

# Employee Resource Groups: A Foundation for Support and Change

Wendy Conklin

**W**hen Ford executive Alan Gilmour retired, came out as a gay man and joined the lecture circuit, his actions were lauded yet criticized by the gay and lesbian community. Why didn't he come out while still working for Ford? What prevented him from taking this action? Many gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered (GLBT) employees do not feel it is safe to share their sexual orientation in the workplace and fear that this information will negatively affect their career advancement and satisfaction. The challenge for GLBT employees is to come out while they are working and be free to express all of who they are, something heterosexuals take for granted. In many corporations GLBT employees are coming out and being more fully self-expressed thanks to the support offered by employee resource groups.

Most groups start informally when one or two courageous individuals question the company about sexual orientation issues and begin to meet with other employees to discuss their experiences. Since many companies have been supportive of other employee resource groups, such as those for African Americans, Hispanics and Asian Americans, starting a GLBT group is easier than ever before.

To formally initiate the process, most GLBT groups seek support from influential allies in the organization. Many talk one-on-one with managers or with the directors of diversity or human resources. It is usually necessary to apply for recognition from the diversity office or council. In most cases, it will be important for the group to write a charter and mission statement that identifies its primary goals for existence. The goals of resource groups tend to fall into several consistent categories, mostly focused on "adding value" to the organization:

*Wendy Conklin is Editor of The Diversity Factor.*

- To create a more equitable and safe work environment for GLBT employees
- To increase awareness and education of all employees about sexual orientation as a workplace issue
- To increase the retention of GLBT employees
- To work with the organization to include sexual orientation in relevant personnel policies and practices, including offering domestic partner benefits
- To increase employee recruitment within the gay community
- To identify new products/services and marketing opportunities in the gay community
- To provide a network that supports the professional development of GLBT employees

In addition, many GLBT groups work to add sexual orientation training to the company's diversity programs and, in some cases, make diversity training mandatory for all employees. They may want the company to publicly demonstrate its support of all employees, regardless of orientation, and convince the company's senior management to publicly endorse the Employment Non-Discrimination Act, a bill to outlaw job discrimination based on sexual orientation.

According to John Sequeira, Diversity Manager at Shell Oil, "It's [the GLBT network] been a hugely positive thing in many respects. It has provided a support structure for individuals who may have felt isolated or part of a small minority and given them an infrastructure for ongoing support. It has given those individuals a forum in which to raise concerns they have from their particular viewpoint that might not otherwise have received the level of exposure and attention they deserve. And it's given senior leaders exposure that they would not otherwise have."

Brian McNaught, award-winning writer, sexuality educator and consultant, adds, "The [employee resource] groups are a place where people can share about what's happening at work. Many have members who serve on company diversity councils and keep management informed. Some of them poll their members and present the information to management. For example, at one Lucent site, EQUAL! conducted a poll and found that 90 percent of its gay population reported having been told a gay joke because the teller thought they were heterosexual. Most heterosexuals are good people who would otherwise be supportive of their gay colleagues. But they're unaware of the impact of their behavior at work."

Despite the growing trend of employers sanctioning and supporting GLBT groups, many of the companies we contacted either did not yet have formal GLBT groups or felt that this was not a good time to talk with the leadership of those groups. All of the companies we talked with had active employee resource groups for African Americans, Hispanics, Asian Americans, women and, in some cases, employees with health issues and people with disabilities. And all of the GLBT resource groups welcomed transgendered employees (see Mary Ann Horton profile, page 18), addressing their particular identity and expression issues in one form or another. We asked these top companies how their GLBT groups began, how they operate and the challenges they face in blazing the trail for other companies and bringing GLBT issues to the forefront. Below are synopses of our discussions with six of these companies.

## AT&T

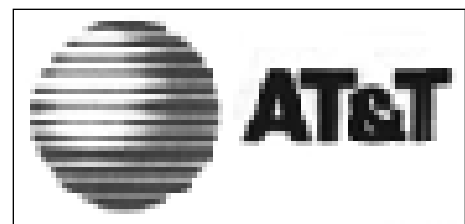
LEAGUE at AT&T is the nation's first and largest gay employee Business Resource Group (BRG). In 1987, a handful of Denver-based AT&T employees felt they could build on the company's 1975 groundbreaking non-discrimination policy, which included sexual orientation. They founded what was to become the first

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LEAGUE chapter. In 1992, LEAGUE National was created and became the visible representative of lesbian, bisexual, gay and transgendered AT&T employees. In 1995, when AT&T announced plans to split the company into AT&T, Lucent Technologies and NCR Corporation, LEAGUE also trivested itself. In 1996, it was officially reorganized into three groups: LEAGUE at AT&T, EQUAL! at Lucent (see page 17) and LEAGUE at NCR. LEAGUE is led by co-presidents, a man and a woman, with



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**Irv Murray  
AT&T**

Irv Murray, Senior Technical Staff Member at AT&T, knew he was gay when he was seven years old, but didn't come out until he reached age 27. "I decided I needed to make a determination about how I was going to live my life. It was a gradual thing," relates Murray, who is now 41. "I dealt with it on a personal basis at first, then came out to my family and friends. I knew I was gay but it was a question of whether I wanted to act on my feelings. Earlier in my life I thought I could compensate for or overcome it. I began to realize it wasn't going to work for me. I saw how gays and lesbians are viewed by society and I had my own internalized homophobia and fear. I bought into the stereotype of how gays behave and I didn't see how it related to me. Eventually, I realized I had to be true to who I was. If I continued to live a life that didn't coincide with my feelings it would be detrimental to me."

Once Murray began a long-term gay relationship his life stabilized. But he still noticed the fear he had of what other people's feelings would be when they found out. When he was 27, his mother came to him and asked if he was gay. Murray was honest and open with her. "We have another family member who is gay and my Mom is very close to him. So she took it well, although she was a little sad," he says. By this time Murray's father had passed away, but he believes his father would also have been accepting.

