

# TRANSGENDER & NON BINARY TALENT

White Paper

*“Why is it so hard to  
recruit and retain  
transgender talent?”*

*...and why you need to.”*



INCLUSION  
CROWD

Professor Lisa McClain Ph.D.

# Foreward

This paper, **Why Is It So Hard to Recruit and Retain Transgender Talent? And Why You Need To**, shines a spotlight on one of the most pressing issues in equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI): the systemic inequities faced by transgender and nonbinary talent.



"I find Professor McClain's work both groundbreaking and profoundly inspiring. Her ability to weave data, personal narratives, and actionable insights into a compelling call for action is a testament to her expertise and passion for fostering meaningful change"

Ed Jervis, CEO, Inclusion Crowd

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While Professor McClain's paper primarily focuses on the challenges faced by transgender and nonbinary talent in the U.S., its meticulous research and in-depth analysis make it universally relevant. The systemic barriers, biases, and opportunities for transformation she highlights resonate across borders and industries.

This piece provides a blueprint for organisations worldwide to examine their practices, confront implicit biases, and create truly inclusive environments. Its applicability transcends geographic boundaries, offering valuable insights for any territory seeking to harness the potential of a diverse and equitable workforce.

# Introducing the author..



**Dr. Lisa McClain.**  
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Dr. Lisa McClain is a Professor of History and Gender Studies at Boise State University, where she has been a faculty member since 2001. She specializes in the history of religion and the intersections of gender, religion, and popular culture. Dr. McClain earned her Ph.D., M.A., and B.A. from the University of Texas.

Her scholarly contributions include the books *Divided Loyalties? Pushing the Boundaries of Gender and Lay Roles in the Catholic Church 1534-1829* (Palgrave MacMillan, 2018) and *Lest We Be Damned: Practical Innovation and Lived Experience among Catholics in Protestant England 1559-1642* (Routledge, 2004). She has also authored chapters in *A Companion to Catholicism and Recusancy in Britain and Ireland: From Reformation to Emancipation* (Brill, 2022) and *Women during the English Reformations: Renegotiating Gender and Religious Identity* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2014). Her articles have appeared in journals such as *Church History*, *Sixteenth Century Journal*, *Catholic Historical Review*, *Journal of Religious History*, and *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature*.

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Dr. McClain serves as an expert on gender as part of the Inclusion Crowd, and our international Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) Think Tank.

She has written public history articles on the intersections of religion, gender, and sexualities for *The Conversation*, reaching a broad audience. Her recent work includes research and collecting oral histories of LGBTQ+ people in Idaho and the U.S. Intermountain West from a variety of intersectional identities. The oral histories are being archived in the Special Collections and Archives at Boise State University in the "Idaho LGBTQ+ Oral History Project (ILOHP), part II" Collection. This research is supported by grants from the Osher Institute and the Institute for Advancing American Values.

Dr. McClain served as Director of Gender Studies at Boise State from 2002 to 2011, during which time the program received the Emerging Center Award from the National Council for Research on Women in 2010. She has been recognized as an Idaho Woman of the Year, an Idaho Woman Making History, and a Les Bois Awards finalist. In 2019, she received the Faculty Excellence Award from the College of Arts & Sciences, and in 2022, she was named the honored faculty member by a Boise State Top Ten Scholar.

Dr. McClain is married and has a daughter and a son. She enjoys outdoor activities such as swimming, hiking, snowshoeing, tennis, and racquetball, as well as reading and cooking. In 2006, she became a one-day Jeopardy! champion.



# "Why is it so hard to recruit and retain Transgender talent? And why you need to"

## 1. A PERSONAL LENS ON WORKPLACE BIAS

Chase Strangio, an attorney whose self-described gender expression transcends the binary of maleness and femaleness, learned after he was hired that, during the recruitment process, some interviewers expressed concern that a judge would not take Strangio seriously or that he would likely be unable to thrive in their work environment because of his non-traditional gendered appearance.<sup>1</sup>

The irony is Strangio was interviewing for a position at the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), where he now serves as Co-Director for Transgender Justice and attorney with the organization's LGBT and HIV Project, litigating trans rights cases across the U.S. Strangio advises companies that they can benefit by maximizing employee capacity and potential to do their best work by becoming more inclusive of the needs of their transgender and gender nonbinary employees. This would in turn create "spaces that are not just more inclusive but more transformative" for all employees and the future of organizations.<sup>2</sup>

