroexual colleagues, and the figures show an escalating pattern of ill treatment. me with dread. If I knew a company was not gay friendly I probably wouldn't go and work there'

Lord Browne leaves his office for the last time after resigning as BP chief executive in 2007: have things changed since then?

"I speak personally as a lesbian," says Ms Bingham. "The acceleration in my personal development has been striking since coming out. I have a responsibility to model this in the

striking stince coming out. I have a responsibility to model this in the business, creating an environment where everyone can succeed.

"There's a powerful business case for getting it right Authenticity is very important, whether dealing with clients or leading teams; they want to see a leader they can trust. We are also increasingly asked to demonstrate our diversity credentials, especially in the US."

Top of the Stonewall Index, Krnst & Young can now measure the business case after conducting global research around the correlation of employee engagement and the performance of business units. There was a clear link between those businesses with high engagement scores and the best profitability.

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Law firm Simmons & Simmons LLP was another award winner. Partner David Stone is co-chair of the firm's LGBT network. He agrees being gay friendly is a social and business imperative, with bends and financial institutions especially keen to see this in suppliers. Good practice helps attract the best lawyers and support staff – and retain them.

Fostering a more gay friendly environment means having chief executive or board level accountability for policy and linking the equality and diversity strategy to the company's aims and values. Policies should be audited to ensure they take lesbian, gay and bisexual factors into account and incidents must be monitored.

Having gay staff as visible role models and senior lead champions also helps – as does engaging "straight with

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Having gay stan as visuole rote mon-els and senior lead champions also helps — as does engaging "straight allies" to support equality, often with "reverse mentoring" programmes, which can see junior staff coaching more senior colleagues. Cay networks also offer a social and business function and help gauge reaction to policy. Education work-shops and engagement programmes with clients are also effective as is involving gay partners. Companies must offer guidance on challenging homophobic behaviour. Staff need to be supported globally, too: as being gay is illegal in more than 70 countries, and with different legislative frameworks abroad, post-ings overseas need careful manage-ment.

effort of self-censoring their behaviour was draining.
Critically, companies failing to foster a comfortable environment for gay staff, are missing out. Liz Bingham, managing partner for people at Ernst & Young, observes that in the past seven years, the diversity agenda has moved from a "ince to do" space into "hard edged business rationale".

She says "Due to the current economic environment, the only way firms can grow is to increase market share so you need the best people—the most talented beterosexual and gay employees alike will be deterred by an environment in which staff can't truly be themselves. And fishing in a narrow pool of straight white means you limit the chance to bring in amazing talent.

IBM is another company that prides

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## Rapid change on sexual diversity

itself on its record of diversity. In 1997, it provided full domestic benefits to lesbians and gays. Fred Balboni, IBM's global leader for business analytics and optimisation, stresses that diversity is "deep in the DNA of IBM

diversity is "deep in the DNA of IBM because it creates innovation".

He says: "Populations of the world are very diverse so it is important to stay close to our clients, to look and act like them. LGBT is a subset of a broader diversity agenda as it creates innovation. It's also good for social justice, so right for our people."

IBM's "Fagle" – employee network groups in the local community – started in the US about 15, years ago and now operate in 25 countries. The company's "About You" indicator enables employees to identify them-

selves formally as LGBT workers. This then enables HR staff to track equal pay and caréer advancement. Dianah Worman, diversity adviser at the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development, reminds employers that once staff are "out" they cannot go back. Employers can raise expectations for gay staff but people will grow disillusioned if nothing is dolluvered.

ing is delivered.

She thinks champions and other inishe thinks champions and other initiatives work well but personal responsibility must also be cultivated and line managers equipped to look at the issues in a broader context. Rigid cultures of any kind can be daunting so people need both to feel respected and respect their colleagues. Stonewall's Diversity Champions programme offers specialist resources for organisations seeking to become

an employer of choice for LGB talent. A starting point is asking staff what they want – for example via anonymous surveys – building in a question on sexual orientation.

But for some employees, gay friendly policies cannot mask the fact that problems remain. According to one senior media professional: "The idea of a diversity champion fills me with dread. If I knew that a company was not gay friendly then I probably wouldn't go and work there – not because I would be concerned that people wouldn't respect me, but because I wouldn't respect me, but because I wouldn't want to work somewhere that doesn't display the kind of tolerance and equality that I believe should run through all of society. I recognise that it doesn't, but it is up to me to make my own choices and stand up for myself."



