



Come as you are

LGBTQ+ employees around the world share personal stories about what it means to bring their whole selves to work

It can be as simple as sharing your weekend plans with co-workers or having a photo of your partner on your desk. When you feel free to be yourself at work, even the seemingly small things can have a big impact on your happiness and wellbeing.

Still, many employees struggle with the decision to reveal aspects of their identities they worry may be problematic for co-workers and managers. They end up “covering” those parts of themselves—whether it’s being gay, being a parent, practicing a certain religion, or having a disability—in order to avoid discomfort or discrimination.

Covering is emotionally draining. It can lead to poor performance at work, not to mention feelings of isolation and depression.

Five of our LGBTQ+ colleagues from around the world—in the U.S., U.K., Colombia, Poland, and Japan—share their own experiences with the fear and anxiety of covering, and the joy of finding freedom at a workplace that encourages them to be themselves.



Finding a support system at work

Tracy A. White, executive customer representative, chronic care division, Missouri

“I came out at MSD before I came out at home,” says Tracy White, whose story starts in 2010, when she saw a video of MSD CEO Ken Frazier talking about the

importance of bringing your whole self to work.

“Watching that video had a powerful impact on me,” she says. “I thought about the gifts that people were missing in me, and the gifts I was missing in others, by not relaxing and being myself.”

Tracy started talking more openly about her partner, Kristyn, with her co-workers. And a simple gesture from Tracy’s manager ultimately gave her the freedom to come out: “She said, ‘Thank you for sharing Kristyn with me.’ That was her way of making it safe for me. And that’s when I started crying and came out to her. That was a turning point for me to feel more comfortable at work.”

After that, Tracy came out to her siblings and parents. She became a co-chair of the sales organisation’s Rainbow Alliance chapter. And she and Kristyn got married in 2013.

“When I came out at work, I embraced my job so much more,” says Tracy. “For me, coming out was just a beautiful gift I gave myself.”



Making a bold move

Edison Chen, senior brand and customer manager, women’s health, U.K.

Ten years ago, Edison Chen left his home country of Malaysia, where homosexuality is a crime punishable by up to 20 years in prison, to start a new life in the U.K. “I had come to a stage where I felt hopeless in a country where I couldn’t be myself,” says Edison, who made the move with his partner, who’s now his husband.

“It was a bold, daring move,” he adds, “but worthwhile in terms of being able to be ourselves... and being able to do the things I never thought would become a reality, like getting married to my partner, or going to a Pride march. And on a professional level, the organisation has been so supportive.”

When Edison joined the company in 2017, he saw an opportunity to offer even more support to LGBTQ+ employees, so he led the charge to start a Rainbow Alliance chapter in the U.K. He organised a group of colleagues to represent the company at U.K. Pride in London in 2019, on the 50th anniversary of the Stonewall Uprising, and the U.K. Rainbow Alliance chapter launched in February 2020.

“Our company gives employees the reassurance they need to bring their whole selves to work every day,” says Edison. “Especially people like me, who come from a place where I could be persecuted for who I am.”



Taking off the mask

Daniel Muriel, associate specialist, clinical operations, medical writing, Colombia

Before joining the company in 2018, Daniel Muriel worked as a flight attendant, a job that allowed him to explore cities throughout South America and Europe. During his off hours, he immersed himself in local LGBTQ+ culture—but on the job, things were different. “I wore a mask

the majority of the time,” Daniel says. “Because of the stigma that ‘all flight attendants are gay,’ customers would put this label on you. So I would put the mask on to earn respect from them.”

When Daniel left to pursue a different career, he decided to seek out a company where he could be completely himself—and he found it at our company. “I said, ‘I’m not going to put the mask on; I’m going to show them who Daniel really is.’ That was one of the biggest and most positive changes in my life.”

Instead of deflecting questions about his personal life, as he’d done in the past, he told his colleagues about his partner of three years, and about their plans to get married, buy a house, and adopt a child. “Even my boyfriend says, ‘Since you started working for MSD, you’re different. I know you’re happy, not just in your personal life but in your professional life.’”



Leading by example

Thomas Johansson, executive director, clinical research, Poland, Czech Republic, Hungary, and Ukraine

In his 20 years with the company, Thomas Johansson hid his sexual identity from a manager only once—only to discover later that the manager was an LGBTQ+ ally. “I was shocked, and I felt so stupid,” he says. “The lesson learned was, you should not cover up; the worst thing that can happen

is someone doesn’t like you, and that can happen to anyone.”

Now in a leadership role himself, Thomas says he tries “to be open as much as possible, to show that as a gay man you can have a career. You don’t need to cover up to be successful at MSD.”

He acknowledges that the recent rise in conservatism and anti-gay sentiment in Poland and across Eastern Europe has made it more difficult to live openly. Indeed, more than 90 Polish municipalities have declared themselves “LBGT-free zones” in the past year. “It’s not as safe as it was in the past to speak up.”

Thomas is working to make sure employees know that our company is a safe space. In 2019, he helped organise the first Diversity and Inclusion Day in Poland—and while none of the participants asked LGBTQ+ -related questions during the meeting, several people approached Thomas afterwards. “Some of them privately said, ‘thank you so much for your courage, thank you for being visible.’”



Speaking up for change

Marie Sagi, senior specialist, oncology business unit, Tokyo, Japan

Same-sex marriage is not legal in Japan, but Marie Sagi and her partner live in one of a growing number of municipalities that offer same-sex partnership certificates. With the certificate in hand, Marie applied for a “with spouse” housing allowance through the HR department in 2018. Her application was denied.

“At first, I felt helpless,” Marie recalls. “But then I thought, if I allowed the status quo to stand, how many others were going to feel demoralized and isolated? So, I decided to take action.”

Marie learned that our company didn’t offer benefits for same-sex partners—it had simply never come up. Although same-sex partnership certificates had been introduced in Japan just a few years earlier, in 2015, being openly gay in Japan is still largely taboo. Marie was the first employee to bring the issue to the company’s attention.

One week later, she began working with HR to advance LGBTQ+ inclusion—and as a result, our company became one of the first in Japan to provide full benefits to same-sex partners.

For Marie, that was just the first step. Her mission is to help LGBTQ+ employees feel comfortable coming out at work if they want to. In 2019, she established the first Rainbow Alliance chapter in Japan, and she’s continuing to work with HR to increase LGBTQ+ awareness and support.

“I’ve been the only one working on this for a long time,” she says, “but last November, two colleagues said, ‘We are LGBT also,’ and they joined the Rainbow Alliance chapter. One of them told me he joined our company because we have this [same-sex partner program]. I’m so happy he said that, because we worked so hard. I hope more people will join us.”