Several interlocking trends indicate the need for employers to be proactive about addressing the needs of transgender and nonbinary employees in an evolving workplace. When McKinsey & Company asked current and former CEOs about their priorities in leading their organizations in 2023, one third identified the "War for Talent" as a key issue.<sup>3</sup> McKinsey also emphasizes a clear need to "engage a new generation of workers."<sup>4</sup> Many senior- and middle-managers recognize that this new generation of talent is often found in workers from historically underrepresented groups. As one manager who participated in a recent study on leadership on DE&I issues commented, "Many of our best hires are people who were overlooked elsewhere. It's great for them, for us, and it also helps us build bridges to our clients." David Chun, CEO of Equilar, commented that, "Leaders who aren't moving forward [on DE&I issues] are being left behind."<sup>5</sup>

## 2. THE GENERATIONAL SHIFT IN GENDER IDENTITY

This new generation of talent, however, is much more likely to identify as transgender or gender nonbinary than previous generations. As NBC News reported in 2017, millennials (ages 18-34) are moving away from identifying within strict, traditional gender binaries such as “man/woman”, with 12 percent of millennials identifying as either transgender or gender-nonconforming, twice the percentage of Gen Xers (ages 35-53) who do.<sup>6</sup> Those percentages are likely growing with Generation Z, and this trend is not confined to the United States.<sup>7</sup>

A 2021 survey of respondents in 27 countries by Ipsos found that approximately 4% of Gen Z-ers across the globe currently identify as transgender, nonbinary, gender-nonconforming or gender-fluid, with countries like Sweden, Argentina, and Germany having the highest percentages.<sup>8</sup> This percentage is likely to rise as Gen Z-ers age. “The patterns that we see in the U.S. are definitely not unique to the U.S.,” Nicolas Boyon, senior vice president of public affairs at Ipsos, said of the higher rate of gender and sexual fluidity among Gen Z. “It’s a global phenomenon.”<sup>9</sup> In censuses and surveys, governments in places such as England, India, Canada, and Pakistan are offering more options to identify one’s gender beyond the usual check boxes of “male” and “female.”<sup>10</sup>

## 3. WORKPLACE BARRIERS AND CHALLENGES

Major employers, however, do not yet appear to be taking this proactive view when it comes to creating and maintaining inclusive workplaces for transgender and gender nonbinary talent. McKinsey admits that despite a “growing business case for inclusion,” LGBTQ+ have yet to see solid gains in their workplaces, and this is especially true for transgender employees.<sup>11</sup> On one hand, major corporations have taken public stands to protect LGBTQ+ rights in the workplace, such as when 206 corporations signed an amicus brief to the US Supreme Court in support of their LGBTQ+ workers.<sup>12</sup>

On the other hand, these significant attempts at ally-hood have not yet resulted in inclusive workspaces or improved recruitment and retention of transgender and nonbinary employees. The United States Transgender Survey (USTS), the largest survey done examining the experience of transgender people in the United States, found that 27% of those respondents who held or applied for a job during the survey year reported being fired, denied a promotion, or not being hired for a job they applied for because of their gender identity or expression.<sup>13</sup> Transgender people were 3 times more likely to be unemployed compared to nontransgender, or cisgender, people. Obstacles were greater for transgender people who are also Black, Indigenous or People of Color (BIPoC) or who have a disability.<sup>14</sup>

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McKinsey details how employees who identified as transgender in their research are much more likely than cisgender people of similar age to be in entry-level positions and less likely to engage in management, evaluation, or hiring.<sup>15</sup> In all likelihood, they are “onlys,” the only employee identifying as trans or nonbinary in their work environment, which carries increased risk of microaggressions, such as sexist or demeaning jokes. “Onlys” are also less likely to feel comfortable bringing their full selves to work.<sup>16</sup> According to focus groups conducted by Pew Research, “Work is one realm where many participants said they choose not to share that they are trans or nonbinary. In some cases, this is because they want to be recognized for their work rather than the fact that they are trans or nonbinary; in others, especially for nonbinary participants, they fear it will be perceived as unprofessional.”<sup>17</sup>

### **Retention and Attrition in the Workplace**

Retention is also an issue. McKinsey reported that transgender employees are much more likely to consider leaving their company than cisgendered workers (32 % vs 21%, respectively). Moreover, 18% of transgender employees report expectations of staying with their current employer for less than a year, compared with only 8% of cisgender employees.<sup>18</sup> Could your organization be unintentionally failing to retain talented workers or discouraging applications from people of certain genders, such the 12% of young talent that does not identify according to the traditional male/female binary? Based on the long-standing history and evidence about gender inequality, we have to assume it is happening or could, and take steps proactively to address this talent drain.



