

Building an LGBTQ+ inclusive workplace

A blueprint for Australia's
construction industry





About this Report

The construction sector is Australia's third largest employer with projected employment growth in the future.

Despite its prominence, the construction industry faces a skills shortage and remains Australia's most male dominated sector with women's participation tracking backwards in the last decade. While research has focused on gender equity in the Australian construction industry, there is little understanding of the experiences of LGBTQ+ workers in the sector.

This report from the Australian Human Rights Institute at UNSW, Sydney summarises key findings from a recent study by Dr Natalie Galea and Dr Melissa Jardine on the experiences of LGBTQ+ workers in the Australian construction sector and the effectiveness of existing

diversity and inclusion strategies - a focus of inquiry necessary to improve workplace inclusivity and diversity. It includes links to industry prepared materials to support organisations seeking to become more LGBTQ+ inclusive

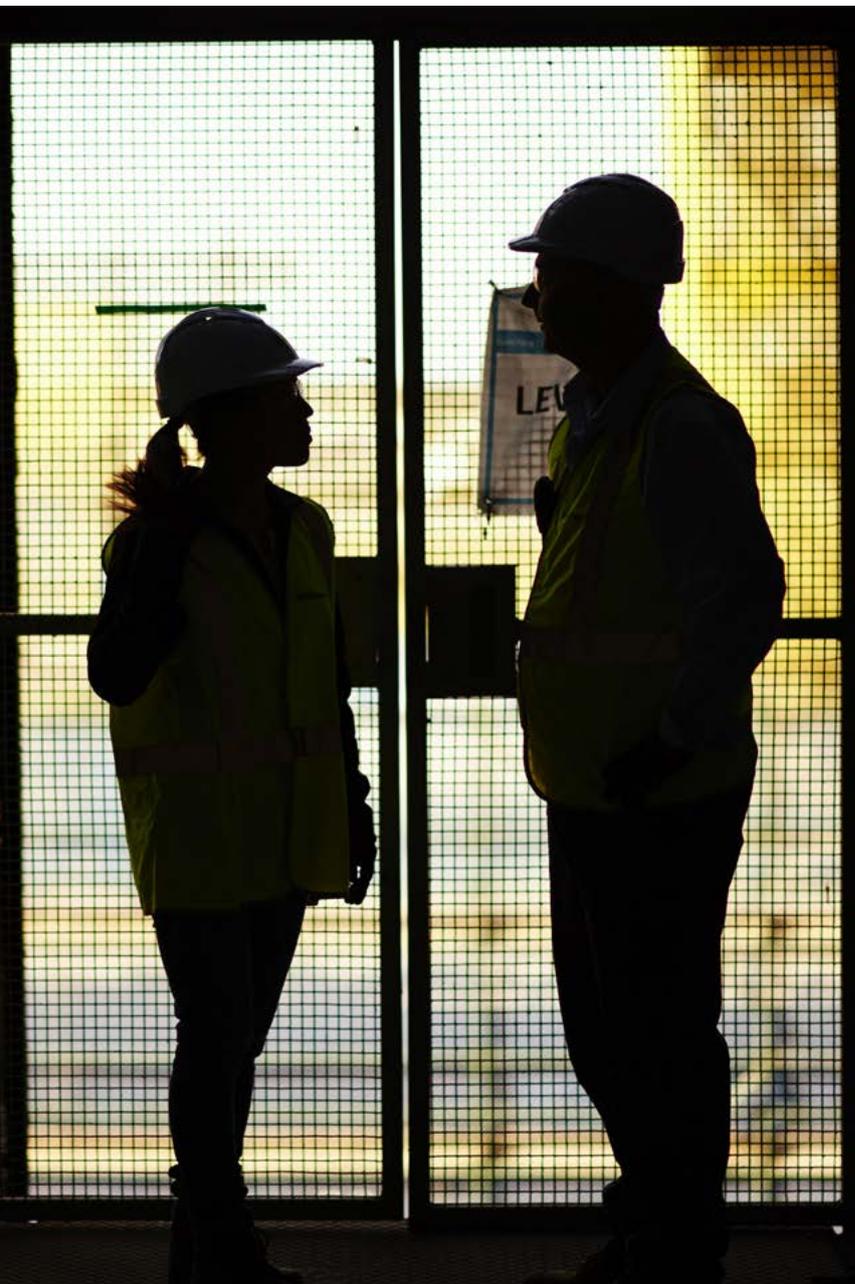
The research was conducted during 2020 and comprised an international literature review and 60-90 minute interviews with 23 LGBTQ+ construction employees. Participants ranged from tradespeople to senior executives of multinational companies from across Australia and represented a mix of ages, gender identities and sexual orientations.

