

# Expressing 'true self' may prove elusive for trans employees who are transitioning

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Trans employees who are transitioning in the workplace go through a complex process of "endless becoming," according to a new study.

The study, published in the *Academy of Management Journal*, explodes the myth of [gender](#) transition as a linear "journey" with a fixed endpoint.

The researchers challenge the idea of an "authentic self" as an ultimate goal by suggesting there is no fixed endpoint at which authenticity is achieved.

Rather, expressing an identity that feels "true" is an ongoing process for individuals as they learn more about themselves and revise how they express their gender identity.

The researchers interviewed 25 [transgender](#) employees from the Netherlands four times over two years.

In each interview, participants were asked open questions about how they expressed their gender identity at work, how their gender identity was evolving and about their feelings regarding their changing sense of self.

"Our participants described being ready to reveal what they perceived to be their 'true self' in the early stages of their transition," said Professor Jamie Ladge, a Distinguished Research Professor at the University of Exeter Business School and Associate Professor at Northeastern University.

"Yet in performing their transition, they realized that what felt 'true' was shifting as they were learning more about how to express their gender in a way that felt 'authentic enough' while also aiming to put others at ease and elicit reciprocal acceptance and understanding."

The process of "becoming authentic" was found to be one of trial and error, with advances and setbacks that do not always lead to any stable endpoint, as transgender individuals experiment with dress, verbal

communication styles and other forms of behavior.

This contrasts with academic findings assuming authenticity is a state arrived at when an individual outwardly expresses a sense of self that aligns with their internal sense of self, and which is then validated by others.

While transitions are often depicted as individual journeys, the study found that the tension between the desire to be accepted and the wish to express a gender that feels authentic means identity transition is a non-linear and ongoing process of exploration and change.

The study's co-author Professor Sophie Hennekam from Rennes School of Business said: "In our study, the psychological shifts kicked off the transition process, as transgender individuals had to feel ready to express their gender at work before engaging in any visible identity changes.

"Once they were psychologically ready, they began the process of making physical (eg dress, hair) and behavioral (e.g., mannerisms) changes in a way that they felt best reflected their internal [gender identity](#).

"However, as they actually expressed their gender through physical and behavioral alterations at work, many came to realize that their internal identity did not fully match these changes, leading them to alter the course of their transition, and getting feedback from others as they expressed themselves also influenced the process."

The findings offer important practical implications for businesses and organizations by showing that while transgender individuals may share similar experiences of workplace bias and discrimination as other marginalized identities, they also face a unique set of challenges.

The authors observed that transitioning while in employment makes transgender employees particularly vulnerable, as they are undergoing a personal transition in public, and urged organizations to provide adequate support.

They also called on organizations, managers and HR professionals to support transgender employees by addressing the extent to which social and gendered norms in the workplace dictate how people should dress and behave, and how organizations knowingly or unknowingly reinforce the gender binary.

"Free to Be Me? Evolving Gender Expression and the Dynamic Interplay between Authenticity and the Desire to Be Accepted at Work" is published in the *Academy of Management Journal*.

**More information:** Sophie Hennekam et al, Free to Be Me? Evolving Gender Expression and the Dynamic Interplay between Authenticity and the Desire to Be Accepted at Work, *Academy of Management Journal* (2022). [DOI: 10.5465/amj.2020.1308](https://doi.org/10.5465/amj.2020.1308)

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