At work Murray is out but hasn't

made any special announcements about it. "I've spoken to my friends here to let them know. And my coworkers know about my involvement with LEAGUE. In my position I'm not exposed to a lot of people. I haven't experienced any harassment or discrimination. It just doesn't come up in my working



relationships," he says. However, through Murray's involvement with LEAGUE he has learned of incidents of discrimination because of sexual orientation.

His involvement with LEAGUE serves as a primary source of support. "It gives me the opportunity to meet with other GLBT people at AT&T," says Murray, who is President of the At-Large Chapter of LEAGUE, which unites employees in scattered locations that do not have enough members to constitute a chapter of the resource group. "My role with LEAGUE has given me many different geographic perspectives. Some issues are particular to certain sectors of the GLBT population. I feel much better informed and have found many resources," he adds. And Murray's involvement in LEAGUE is always part of his annual performance reviews. His supervisor includes his work with

LEAGUE as part of his overall accomplishments.

Murray believes that overcoming homophobia in today's society is mostly a matter of education. "As people are better informed, the walls come down. I think the more visible GLBT people are, the more others will see that we're not strictly defined by stereotypes. The personal interaction is very important. It will take time," he explains.

"I've learned that I need to be as patient as possible. It's a matter of realizing that change is gradual and that people don't change their feelings overnight. I probably shouldn't jump to conclusions about what a person's reactions might be. Some people I thought would be fine weren't and vice versa. Be ready to be surprised," he says.

According to Murray, "As an African American, one thing I notice is that even though both African Americans and gays face prejudice that doesn't mean we're on the same page. I've seen racism in the GLBT community and homophobia in the African American community. The struggles and the issues are not the same. The basis for prejudice emerges from different sources. We are similar in that we share the challenge of dealing with prejudice and intolerant behavior."

Murray concludes, "I've learned that I can have some impact on the issue even though I don't consider myself an activist. I do it in my own way. My advice to people is to make change whatever way you feel comfortable. Not everyone has to be out in the streets as an activist. Just helping out another person can make a big difference."

terms that are staggered to support ongoing strength in leadership. Marcia Sommers, Lotus Notes Administrator and LEAGUE Co-President is the first leader to meet with the group's internal champions and make sure LEAGUE's goals are in line with AT&T's business plan. According to Greg

ceiling," refers to the limitations for career advancement due to oppression of gays and lesbians. "It's a big reason why people hide who they are in order to get promoted," says Sommers.

Regionally, LEAGUE supports local AIDS organizations and various cancer walks/marches. Members work in homeless shelters and youth centers, and make themselves available to the mainstream community. The group gives out four awards at the national conference: two for outstanding national service and two for local service. About three years ago, they started the LEAGUE Foundation, a nonprofit that awards college scholarships to gay and lesbian youth.

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Srnick, the other Co-President and Market Planning Manager at AT&T, "It's LEAGUE's ability to interact in a positive way with the company that makes it a strong partnership." LEAGUE also plays an active role in AT&T's efforts to market to the gay community.

AT&T shows its commitment through the champions who work with LEAGUE to meet the needs of the company and the BRG. The group has an executive champion who reports directly to the CEO, as well as a senior VP and several VP champions. LEAGUE also partners with the leadership of other BRGs, the company's diversity center and human resources. The biggest priority for Srnick and Sommers is that LEAGUE continue to receive company support, especially with the many changes within AT&T.

LEAGUE members meet each year for a conference, and officers (both national and those from 23 local U.S. chapters) also meet once a year. There are no rules or requirements for membership. Members do not have to be gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgendered. In fact, there are many heterosexual members. All communications are blind and delivered via email and teleconference. Members do not have to be out and information about members is released only with their permission. Each member pays annual dues and the group receives funding from the company. LEAGUE is a nonprofit organization.

According to Sommers, the two biggest issues for LEAGUE are the "lavender ceiling" and equalization of domestic partner benefits—they have the benefits, but are lacking in regard to pensions, due mostly to the way the IRS is set up. The "lavender ceiling," a term similar to the women's movement "glass

Srnick's advice to other GLBT group leaders is, "Do not give up. It is worth everything. I have had some of the most rewarding experiences of my life as a member of this group. I am so proud of AT&T and thankful that I can be me and get my job done."

*(See The Diversity Factor, Winter 1996, for a related article on LEAGUE at AT&T.)*

## Prudential

In 1991, a group of Prudential gay and lesbian employees met socially and discussed forming a resource group. Throughout 1992, these employees informally created bylaws, a mission and elected a board. In early 1993, Prudential recognized EAGLES (Employee Association of Gay Men and Lesbians) and announced it to all employees via email.

According to Earl Miller, Senior Systems Analyst and President of EAGLES Minneapolis, Prudential's first GLBT group, "The year 2000 has been an amazing year for EAGLES. We obtained resources through



**Prudential**

one of our corporate VPs, who is an executive sponsor of our group and a real champion of what

we're doing. Through her support we have gained exposure and support from other executives and funding for many of our programs. In the last year and a half the climate has changed. Having a voice with senior management has really helped."

Members of both the Minnesota and Northeast chapters (approximately 150 members total) meet monthly at their respective locations, with committees meeting as needed. Both groups communicate

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## Amy Huang Prudential

When Amy Huang, age 23, was job hunting after college, she prepared two different resumes: one “straight” and one “lesbian.” Her leadership accomplishments as a lesbian activist were important to her and she wanted to continue her volunteerism without employment discrimination. But she knew that not all interviewers would be accepting of her sexual orientation. She submitted her “lesbian” resume to Prudential and spoke openly about her leadership experiences during the interviews. Huang is now a Management Associate at Prudential and President of EAGLES Northeast, a chapter of the company’s GLBT employee resource group.