Findings

The research showed that while there is a positive trajectory there is a significant variation across the industry regarding efforts towards LGBTQ+ inclusion, and the sector is generally coming off a low base.

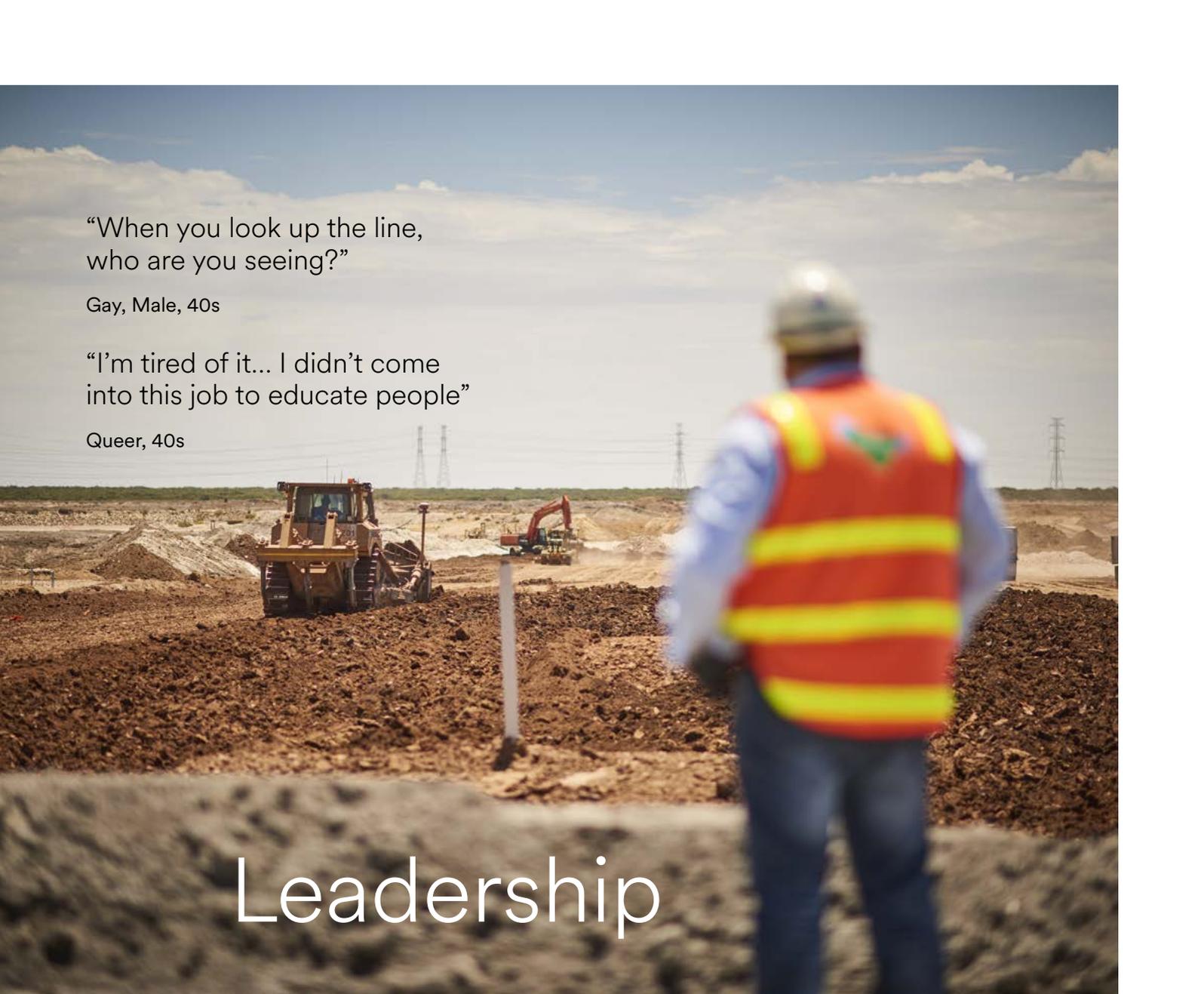
While government departments and larger organisations are perceived as generally being more inclusive and tended to have policy frameworks to support inclusivity, smaller businesses could also be a place where LGBTQ+ people can thrive given the ability to have closer relations with people in the workplace. Office based environments were also seen as generally more inclusive than construction sites or regional and remote locations.

