Tim Cook's announcement could spur Silicon Valley to push for social change

November 5 2014, by Heather Somerville, San Jose Mercury News

Apple chief executive Tim Cook's announcement last week that he is gay caps years of efforts by an industry that has long championed gay rights at home. It also may help propel Silicon Valley to the forefront of global struggles for equality, underscoring the reach tech powerhouses have not only with their gadgets and software but with their positions on heated social issues.

Cook's acknowledgment, in an essay for Bloomberg Businessweek, was far more than a disclosure of his sexuality - it was a declaration that a business leader is not defined by whom he dates, that companies can innovate whether the chief executive is gay or straight, and that the tech industry is at its finest when its leaders are their true authentic self, say gay advocates and industry analysts.

"Everyone is saying, 'Look at the most valuable company on the planet, and it's run by a gay man,'" said Chris Sinton, a 10-year marketing and Internet executive at Cisco who left the company in 2002 to work in philanthropy and on issues involving the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender community. "Maybe someday some kid in Russia will read that and change his view on what sexuality is and what a gay person can accomplish."

After Cook's revelation, advocates say, tech companies that are some of the wealthiest and most powerful multinational companies in the world have a new opportunity to advocate for equality in countries such as Russia and Pakistan, where they sell their products but where LGBT

communities are discriminated against - or worse.

"These big tech companies have offices overseas and sell products in places where there are not only not enough women as business role models but definitely not a lot of lesbian role models," said Leanne Pittsford, a founder of Lesbians Who Tech, a San Francisco-based group dedicated to supporting and connecting gay women and their allies in the industry. "This could provide an impetus for tech companies to get more involved overseas."

Tackling gay rights on the global stage is seen by LGBT advocates as a natural progression for the tech community, where information-driven and forward-thinking firms, often staffed by young and highly educated professionals, have created workplaces that embrace sexual diversity.

Whether it's Apple marching in the annual San Francisco Pride parade or Google's Legalize Love campaign, which promotes gay rights in countries where homosexuality is illegal, tech giants and startups have more openly and aggressively championed the LGBT community than many other industries have. Indeed, tech companies were offering benefits for same-sex partners in the 1980s, when such perks were unheard of almost everywhere else.

"Technology as an industry has always been based on early adopters and innovators," said Jonathan Lovitz, spokesman for StartOut, an organization of LGBT entrepreneurs. "So they are likely to be ahead of the curve on social policy. You're watching banks and law firms that are now playing catch-up with the tech sector, which has been way out in front."

Leading tech companies, including Google and Apple, rank high on the Human Rights Watch equality index, which tracks how companies treat LGBT workers. There aren't any hard numbers about LGBT workers in

tech, but Deloitte researcher Christie Smith said tech has one of the highest percentages of workers among industries who say they feel comfortable coming out at work.

Part of that, Smith contends, is because tech leaders tend to be more honest about themselves than executives in other industries. Among the openly gay tech leaders are Megan Smith, who oversaw Google's experimental projects and recently joined the White House as chief technology officer of the United States; Peter Thiel, PayPal cofounder and billionaire investor; Sam Altman, president of tech accelerator Y Combinator; Wesley Chan, an early Google product manager and angel investor; and Nancy Vitale, the chief human resources officer at Genentech.

But there's still plenty of work to be done to promote tolerance in Silicon Valley, particularly among younger startups, Sinton said.

"Sure, (information technology) is innovative and forward looking," he said. "But at the same time it's 'bros' and the 'brogrammers' and the frat-boy culture."

Still, the very technology some of these companies create - social media networks, dating apps and video-sharing platforms - has helped reduce intolerance and homophobia by creating an information-driven culture where nearly everyone with a smartphone has stumbled upon a Facebook page for a LGBT group or a "coming out" video on YouTube.

"Once you have the Internet of people connecting with each other, and whether that's on Facebook or people connecting on apps, you can't reverse that," said Kenji Yoshino, a professor of constitutional law at New York University who is writing a book on this topic. "You can't unring that bell. The fact that gay people exist is everywhere, and you have to decide whether or not you're going to treat them as brothers and

sisters. And I think tech - Google, Facebook and Apple - had a lot to do with that."

Others caution that Cook's - or any tech leader's - obligation is not to the LGBT movement, but to employees and investors.

"He is a CEO who happens to be gay," Sinton said. "His obligation is to his shareholders. I do not expect him to carry a rainbow flag and drive a social agenda around the world."

Cook's announcement, and the lengths to which tech companies have gone to embrace the LGBT community, also highlight how little they've done to bring more women, blacks and Latinos into their workforce. Many of these companies champion diversity, but while they've taken to the streets to advocate for gay rights, they have done little to move the needle on the number of women and people of color entering and staying in tech. Apple's workforce is 70 percent male and 55 percent white.

Jennifer Brown, a diversity and inclusion consultant who has worked with Fortune 500 companies including Cisco, said Cook's announcement should resonate with both "tech talent and the executive leadership who may say they support diversity but haven't really been putting their money where their mouth is and go out on a limb."

"This sends a social message," she added, "that the C suite, which frankly is composed largely of white heterosexual males, is one of the last bastions where we aren't seeing the true diversity of the rest of the world."

Citation: Tim Cook's announcement could spur Silicon Valley to push for social change (2014,

November 5) retrieved 20 March 2024 from https://phys.org/news/2014-11-tim-cook-spur-silicon-valley.html