Huang, a Taiwanese-American, says that her first experience of discrimination occurred when she was 17 and her family discovered her sexual orientation. Huang’s father was accepting, but her mother was very angry and didn’t handle it well. “This was so sad because I was in an amazing relationship and felt I couldn’t share it with the people I love the most,” relates Huang. “My mother told me I needed counseling.”

Her family has adjusted and their relationship is phenomenal now in comparison. Huang’s friendships have also weathered any issues related to her sexual orientation. “The majority of my friends are

straight. They have been very supportive and we’ve all grown together as a result. People need to realize that I’m just a person like anyone else. We need to deal with whatever associations people have made about sexual orientation and the blind hatred they’ve been raised with,” she says.

Recently, Huang coordinated part of Prudential’s Global Volunteer Day. A respected coworker told her she would volunteer because of



Huang, but not for the gay pride cause. “Every person I see and touch is affected. I am open to questions and am happy to respond honestly. We need to take a stand for each other on all fronts, not just on GLBT issues,” she says.

Huang first experienced inklings of her sexual orientation in the eighth grade. She didn’t label herself then because she was unsure of her feelings. In her senior year of high school she fell in love with a woman and accepted herself as a lesbian. At that time celebrities like singer Melissa Etheridge were out, so it was, in some ways, easier for Huang than it had been for others who came out before her.

Huang’s advice to others in difficult situations is, “If you are in a volatile and dangerous situation, don’t provoke people. People who behave badly are not of the mindset to listen to a different opinion. If possible, the best way to deal with it is to focus on a common goal that everyone can work toward.”

In her quest for acceptance and equality, Huang has discovered that she is indeed quite powerful and courageous. “You make yourself powerful by taking a stand. It’s my strength of personal conviction that leads me to be an advocate. My expectation is equality for all people and I believe it is possible,” she says.

“Sometimes I compare lesbian equality with the race and women’s rights movements. It’s sort of a spectrum. I still see incidences of gender and race discrimination and I wonder how long it will take for women to achieve equality. Many organizations are doing tremendous work. We now have a strong GLBT presence in the media, which demonstrates that we are here to stay and are not going to hurt anybody. The moral issues make it sticky,” Huang explains.

In the future, Huang plans to continue her activism in the gay rights movement. She sees her role as one of “bridging gaps.” For example, she considers confidentiality a gap. “It’s hard to be out, but when we mask part of the community we lose strength in numbers and voices. The current movement is sometimes held back by its own actions or lack thereof. We are such a diverse community held together by one string—our sexual orientation—but it’s more than that. It’s about being an advocate for all people.”

through email, with the Northeast chapter using both open and blind copies. The Minnesota group used to have a strictly confidential list, but now feels the climate has changed enough to discontinue its blind list.

“Our biggest challenge is making language inclusive at Prudential,” explains Miller. “We spend a lot of time partnering with the legal department making sure that company communications (marketing materials, administrative and policy documents) are fully inclusive of all groups.”

EAGLES strives to work together with other resource groups at Prudential, the business units and outside organizations, in order to collectively make a difference. Amy Huang, Management Associate and President of EAGLES Northeast (see profile on page 16), recently joined the company, in part because of its commitment to diversity. When asked what issues are most important to members, Huang said, “We would like to see mandatory diversity training throughout the company and image-based affinity marketing. We believe Prudential can take advantage of this marketing tool and as employees we can take further advantage of Prudential’s products and services.”

Sexual orientation and discrimination are included in the company’s EEO statement and Prudential offers employees qualified-adult benefits, which extends beyond same-sex domestic partners to include any qualified adult.

EAGLES members are actively involved in community activities and education. Prudential recently rolled out a workshop for employees called “Fostering an Environment of Inclusion: Gay Men and Lesbians,” for which members of the resource group serve as facilitators. Two new courses—“Fostering a

are the result of a two-year effort to revamp the company’s diversity curriculum.

In the local community, both the Northeast and Minnesota chapters volunteer member time. For example, the NE chapter supports the Hyacinth AIDS Foundation, the Lesbian and Gay Community Services Center, the AIDS Resource Foundation for Children and other organizations. Prudential also has reached out to members and supporters of the GLBT community by participating in the Gay Financial Network’s Gay Life Expo. Joined by other financial services firms, corporations and organizations, and with significant support from EAGLES, the company provided information on their products, services and recruiting at the event.

## Lucent Technologies

Ken Herron, Global Co-President of EQUAL! and General Manager of Performance Communications at Avaya Communication (recently spun off from Lucent), considers himself an “accidental activist.” In a radical break from tradition, Herron was elected Co-President without being actively involved prior to his election.

Born of AT&T’s efforts in recognizing employee resource groups, Lucent’s Employee Business Partner (EBP) groups, including EQUAL!, were launched collec-

tively about 15 years ago. Of Lucent’s 150,000 employees about 1,500 are active members of EQUAL! Twenty chapters are considered active worldwide and an at-large chapter captures members scattered at locations where no active group exists.

Like most employee resource groups, EQUAL! operates with a group of officers and a board of directors comprised of members. Many of these members also serve on the boards of other resource groups and bring those valuable perspectives.

“EQUAL! gives GLBT Lucent employees an instant network of people for career advancement and for solving business problems,” says Herron. To become a member of this nonprofit organization, employees simply hook into communications on the company intranet. EQUAL! does not charge dues, and activities are a mix of geographically focused volunteer and community events. The group holds an annual meeting with educational activities for members and nonmembers, for which the company covers expenses and allows the




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Respectful Workplace” and “Managing Diversity for Managers”—are mandatory for Prudential management and cover issues related to a variety of diversity topics, including sexual orientation. These courses

PROFILE

**Mary Ann Horton  
Lucent Technologies**

“The transgendered world has come a long way in the last few years. I remember well when crossdressers were just freaks on talk shows, and transsexuals were forced to divorce and change careers when they transitioned. Today, we are beginning to have some visibility and some rights,” says Mark Horton, Distinguished Member of Technical Staff at Lucent Technologies and a national Vice President of EQUAL!, Lucent’s employee resource group.