Business leaders often lacked awareness of LGBTQ+ inclusive practices and often failed to act on homophobic or discriminatory behaviours in the workplace. Addressing these leadership issues were seen to be the best way to achieve “quick wins” as well as sustained progress.



“I hope the results from this research can help our community, and that LGBTQ acceptance and inclusion just becomes the norm.”

Gay, Male, 30s



“When you look up the line,
who are you seeing?”

Gay, Male, 40s

“I’m tired of it... I didn’t come
into this job to educate people”

Queer, 40s

Leadership

Recommendations:

Share stories of successful LGBTQ+ employees and leaders own connection and support of the LGBTQ+ community (ie as a parent or sibling)

Provide LGBTQ+ inclusion training to leaders and as part of new starter orientation / site safety induction

Make clear that homophobic and discriminatory behaviours will not be tolerated

Highlight LGBTQ+ role models:

People need evidence that being “out” at work is not a barrier to career progression. A lack of visible role models reinforces the perception that to have a successful career people need to hide their identity – especially early on where they have little power and security and need to fit in to the dominant work culture.

Provide training on LGBTQ+ inclusive work practices:

Leaders often lack awareness of inclusive LGBTQ+ practices and may be uncomfortable asking questions of LGBTQ+ employees for fear of offending. External training support should be considered to avoid placing too great a burden on LGBTQ+ employees to educate.

Call out homophobic and discriminatory behaviours:

There is a perception that leaders are waiting for “old school men” to retire and that generational change would resolve these issues. That risks entrenching current behaviours and the loss of new talent. It also exposes the company to non-compliance with anti-discrimination laws.

Policies and Procedures

Policies matter:

They act as a symbol of inclusion, a measure of acceptable behaviour and a mechanism for accountability and a degree of certainty. They also have to be enforced and carry consequences to be effective.

Ensure policies are LGBTQ+ inclusive:

Unless explicitly stated employees may not consider a policy applies to them.

LGBTQ+ inclusion is a legal requirement:

In Australia it is unlawful to discriminate on the basis of a number of protected attributes including sex, intersex status, gender identity and sexual orientation.

Recommendations:

Seek guidance from industry peers how LGBTQ+ inclusion is referenced in policy documents (see resources at back of this guide)

Update policy language to ensure they are explicitly LGBTQ+ inclusive – for example in a parental leave policy note that it “includes LGBTQ+ families”

