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Workplace inclusion requires active engagement
with the unseen and unheard
"There's no such thing as an average employee."

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Working with people outside your regular bubble sometimes leads to the best, most meaningful results. Jojanneke van der Toorn, Martine Veldhuizen and Mathias Funk can only affirm this. The three researchers from different Dutch universities have been working together for two years now. As part of the Power of One project, they focus on how the needs of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and intersex (LGBTI+) employees - many of which remain unheard and unseen - can be better assessed and addressed in the workplace.

It all started with the Centre for Unusual Collaborations (CUCo). This collaborative initiative originated with the idea to encourage academics - who are usually occupied with highly specific work - to take a step back and see where else their expertise could be useful. Their daily jobs are normally highly structured, unlike any collaboration within CUCo. "This project successfully dragged us out of our usual work patterns and relationships, and into something completely new and exciting," says Funk.

Getting to know each other
"Nine of us, all connected to the Young Academies within the Strategic Alliance, were intent on working together but without a predetermined plan," explains Jojanneke van der Toorn, social and organizational psychologist and project lead. "Coming from vastly different disciplinary backgrounds, from cultural history and psychology to industrial design and immunology, we first needed to get to know each other and find a common language. During a 24-hour retreat in the centre of Utrecht in June 2020, we did just that and formulated the first idea for the theme. Usually, your research topic represents the basis on which you gather the appropriate researchers. In this case it was the other way around."

Inclusion at work
With an overarching project focus on a better representation of unseen and unheard individuals in society, the group split up in three teams with Van der Toorn, Veldhuizen and Funk focusing as a team on the context of the workplace. Van der Toorn: "There are many individuals who fall through the cracks because of their stigmatized identities or complex social problems. We were interested in how organizations try to assess the needs of LGBTI+ employees and the extent to which they succeed in reaching all employees identifying with this group."

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"With sexual orientation and gender identity being relatively invisible, proactive strategies are needed to reach these employees," continues Van der Toorn. "Organizations are very motivated to create a more inclusive workplace, but their chosen strategies are not always the right fit. Company surveys aimed at charting employees' experiences often cannot identify group-based inequalities in the workplace, because the necessary background questions simply were not asked. Our research demonstrates the many barriers to assessing the needs of the unheard and unseen. Sometimes these barriers are practical, such as lack of time and money. But they can also be relational (lack of trust) or assumption-driven (due to biases)."

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As to the importance of including the unseen and unheard, Funk explains there is no such thing as an average employee when you take intersectionality seriously. "The Power of One perspective involves everyone in an organization. It forces you to think in terms of individuals." Van der Toorn continues: "Often the assumption is that certain questions, such as regarding an employee's sexual orientation or ethnicity, cannot be asked for privacy reasons. This is not entirely correct, however, and we encourage organizations to more actively consider ways to hear and see their employee base in all its diversity. At the very least, they should start a dialogue with their employees on how to best assess their needs and let themselves be informed from the bottom up."

"We just want it to succeed, this crazy initiative to get researchers from four institutions to collaborate."

The three academics are very active and invest quite some time in making this CUCo project a success. "We just want it to succeed, this crazy initiative to get researchers from four institutions to collaborate," says Van der Toorn. "But first we had to establish a good collaboration. After that we were able to start adapting, merging, and unfolding. This unusual sequence of events is one of the success factors of our collaboration and how it becomes truly interdisciplinary. It is key that there is space for researchers to work this way."

'Out of my comfort zone'

"Sometimes you just have to step back from your initial research theme in order to come up with a broader or a different one," adds Veldhuizen. "That's how I went from my own research field of cultural and literary history to privacy and inclusion in the workplace. I was a bit anxious at first, because this is way out of my comfort zone. But listening to each other's ideas and passions really pays off."

"It is just so interesting to have deep conversations with people outside of my own scope."

Funk admits that he also had his doubts at the very beginning. "I was afraid that it was yet another side project that wouldn't really contribute anything. But it is just so interesting to have deep conversations with people outside of my own scope about topics that aren't necessarily part of my streamlined agenda. But the more the process advances, the more it gradually moves in a direction that matches my own work in industrial design, and methods and tools for design research."

Qualitative and quantitative research

Van der Toorn: "Throughout the process we have noticed that we complement each other in a positive way. For example, there is a big difference in approach between people who do qualitative research and those who do quantitative research. Mathias and I are used to convincing by means of numbers and statistics, whereas Martine's expertise is using singular stories. The combination of the two, and our discussions on the merits of individual stories versus patterns in larger data sets, added enormous value to the results of our research."

"We decided to make a glossary with terms and definitions that we could all agree on."

Meaningful compromise

On the other hand, it is obvious that they did not always agree. There were for example different ideas about who are the relevant actors in this research, and when to start focusing on solutions rather than problems. While some disagreement remains, they managed to find a meaningful compromise during the process. Funk: "We realised that we initially weren't speaking the same language. In the interest of reaching alignment, we decided across teams to make a glossary with terms and definitions that we could all agree on."

Finding the right balance

Another obstacle the academics encountered was the limited amount of time they could spend on their research. "In a few hours a week, it's challenging to finish the full list of deliverables we signed off on," says Veldhuizen. "Sometimes it was challenging to find the right balance between our research, academic jobs, and personal life, especially in times of Covid. Nevertheless, we managed to lay the foundation in the first phase together, which we could never have done without the help of other professionals who for example conducted interviews, wrote blogs or created visuals for us. In phase two, in which we'll be moving our focus to the perspectives of employees, we aim to expand our team of researchers and continue to lean on these flexible human resources."

'Is my dataset fully representative for all LGBTI+ people?'

The three also learn a lot about themselves as researchers and how they go about their research. They've seen that a lot of people are actually excluded from the research. Van der Toorn, who studies the workplace inclusion of LGBTI+ employees, acknowledges that: "I realised that often my own data sets aren't all that representative of the LGBTI+ community, or I simply have no information to determine it. This is where the topic of intersectionality becomes extremely relevant. In this way, the project also encourages us to take a good look in the mirror. We may face similar challenges and make the same mistakes as the people we are researching, which is confronting and quite valuable at the same time."

"I'm truly proud of what we have achieved so far in good harmony."

Two steps back and one step ahead

Funk adds that the reiterative approach of the research is what makes this project so worthwhile. "It's ok to take a few steps back to get one step ahead. You always learn something. For me it was sharpening my vocabulary and looking at things differently. Even though it's hard to quantify, we need to be comfortable with the fact that not everything pays off immediately. I'm truly proud of what we have achieved so far in good harmony. I think I speak for all of us when I say that I'm genuinely happy to be part of this inspiring group of people who complement each other so well."