Mark, also known as Mary Ann, is a transgendered person. He spends about three quarters of his life as Mark. In 1999, he went to work eight times as Mary Ann. Married to Beth and raising two teenage sons, Mark has a family that is supportive of his transgendered status. Mark is faithful to his wife. “I love her dearly no matter which role I’m in. Beth is the most wonderful wife in the world. She has helped me grow into the person I am. She is in love with Mark, and as long as she has lots of time with her husband, she’s very accepting of Mary Ann. My two teenage sons are the best kids in the world! They are pretty comfortable with who I am. They’ve gone places with Mary Ann: church, shopping, dinner, amusement parks. I don’t embarrass them in front of their friends and I am Mark when it comes to all school-related activities,” he says.

The term “transgendered” is an umbrella term for a gender variance, not a sexual orientation, that ranges from crossdressers (those who sometimes wear the clothing or

assume the role of the other gender) to transsexuals (those who want to live full time as a member of the opposite sex). For clarity about definitions, see Mary Ann’s “Glossary of Transgender Terms.”

When Lucent amended its EEO policy, prohibiting discrimination against the transgendered, Mary Ann came out in the workplace. “I’ve laid a lot of groundwork in terms of coming out over the past three years to management and my coworkers, explaining what it’s all about. I’m free to be myself now... I don’t have to hide anything. I’m more productive in my job because I can fully use all of my personality to do a better job. Being transgendered is something you are, not something you do or choose. I just ask that I be accepted for who I am, and that others who are transgendered be given the same respect and freedom,” says Mary Ann.

“Most transgendered people are afraid that if they come out at work something bad will happen. This has not happened to me,” says Mary Ann, who always pre-negotiates her presence at work. “Once the novelty wears off and people stop gawking, they understand and accept it.” Initially, Mary Ann used the single occupancy women’s bathroom in the company’s medical department, a five-minute walk each way. Now she uses the closest women’s bathroom. At this time, Lucent recommends that transgendered employees use the restroom for the

gender they are presenting (unless a state law prevents an employee from doing so).

Mary Ann is not seeking a sex change and Mark is not gay. The people he knows well see him as both Mary Ann and Mark. “I refer to Mark and Mary Ann as my two personas. I don’t have a mental health condition, like Multiple Personality Disorder or schizophrenia. I’m one person with one soul. It’s kind of like the difference between having both a car and a truck, which you can only drive one at a time. I have found that my personality is subtly different in the two roles. Mark is more of a ‘type A’ personality, effective at technical work and more introverted. As Mary Ann, I’m more relaxed, better able to relate to feelings and perhaps more outgoing. It’s vitally important for me to nurture both sides of myself, to spend time in both roles.”

Mary Ann’s advice to other transgendered employees is this: “If you are working for a company where diversity is valued and you can get past your fears, take the risk of coming out to someone in human resources, the diversity center and your own management. Once you get over that barrier, life gets a lot better. Be conservative and considerate of other coworkers because it’s new for them. Have a positive attitude and don’t have a chip on your shoulder. Do your job and don’t use your transgendered status as an excuse.”

*For more information about Mary Ann Horton, visit her web site at [www.tgender.net/~mah/](http://www.tgender.net/~mah/).*



## Mary Ann's Glossary of Transgender Terms

**Bi-Gendered:** A person who lives a dual life, having one role as a man and another as a woman. Bi-gendered people spend significant time in each role and have separate names, pronouns, social circles and gender identities. Often one social circle is unaware of the person's other identity. Sometimes called a transgenderist.

**Butch:** A woman who crossdresses in men's clothing, has a masculine haircut, and takes on the masculine gender role, but does not try to pass as a man or change pronouns. See also *Gender Bender*.

**Crossdresser:** Literally, a person who sometimes dresses in clothing traditionally associated with the opposite sex. In practice, most crossdressers assume the feminine gender role, presenting completely as a woman (with long hair, makeup, padding and sometimes changes to voice and body language). Crossdressers change repeatedly back and forth between man and woman.

**Gender:** The role a person takes in social interactions, as in "man" or "woman," "masculine" or "feminine," "he" or "she." Gender involves a person's internal feelings of "gender identity" as well as external "gender role" or "gender expression." Gender is not a synonym for "sex," although the sex and gender of most people are congruent.

**Gender Bender:** A person who presents elements of both masculine and feminine appearance without trying to pass as the opposite sex. Examples include a man in a skirt or with painted nails; a woman in jacket and tie or a short, masculine haircut.

**Gender Characteristics:** The physical attributes of a person, as they relate to the traditional stereotypes of "man" or "woman," "male" or "female." A person's gender characteristics include height, body shape, deepness of voice, body hair, etc. Protection of gender characteristics means that a person will not be treated differently if their gender characteristics do not match those traditional for their sex (e.g., a very short man, a woman with facial hair).

**Gender Expression:** The external presentation or appearance of a person, as it relates to the traditional stereotypes of "man" (or "boy") and "woman" (or "girl"). A person's gender expression includes appearance, dress, mannerisms, speech patterns, hairstyle and social interactions. Protection of gender expressions means that any gender expression that is acceptable for one sex is also acceptable for the other sex.

**Gender Identity:** The internal feeling that people have of being a man or a woman. In the case of transsexuals, the feeling of identity or belonging is not compatible with the sex assigned at birth. The gender identity of a crossdresser is somewhere between the endpoints "man" and "woman," and may move back and forth.