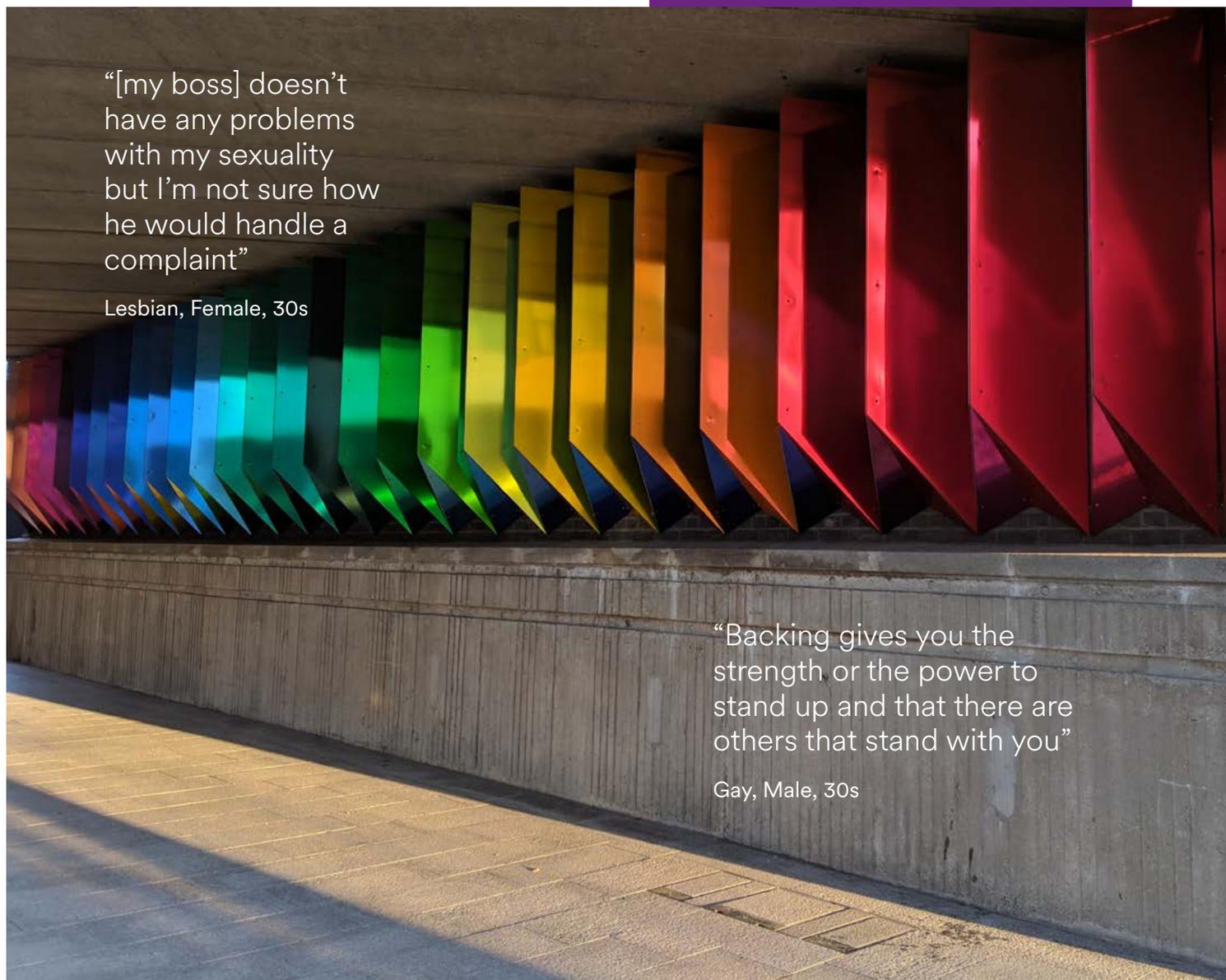
Have mechanisms in place to educate on policies and manage non-compliance

“[my boss] doesn't have any problems with my sexuality but I'm not sure how he would handle a complaint”

Lesbian, Female, 30s

“Backing gives you the strength or the power to stand up and that there are others that stand with you”

Gay, Male, 30s



Safety at work



“[I realised] how much energy I was putting into what I call camouflage... 20% of my time was about hiding myself or pretending to be someone I wasn't”

Gay, Male, 50s

Recommendations:

Provide visible signs of support to create a safe environment for people to be out at work

Ensure EAP (Employee Assistance Program) providers are equipped to address LGBTQ+ people and link with organisations like MATES in Construction who understand the construction sector

Support the establishment of peer support groups so LGBTQ+ employees can “find each other”

Being safe to come out:

Needing to assess if it's safe to “come out” can be a constant source of anxiety and lead to distraction and lower productivity. Given the changing nature of work teams on construction sites there are regularly new people to “come out to”.

