

Pronouns and the Workplace

More and more employees are entering the workplace with gender identities and expressions that may be different from what we most frequently think of when discussing gender.

Gender-expansive employees – those that do not self-identify as male or female – have helped change the existing understanding and norms around gender. These employees may opt to use gender-expansive pronouns such as “they, them and theirs” instead of the gendered “he, him and his” or “she, her and hers.” In addition, gendered honorifics such as “Ms.” or “Mr.” may change to the more inclusive “Mx.”

It's important for people and businesses to create an inclusive working environment. However, those who are not well-versed on the topic of gender pronouns, can unintentionally insult a colleague or create a situation that is embarrassing for both parties. So, here's everything you need to know about gender pronouns and why it's important in the workplace.



WHAT ARE PRONOUNS?

Pronouns are words we use in everyday language to refer to ourselves or others. They can be an important way to express your gender identity. 'I', 'me', 'she/her', 'he/him' and 'they/them' are some examples of pronouns.

For generations, we've used 'they', 'them' or 'their' as a singular pronoun. For example, if you find a

bag that was left behind in the office, you may ask: 'Did someone leave **their** bag here?'

Some trans and gender non-conforming people may use 'they' 'them' and 'theirs' as personal pronouns as these are considered gender-neutral.

For example: 'Georgina works in our communications department. **They** delivered an informative presentation today about their most recent project.'

MULTIPLE PRONOUNS

Some people may wish to use more than one set of pronouns to refer to themselves. For example, a gender non-conforming person may feel equally comfortable with they/them, he/him or she/her pronouns. Other trans and gender non-conforming people may not be out, so may use different pronouns so they're comfortable in different situations.



If someone uses more than one set of pronouns, you can ask them what they would prefer you to use. They may prefer you use all of them interchangeably or keep to one set.

For example: 'Gail has exceeded **their** targets this year. **She** plans to apply for a promotion soon.'

NOT USING PRONOUNS

For some people, the correct way to refer to them is by using their name only.

For example: '**Brad** is taking the minutes for **Brad's** next meeting'.

NEOPRONOUNS

These are pronouns used by some to refer to

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themselves without the context of gender. Some examples are xe/xir or ze/zir, both pronounced zee and ze-er (rhymes with 'here').

For example, 'Niven has been successful in **xir** interview. **Xe** starts **xir** new job on Monday.'

BEST PRACTICES FOR USING PRONOUNS IN THE WORKPLACE

Management services company, ADP, has produced some extremely helpful tips to create a more inclusive workplace:

1. Consider including your pronouns in your email signature or name at work to foster a culture of inclusivity. Remember that for some LGBTQ+ people, disclosing their pronouns may be a source of anxiety so don't force this practice on others.
2. Incorporate neutral language in greetings. Instead of "Hey, guys!" or "Welcome, ladies!", use "Welcome, everyone!" to make sure all participants feel acknowledged, safe and included.
3. If you make a mistake and someone corrects you, say "Thank you" instead of "I'm sorry" to own the responsibility for your mistake. Practice using someone's pronouns so that you can get this right as soon as possible. Having to correct others who misgender them is exhausting for many transgender and non-binary people.
4. Use "they or their" wherever possible, as opposed to "his or her" to include people who may not identify with the pronouns his or her.
5. Respect a person's privacy and journey. Although it is good to ask what pronouns or name a person uses, never ask anyone about gender-affirming surgeries or medical transitioning status. Not asking someone about their medical history or plans for surgery is common practice at work regardless of someone's gender identity.
6. Remember that you can't tell someone's gender just by looking at their appearance. So, share your

pronouns first and invite others to share theirs with you.

WHAT SHOULD ORGANISATIONS DO?

In addition to the previously stated practices, organisations should:

1. Issue clear leadership and guidelines about the use of gender pronouns.
2. Include language in their employee policies stipulating that employees can expect their colleagues to use the pronouns they use.
3. Train managers and employees to use gender-neutral language in formal and informal communications.

This approach shifts the burden away from non-binary and LGBTQ+ employees and instead creates an expectation of inclusion that applies to the entire workforce.

WHY RESPECTING EMPLOYEE'S PRONOUNS IS IMPORTANT

While respecting other people's pronoun choices may be a new concept for some, it's no different to respecting other people's personal lives like parenthood, marital status, and medical history — all social courtesies that we're used to.

Addressing employees in the way they wished to be addressed can show them that they matter, and demonstrate that we respect who they are.

Similarly to how our name is something that is ours and ours alone, our pronouns are an extension of that. While it can be hard to get used to, it's important to work at it every day, because it does matter to cultivating an inclusive working environment.



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