**Gender Roles:** Societal expectations of how we are supposed to appear and behave depending on one's being male or female. One of the most explicit social rules is that one is expected to present oneself in public in a manner consistent with one's sex, and that presentation is to be unambiguous.

**Intersexual:** A person for whom the process of biological sex differentiation has resulted in a genital phenotype that is culturally unacceptable. The term often implies a medical history of intersexuality and is preferable to the outmoded term hermaphrodite.

**Transgendered:** A term that is used to refer to the entire community of individuals whose sex is not entirely congruent with their gender identity. This includes the entire range from the occasional, recreational crossdresser to the transsexual. This term is also used to describe non-operative transsexuals, intersexuals, feminine males, masculine females or anyone who crosses the line outside the "man" or "woman" boxes expected by society.

**Transgenderist:** Not to be confused with "transgender" or "transgendered." A transgenderist is a person who lives full-time or nearly full-time in the opposite gender from their birth sex, but does not desire surgery. Also called a non-operative transsexual.

**Transsexual:** A person who desires to permanently live as the opposite sex from their birth sex. This person may choose to have sex reassignment surgery.

release time so that employees can attend. Since most EQUAL! members tend to be active volunteers, they are always looking for ways to give back to the community.

Former Global Diversity Director for Lucent Suellen Roth (now VP of Global Diversity, Policy and Retention at Avaya) attended the monthly meetings and annual conferences of all EBPs. "At the meetings we discussed charitable or corporate events and

strategies for mutual support of all the EBPs." In addition, Roth polled employees to check knowledge, understanding and behavior in different areas of the world. When Lucent first conducted climate assessments at manufacturing sites (conducting focus groups with ten percent of employees at each specific location), local leadership became concerned when participation fell below the targeted ten percent. "When local leadership pointed out that support of



diversity helps to achieve a high-performance operating environment, and that the assessments would support that goal, the participation increased dramatically. Employees needed to see the enthusiasm of local leaders,” notes Roth.

“Diversity is a critical element of our overall

business strategy,” says Bob Jerich, Midwest Director of Media Relations for Lucent. “As a global company our employee body needs to reflect the diversity of our markets and customers.”

Current issues include the parity of domestic partner benefits, particularly in light of the fact that GLBTs are now taxed on their benefits. The group has used benchmarking to encourage the company to provide domestic partner and other benefits. They now have relocation benefits, which are normally offered only to spouses of heterosexuals. But the tax penalty is severe. Only Vermont has made these benefits legal.

Another priority is ensuring compliance with the company’s code of conduct—zero tolerance for bad behavior. It’s been made very clear from the top of the business that there is no tolerance. Recently, when some employees were concerned about EQUAL! activities, David Williams, President and CEO of Cirent Semiconductor, a Lucent subsidiary, said this in an email to all

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PROFILE

**Cooper Thompson  
Activist, Writer and Consultant**

In the mid 1970s, because of the influence of several feminist women, Cooper Thompson began to think about the impact of sexism and homophobia on men. In particular, he noticed the way that homophobia separated men from each other. “It was distressing to me that I couldn’t get closer emotionally to other men. The contact always stopped before it became too emotionally intimate. I believe it was because of homophobia,” says Thompson, who had many women friends at the time, but few close men friends. “It wasn’t until the mid ’80s, when I had a lot of contact with gay men, that I identified for myself the importance of the oppression of gay men and how it affects all men.”

By the 1980s, Thompson was working with both gay and straight men, finding ways to teach others about homophobia. Like many heterosexual allies, he became involved in activities that would shift the perceptions of heterosexuals from negativity and fear to acceptance and affirmation. He coordinated a task group on homophobia and developed educational materials. In 1986, he and ten other men started the Campaign to End Homophobia, which Thompson coordinated through 1994. He has organized national conferences on homophobia and conducted training

programs. During this time, he also designed curriculums, such as “Mutual Sharing, Mutual Caring”—a sexuality curriculum for young women and men, and wrote articles, such as “Visions of a New Masculinity.”

Thompson is most proud of a pamphlet he co-authored in 1987 with Kevin Cranston, entitled “I Think I Might Be Gay, Now What Do I Do?” Born of his and Cranston’s concern that HIV education was directed at heterosexual teens and the fact that public health educators were not talking about the particular needs of gay youth, the piece became an affirmation of gay youth. “We were told it would never get distributed because it was too controversial. We got a lot of positive and negative reactions to it,” says Thompson. “But I was proud to take an affirmative position and tell gay youth that they are absolutely fine. The pamphlet is widely distributed today and has been translated into many languages.”

In his work, Thompson helps clients see that oppression occurs at four different levels. He sees a role for allies at each level. On a **personal level**, heterosexuals need to first think about their own self-interest in challenging homophobia. “It’s tempting for heterosexuals to feel sorry for gays and lesbians and to try and rescue them by doing what they (heterosexuals) think is needed,” explains Thompson.

Second, heterosexual men must be willing to risk being seen as gay. “It’s been challenging for me as an advocate,” he says. “There were times when I would not talk about homophobia because I thought my credibility would be

employees, “While I encourage people to share their thoughts with me about any part of the business, there is no room for debate about the presence of flags or posters displayed in the building by EQUAL! or any other EBP. Some things are not negotiable, and fundamental respect for our employees is one of those things.”

He went on to say, “I am committed to creating an operating environment where the talent, contributions and ideas of all Lucent people can flourish. Any violation of our corporate code of conduct, our diversity policy, or any behavior that is inappropriate toward individuals or groups of employees, will be dealt with in the strictest way—up to and including termination.”

“Unfortunately bad things still happen,” says Herron. “There are areas where people haven’t had the same exposure and education. Manufacturing environments are tougher than the white collar ones. We do not yet have senior leaders who are out and open, which is a red flag since if it were truly a non-issue, they would be out.”