Mental Health Support:

Construction sector workers and the LGBTQ+ community both have higher rates of depression and suicide than the general population. Mental health workers need to understand the unique challenges these groups face when providing support.

Peer Support:

Without visibility of others LGBTQ+ workers may feel isolated as the only LGBTQ+ person in the workplace. This is particularly the case for workers in remote and regional locations who may also be away from their personal support networks.

Communications and Visibility

Signs of support help:

Allowing employees to show if they are allies of the LGBTQ+ community can assist with the “coming out” decision and also share the burden an LGBTQ+ person may feel in advocating for changes and educating others. It’s important though that the support is real and not just lip service.

Education breaks down barriers:

Helping employees to understand the differences within the LGBTQ+ community and the challenges that can be faced can provide greater understanding and acceptance. This is especially so if the LGBTQ+ person is someone that the employee knows and likes

Promote the benefits of diversity:

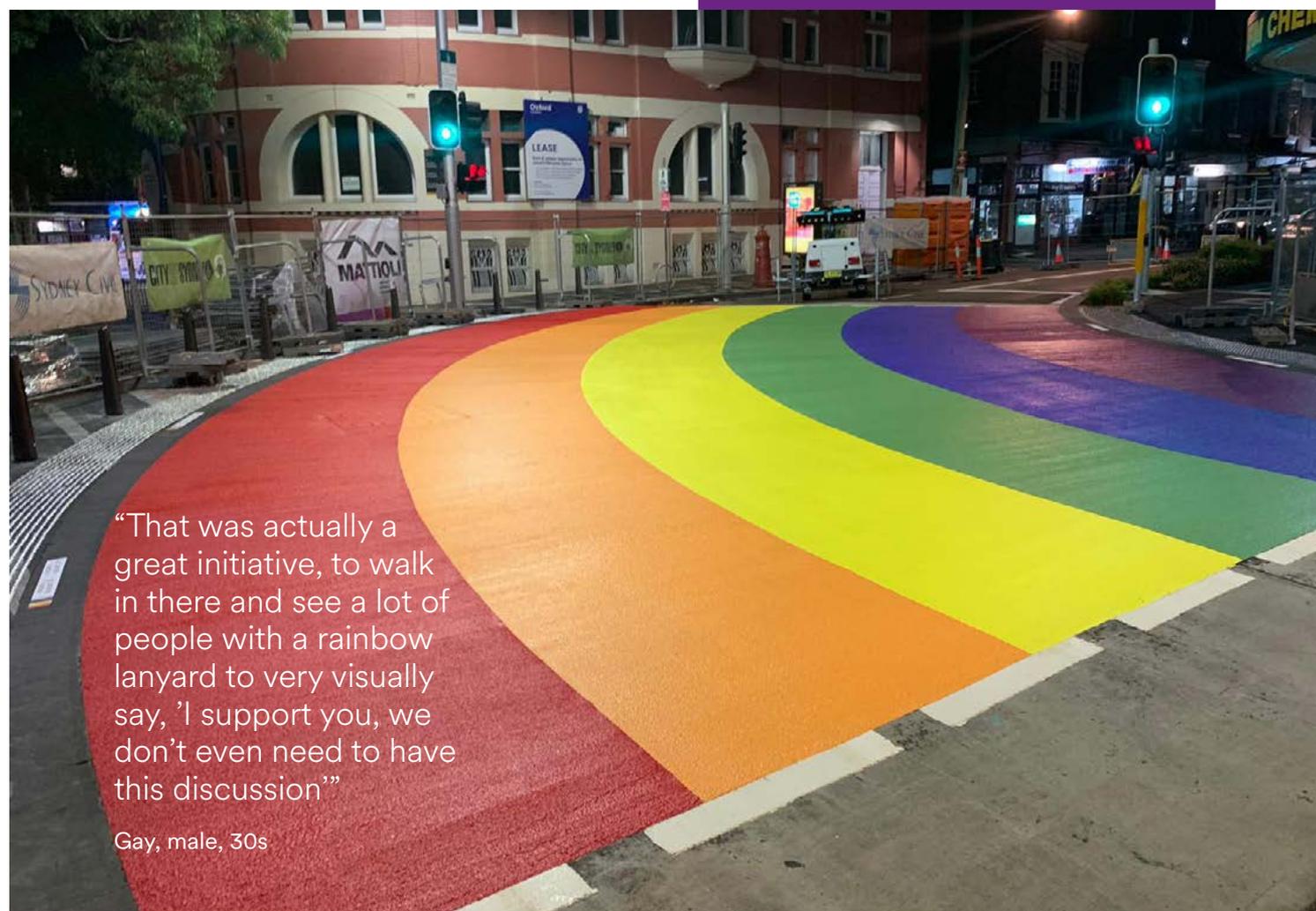
If employees understand the benefits of a diverse workforce such as improved creativity, wider talent pool and client engagement they are more likely to accept LGBTQ+ inclusion alongside of gender equality, first nations engagement and other minority groups