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## 4. DATA GAPS AND MISUNDERSTANDINGS

A major challenge is that most employers do not yet have the information they need to address DE&I issues for their transgender and nonbinary workers. Data on employees who identify as transgender or gender nonbinary is rarely collected. Dr. Felice Klein, an associate professor in the Department of Management at Boise State University who specializes in gender, compensation and inequality in the workplace, reflected that the majority of data sources contain no gender categories beyond “male” and “female.”<sup>19</sup> As McKinsey admits, “Due to limited data availability regarding nonbinary employees, LGBTQ+ figures are only provided for employees who identify as men or women.”<sup>20</sup>

Gender identity has been lumped in with a variety of other identities under the LGBTQ+ umbrella, generally as the “T”, for transgender. The term transgender itself cannot encompass diverse gender identities such as gender nonbinary, gender queer, gender non-conforming, and others.<sup>21</sup> For example, although the Pew Research Center estimates that approx. 1.6% of the US population openly identifies as transgender, the Williams Institute at the UCLA School of Law reports that 11.1% of LGBTQ adults aged 18-60 identify as nonbinary and 32.1% of the transgender population identifies as nonbinary.<sup>22</sup> As our understandings about the diversity of gender have become more nuanced in the last two decades, it has become clear that people who are gender diverse do not have the same experiences or needs as people of minority sexual orientations. This is especially true in the workplace.<sup>23</sup> Many previous attempts to gather data on LGBTQ+ employees have missed these distinctions or simply focused on the experiences of one community on the LGBTQ+ spectrum, such as gay male employees.<sup>24</sup>



## 5. CASE STUDIES AND ORGANIZATIONAL PROGRESS

The good news is that major companies such as Microsoft have begun collecting such data, expanding employees' options to self-identify their gender beyond the usual male/female boxes. Klein surmises this is because we are having a larger public discussion about gender identity.<sup>25</sup> Within the last two years, Microsoft employees in 28 countries around the globe have had the choice to identify their gender identity beyond the usual gender binary. As Sarah Bender, an ERG (Employee Resource Group) & Community Experiences Team Lead for Global Diversity and Inclusion for the company commented, "A focus on trans and nonbinary people is a necessity because our communities are at the center of critical attempts to limit human rights across the US and the globe. Nonbinary people are also too often pushed to the side because of a limited and binary understanding of gender. A small but important part of this work is feeling seen through the available self-identification options."<sup>26</sup>

Moreover, insights from broader DE&I research provide clues that may be useful in overcoming the barriers to workplace inclusivity, recruitment, and retention of transgender and nonbinary workers. PrismWork, for example, published the results of a W.K. Kellogg Foundation-funded study into DE&I issues in March 2023. Findings suggest many company leaders, the clear majority of whom are men, have good intentions, but there is a gap between "aspiration and action." Leaders find themselves "frozen between their good intentions and their day-to-day realities," when it comes to transforming the workplace to recruit and retain employees of diverse identities.

Three-quarters of the study's thousands of participants from a variety of fields—all male, mostly senior or middle managers—agreed that they believed "diverse teams produce better business outcomes," and two-thirds had actually participated in their organization's DE&I initiatives. Others, however, were unsure if it was appropriate for them, as privileged white men, to participate. Less than 1/3 had actually "hired, mentored, or sponsored a white woman or person of color." While these managers recognized the importance of "getting informed" on these issues, only 4 out of 10 had done so. Interviewees evinced frustration but also a clear desire to be more inclusive but said they did not know how to be. "It's hard to know what to do." "We need the rule book." They are worried about "getting it wrong." PrismWork co-founder and CEO Lisen Stromberg encouraged company executives to build on these good intentions and provide male employees, in particular, the tools they need to do so.<sup>27</sup>



**With great influence  
comes great  
opportunity**

*"Breaking biases and embracing  
gender diversity isn't just the right  
thing to do—it's the key to attracting  
transformative talent and future-  
proofing your workplace."*