When asked what else the company could do, Herron replied, “Part of me says that we’re already there. But there’s always something more to do. We’d like to see our senior people walk the talk. We’d like to hear them say the word gay or lesbian in their speeches. Sometimes they are more conservative in their words and we’d like to see them speak out more.”

According to Roth, “There’s a difference between having a personal bias and being hostile. We may never unite as a human family and be universally supportive of the GLBT community, just as some people might not support women in high positions. It’s the knowledge and exposure that helps people begin to let go of their prejudices. At Lucent we believe that while you may feel differently in your heart, you must exhibit highly professional behavior in the workplace.”

## Dun & Bradstreet

In February 1998, as part of Dun & Bradstreet’s inclusion efforts, employees



diminished. If you speak up about gay issues, some men—and women—will assume that you are gay, and their homophobia will lead them to discredit you. It’s a strategic question that consultants and change agents have to deal with. At the same time, heterosexuals have to challenge their own sense of comfort—that’s their work.”

On an **interpersonal level**, Thompson hears from gays and lesbians again and again that heterosexuals don’t ask them about their relationships. “It’s helpful when allies ask gay coworkers about their partners and talk openly about the similarities and differences in relationships, whether heterosexual or homosexual. And if you are heterosexual, be willing to challenge and give positive information to other heterosexuals,” he adds.

On an **institutional level**, “the task for heterosexuals is to propose and support rules and policies that are anti-discriminatory, that speak to the equality of all people,” says Thompson. “Legislation is not the panacea and neither are rules, but they are needed.”

On a **cultural level**, “the question is, what are the unwritten rules that govern how people think and behave, with the task for allies in public settings or meetings one of challenging and raising questions about homophobia and sexual orientation,” explains Thompson. For example, looking at how a corporate marketing decision impacts

lesbians and gays; raising questions about the assumption that everyone is heterosexual; and including sexual orientation in corporate training.

One personal obstacle for Thompson in his work has been the fear of how he would be seen. In particular, he was concerned that people would think he is gay (he is not) and that this would impact his credibility and reputation. A second

obstacle has been the challenge of getting other heterosexuals involved. It has been easier for Thompson to find gay and lesbian people willing to support his work.

Over the past few years, Thompson has gradually focused more on racism and less on homophobia. “It’s not that one is more important than the other, but racism seems particularly intractable in the U.S., and so I have pulled in that direction. That said, I’m concerned that as a society we haven’t fundamentally decided to affirm the presence of lesbian and gay people. I believe that there is a degree of tolerance in some business and social settings, but as my friend Wekesa says, ‘We tolerate things that we don’t fundamentally like but have to live with.’ That shouldn’t be our task when it comes to other human beings. I believe that our job as heterosexuals, or whites, or male allies is to actively appreciate and support all of our fellow human beings.”

**Employee Resource Groups: A Foundation for Support and Change**

formed Support Network Groups (SNGs). At the first meeting of GLISN (Gay and Lesbian Information Support Network Group), nine gay and lesbian employees participated.

“At that time, most gay folk were in the closet except me,” remembers Ed Patterson, President of GLISN and Director of Information and Access Services in the Receivable Management Services Division of D&B. “My management has always been supportive. And because of this I feel a responsibility for other closeted gays and lesbians, as well as for my heterosexual colleagues. The past three years of my 35-year career with D&B have been the best. I am rewarded and compensated better than I have ever been.”

Approximately 125 members are active nationwide, with one third of the group heterosexual. A 14-person leadership council that meets regularly guides GLISN. Each SNG has a champion who is a senior manager reporting to the top echelon. From day one, GLISN’s champion has helped the group immensely—everything from positioning of the group’s activities to ensuring the necessary support throughout the chain of command.

“GLISN has been sensitive to the expectation of management, regarding productivity and service, especially since the group operates partially on company time. All of our members must negotiate their participation with their own bosses,” explains Patterson.

Regarding rules and requirements for membership, the main rule is to respect confidentiality.

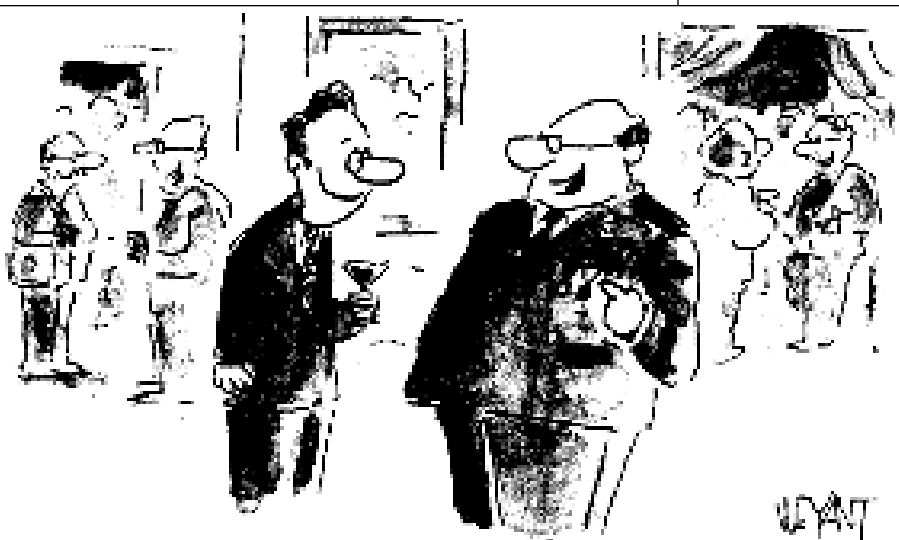
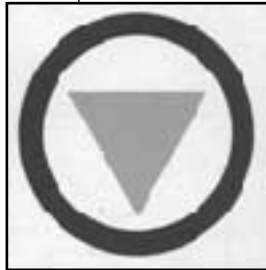
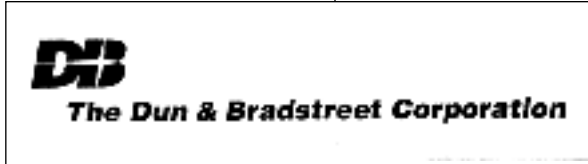
GLISN’s list of members is always blind copied and never available for public view, and new members are announced only with their permission. The group has an internal Enews service and a newsletter where people can publish articles.