Recommendations:

Celebrate LGBTQ+ identities, especially around days of significance like Wear it Purple

Encourage visible signs of support (ie lanyards, rainbow laces, ally stickers, pride flags) if that support is genuine

Support creation of Diversity & Inclusion / Pride networks to help drive new initiatives





“I’m going to wait until I finish my apprenticeship and get a permanent position [before being more open about my identity] even though my role is considered permanent... I feel like I need people to see that I do a good job and I’m an okay person”

Queer, 40s

Government and Business action

Recommendations:

Build diversity and inclusion requirements into procurement and site induction processes in a staged manner

Develop recruitment pathways that actively target LGBTQ+ tradespeople and university graduates

Share inclusion policies and processes via industry bodies to support sector wide progress – but ensure employers are using policies that reflect their level of diversity and inclusion maturity

Large organisations to provide leadership:

Government and large construction companies can help drive change across the sector and provide leadership by ensuring suppliers / sub contractors support industry wide diversity and inclusion objectives.

Support emerging talent:

LGBTQ+ apprentices are at a significant disadvantage when entering the workforce given lack of power, precarity of work and a desire to “fit in” It will also be important to ensure that the workforces they go into will support their development and commit to their inclusion until it is accepted as the norm.

Inconsistency across the sector:

There is wide variety between businesses large and small and so a one size fits all approach will not work. Instead organisations will need to start and then build on their inclusivity over time with a ratcheting up of baseline expectations.

Resources

Further resources to support LGBTQ+ inclusion in construction can be found at the following locations



Australian Human Rights Institute at UNSW Sydney

The full research report prepared by Dr Natalie Galea and Dr Melissa Jardine

www.bit.ly/AHRI-LGBTQ



InterBuild on LinkedIn

The latest information and events from InterBuild – the LGBTQ+ network for the property and construction sector

www.bit.ly/InterBuild



InterBuild Resource Toolkit

Resources to support property and construction companies to progress LGBTQ+ inclusion

www.bit.ly/InterBuild-Toolkit



Pride in Diversity

Australia's leading national not-for-profit supporting LGBTQ workplace inclusion

www.bit.ly/PrideInDiversity

This research, undertaken by the Australian Human Rights Institute at UNSW Sydney, was sponsored by Lendlease Foundation and undertaken as part of the Lendlease Platinum Project for the LGBTQ Inclusion Awards run by Pride in Diversity.

It forms part of the resource base being developed for InterBuild – the LGBTQ+ network for Australia's Property and Construction sector, providing guidance and engagement to build a more inclusive Australia.

The gender and sexual identities referenced in this report are self described by the research participants.






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