## 6. BREAKING THE CYCLE OF WORKPLACE BIAS: A MULTILEVEL APPROACH

Researchers at Northwestern’s Kellogg School of Management and the University of Southern California’s Marshall School of Business contend that this would be an important step to addressing workplace bias and resulting inequities but not the only step. Nicole Stephens, Lauren A. Rivera, and Sarah S.M. Townsend suggest that we haven’t been able to successfully address DE&I issues, such as those involving transgender and nonbinary employees, because we’ve typically been addressing it at either the individual or the organizational level, but rarely both. Instead, they argue workplace bias operates as a continual cycle. Disrupting the cycle requires mutually reinforcing, multilevel interventions.<sup>28</sup>

Although it is unclear if either of these studies asked about gender beyond the male/female binary, both studies identify important attitudinal, institutional, and systemic barriers at the multiple levels that need to be overcome for employees from all marginalized groups, including transgender and nonbinary people. Key to overcoming this barrier is up-to-date, quality, research-based information from experienced facilitators on these particular types of gender diversity issues, including the insights from transgender and nonbinary employees themselves. Strangio, for example, suggests we begin by questioning and deconstructing our assumptions about gender that have historically been embedded into our workplaces. Gendered assumptions—about “who people are, what they can do, how they’ll be perceived by others”—were in play during Strangio’s own job interview.

Although Strangio got the job, such assumptions have largely benefitted cisgendered people to the exclusion of others, even to the point of “pushing people all the way out of the workplace...[To] have our workplaces be the most efficient, be the most profitable, be the most exciting...we have to break down all of these structural and interpersonal assumptions about gender that we are bringing” to the table.<sup>29</sup>



## 7. FROM BELIEF TO ACTION: BUILDING A TRULY INCLUSIVE WORKPLACE

This is about maximizing human capital—finding the best leaders, best talent, and ensuring your workplace is inclusive to retain them. Employers are missing out on some cutting-edge talent: employees that Strangio asserts could transform institutions, leverage opportunities, and maximize employee capacity.<sup>30</sup> The majority of your employees will be cisgendered, and as a result, most of your experience in recruitment and retention speaks to the needs of these employees. Numerous studies demonstrate that gendered discrimination—such as sexism and transphobia—continues to be pervasive in hiring and in the workplace despite our best efforts to eliminate it. But the demographics of the workforce are changing to include a new generation of young, talented workers less tied to traditional understandings of gender.

If a job candidate who is transgender or gender non binary applied for work at your organization, how prepared are you? How comfortable do you feel around the issue of pronouns? Are your interview questions phrased in a gender-inclusive language that respects the dignity of every applicant? What is best practice if an applicant presents as one gender but their references, social media, or records refer to someone of a different name and gender?

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How can you minimize any implicit biases that might unintentionally impact your ability to fairly assess this candidate's potential at your organization? Do you understand your company's legal liabilities around these issues? Remembering you have to sell the candidate on your organization too, how can you present your organization in the most effective way to recruit this individual? Once you have hired this talented candidate, how do you retain them?

Can a transgender or nonbinary employee come to work as their "full self"? Does your company have written policies and procedures in place to accommodate people of all genders? Has your company created a Gender-Inclusive Work Environment, one that supports every employee and goes beyond the presumption that "all are welcome" here to intentionally designing a work environment with employees of all genders in mind?

Believing in gender equality is one thing. Taking action to achieve it is critical to good leadership and future success.



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# Inclusion Crowd

At Inclusion Crowd, we recognise the significance of gaining the support of all impacted teams to drive successful EDI initiatives. Our close collaboration with clients helps create the operational space and resources essential for cultural transformation. We understand that allocating the initial time and resources for meaningful EDI progress can be challenging.

That's where we step in, assisting organisations in identifying strategies to prioritize DE&I, engage all employees, and build excitement and momentum around it. Our commitment lies in helping clients establish an inclusive culture that truly makes a difference.

We understand that entering the world of inclusion and diversity can be overwhelming. At Inclusion Crowd, we are dedicated to creating psychologically safe spaces where learning and growth happen without fear of making mistakes or causing offense. Our mission is to equip our clients with confidence and tools for implementing EDI practices tailored to their organisation. We believe that addressing issues head-on is the key to building confidence, unlocking the power of inclusion, and fostering a more welcoming environment for all. Don't let fear hinder your progress. Contact us to discover how we can support your journey in creating a culture of inclusion that genuinely makes a difference.

[www.inclusioncrowd.com](http://www.inclusioncrowd.com)



*It is our mission to  
ensure organisations  
reflect society at all  
levels*

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