GLISN’s main event is a monthly conference call with 20-80 members across the nation. Members work a business agenda and discuss a predetermined topic on each call, such as company issues, domestic partner benefits (which they have) and the SafeSpace program (which generates awareness of GLBT issues through education and the display of Lucent Technologies’ SafeSpace symbol on office doors and walls). Calls that feature an outside speaker, such as a lawyer (on wills), the Red Cross (on blood donation issues) and an executive from a gay-owned company, draw the biggest crowds.

This year, D&B granted each of its resource groups a budget. In addition, the company pays for all overhead items. “We are grateful to our ‘angels’ who generously donate to the group and managers who use funds from their budgets for our activities,” says Patterson.

The most important issues for GLISN involve awareness—the way members are treated by other employees. More than 1,000 people have adopted the SafeSpace program. This year, GLISN is focused on gay pride and visibility issues. Pride Month in June began with a D&B-sponsored national email to every employee. The company also approved the presence of the D&B corporate banner in the Gay Pride March in New York City.

“This is the first year we are raising our visibility. There is some trepidation, which is to be expected. But awareness programs have helped make the timing correct,” says Patterson. GLISN is involved in an AIDS walk and has raised \$25,000 for AIDS foundations in five states through these events and other sources of support, including the D&B Foundation. GLISN also focuses on outreach to gay and lesbian network groups in other companies and to university students. D&B places ads in



*“This one’s for not asking and this one’s for not telling.”*

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*The Advocate*, a national biweekly news-magazine for gays and lesbians.

Members would like to obtain some changes in employee benefits, but many of the changes are IRS-related. The company's domestic partner benefits are not a special privilege for gays and lesbians; they are also available to unmarried heterosexuals.

Patterson's biggest challenge is maintaining the balance of doing his job and leading a large network of people. In closing he says, "Apathy, when it does raise its head, is as ugly as prejudice."

## Shell Oil

"It seems like it moves so slow, but if you look back 15 years we've made tremendous strides. As a gay man, my life is so different from what it was even five years ago," says John Murphy, Diversity Associate, Diversity and Work Life Balance and Co-Chair of SEA Shell, Shell's GLBT group.

About six years ago a group of gay and lesbian employees began meeting for lunch. In April 1996, two employees took a high profile and came out of the closet. They pulled together a group that year and organized informally. In 1997, SEA Shell was officially recognized and received some corporate funding. In 1998, it operated with a few committees, but no formal leadership. By the end of 1998, the group had elected officers. A year later, it shifted to a co-chair leadership structure in an effort to attain gender balance. SEA Shell was one of the earliest recognized resource groups at Shell.

The group's steering committee meets monthly, while other committees meet as needed. Once a year they hold an annual meeting. Each group has an advisory board made up of senior managers who meet with the groups on a quarterly basis. CEO Steve Miller just completed a cycle of meetings with the resource group steering committees. SEA Shell uses a part-open, part-blind email distribution list that includes 120 people; of that group about 40-50 are active and can be counted on to volunteer for activities. The group participates in organized activities, such as the Gay and Lesbian Pride Parade, Houston's GLBT business expo and AIDS walks. Shell offers domestic partner benefits and has a non-discrimination policy based on sexual orientation. SEA Shell is working closely with Shell to achieve a third goal—a safe and inclusive work environment.

"Our challenges relate to the pace of and expectation for change," explains Diversity



Manager John Sequeira, who works closely with the resource groups. "The problems are usually systemic in nature and therefore cannot be changed overnight. Part of the challenge is looking at the issues that are raised and deciding which ones are most critical. Sometimes we have to provide data back to the groups to back up our perspective."

According to Sequeira, the challenge of the GLBT network has been to raise awareness about the circumstances that gay and lesbian employees experience in the workplace. "There is a big gap in employee understanding. Because some people have strong beliefs about sexual orientation in general, there tends to be a level of intensity that is felt differently when the GLBT network raises its profile within the company."

"We want to find a way to respect everyone's right to their own belief yet explain to them why Shell is

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*Because some people have strong beliefs about sexual orientation in general, there tends to be a level of intensity that is felt differently when the GLBT network raises its profile within the company.*

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supporting this approach in the workplace. It's hard for people to understand that we are not trying to change their belief systems," adds Sequeira. For example, for the second year in a row Shell had a presence in the Gay Pride March. In addition, as part of its awareness and education activities, the group sponsored a panel discussion for employees in the corporate headquarters facility. The GLBT network created a display that was placed in the lobby. That was a triggering event for some employees who interpreted this step as Shell advocating a particular "lifestyle" that ran contrary to their beliefs. Company representatives explained to these employees that Shell's purpose in presenting the display was to enhance the education and awareness of GLBT life and its history.

Resource groups receive their budgets from the company's diversity center. Managers in the center formally bring together the resource group leaders on a quarterly basis to talk about issues of common concern and look for opportunities to collaborate across groups.

About 30 SEA Shell members are dispersed among the company's diversity councils and teams at many locations. Twice a year the group sponsors a workshop with this extended group, giving them information and tools to take back to their diversity teams and resource groups. For example, to help them communicate sexual orientation to employees they use a non-threatening discussion tool called "Sexual Orientation 101," that explains Shell's business case for discussing this issue in the workplace. They also perform a skit that demonstrates what it's like to be closeted in the workplace.

This year Murphy is working to move SEA Shell

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*The major resistance for SEA Shell is religious pushback, because the people in many of its locations have fundamentalist religious beliefs.*

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into its next phase. "Since Shell has listened carefully to what it is we want from them, we want to have a dialogue with them about what we can offer in return. We are looking for ways to tell the Shell story in the GLBT community. Most gays and lesbians are progressive consumers, who can look to Shell for their energy and chemical needs. We want them to know that Shell is very committed to inclusiveness," said Murphy.

The major resistance for SEA Shell is religious pushback, because the people in many of its locations have fundamentalist religious beliefs. According to Murphy, "The real heroes are the people at the refineries and chemical plants because they don't have the same life experience as others working in the Houston corporate office. Many of them grew up in small towns and have not been exposed to this issue."

"The biggest stress is time. While we are able to meet on company time, which we really appreciate,

there's more work to do than we can accomplish. It sometimes feels like the company doesn't fully understand the value of the work we contribute, especially since we are working hard to have our efforts bring something back to Shell. One way the company could support us now is by placing a higher profile on what we're doing," adds Murphy.

## Equilon, A Shell Affiliate

In 1980, the decision was made that Shell's alliance companies (Equilon, Motiva and Equiva) should have independent resource groups from Shell, one of the parent companies. At Equilon, a joint venture company with Shell, Texaco and Saudi Aramco, Prism was formally launched earlier this year.

"It was pretty easy to establish Prism because of Shell's track record. We encountered some concern regarding the inclusion of transgendered people. For example, we had to omit the word "transgendered" from official email sent to all alliance employees announcing our formation. However, we were able to keep the wording in our bylaws. The alliance is a marriage of cultures and some of them are very conservative. Part of the challenge for the diversity center was to manage a balance among these cultures," explains Jeff Louallen, Chair of Prism and a Statistician for the alliance.

Prism's eight-person steering committee meets monthly and meetings are open to all employees. About a fourth of the committee is heterosexual. It works closely with executive advisors, one of whom is the VP of refining. Prism's launch event was a well-attended working meeting held in May where Equilon CEO Rob Routs spoke. They talked about marketing, community involvement and education in the workplace.

Membership is defined by a distribution list of 30 people. Prism has a web page within the company intranet and the alliance offers domestic partner benefits. Sexual orientation is included in Equilon's

EEO statement but it does not yet include gender identification. Prism has participated in the sponsorship of events with the Houston Gay/Lesbian Chamber of Commerce and sponsored commemorative ads for Pride Month.

"We would like the company to help us continue the education process because that's what will bring about change. It will lead to a more inclusive, accepting environment in the workplace," concludes Louallen.



## J.P. Morgan & Co., Inc.

In the early '90s, J.P. Morgan's legal department began to focus on gay and lesbian issues. Three officers in the legal department organized a discussion about what it's like to be gay at Morgan and then started benchmarking the New York City legal community regarding domestic partner benefits. By then many of the top law firms had extended these benefits. In 1995, they turned this information over to the human resources department. In December 1997, the company extended domestic partner benefits to employees.

Five employees began meeting in late 1998 to discuss gay and lesbian issues at the firm. Their immediate goal was to promote visibility of GLBT issues and to deal with a limited range of benefits that had not yet been extended to include same-sex domestic partners. (A statement of nondiscrimination and same-sex domestic partner health and dental benefits were already in place.) They talked with the firm's diversity manager, who told them they could become an official employee group whenever they were ready. GLEAM (Gay Lesbian Employees at Morgan) received formal recognition in January 1999 and the company intranet listed the new group.

Today, of J.P. Morgan's 15,000 employees worldwide, 66 are members of GLEAM (approximately 35 are located in New York City, with another large group in London). Members work at all levels of the firm—from administrative assistant to managing director (three directors are active). Predominantly men, the group also counts four lesbians as members. They meet quarterly as a large group and subcommittees meet as needed. Members make heavy use of email. The vast majority of members are out of the closet; only eight are blind copied. The group also has straight allies in the company, to whom they forward announcements. In 1999, GLEAM made great strides with additional employee benefits, such as relocation policies and matching gifts, which were extended to domestic partners.

The group's Visibility Committee organizes panel events where members answer questions from employees of Morgan businesses. Employees who attend are educated on a basic level and are engaged in the issues related to sexual orientation in the workplace. Since the early '90s, J.P. Morgan's diversity

training program has included gay issues. Diversity training is already mandatory for all employees.

"I think people need to be told that it's OK to talk about GLBT issues in the company," said Andrew Lane, an Associate in Morgan's Community Relations and Philanthropic group and Co-Founder and current Secretary of GLEAM. "We need to take a very proactive position about creating a safe work environment. We're not talking about sex or our personal lives, we're talking about diversity issues."

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Early on GLEAM helped sponsor the National Workplace Symposium at the Wharton School in Philadelphia with \$5,000 it received from the firm's diversity center. The symposium was part of the gay pride events held in that city. Later, the group sent two members and one HR manager who deals with policy to the Out and Equal Conference in Atlanta. They also co-hosted with American Express a recruiting event targeted at MBA students at five top business schools. Other networking is focused outside the firm. For example, GLEAM has established relationships with other companies through GLEG (Gay and Lesbian Employee Groups) of New York.

"Our next horizon is to put some muscle behind our sponsorship of gay events and organizations, and take advantage of the gay population as a market. Many gays and lesbians are wealthy potential customers," adds Lane. "In addition, gay people are great candidates for employment."

It is important to note that in a few short years, GLBT employee resource groups have become strong unified voices for equal rights. Both inside and outside the corporation they serve as reliable sources of information, support and education. The fact that companies are sanctioning the formal organization of these groups tells us that they are ready to take the next steps toward creating inclusive, respectful and productive workplaces. There's still a long way to go, but great strides have already been made. ■

