

Authenticity on the job dramatically benefits trans workers, study finds

June 3 2024, by Rick Hellman



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A recent study of transgender and nonbinary adults found they were dramatically happier about their job and life in general when they felt comfortable asserting their true identities in the workplace.

It increased their self-reported satisfaction scores in those categories by 22% to 24%.

"We're always looking to move the needle, but this is not incremental. It's huge," said one of the study's co-authors, Cameron Piercy, University of Kansas associate professor of communication studies. "And there is no cost to an employer. All they have to do is value people for who they are."

Piercy and his former graduate student Rebecca Baumler, who is now pursuing a doctorate at the University of Texas-Austin, co-wrote "Crystallized Trans Identity: How Authenticity and Identity Communication Affect Job and Life Satisfaction." It was first [published](#) online March 10 in the journal *Communication Research*.

They surveyed 206 trans adults about how they communicated their gender identity at work, broadly dividing it into three forms of communication: explicit (i.e., openly sharing their trans identity), implicit (i.e., voicing support for trans rights) and covering (i.e., concealing their trans identity).

Based on previous research, Piercy said, it was unsurprising that explicit outness was associated with increased job and life satisfaction while closeted communication was negatively associated with them. But the magnitude of that positive association was surprising, he said.

"For our trans participants, this is really meaningful," Piercy said. "And for workplaces, it's often at the bottom of the list of things they're paying attention to. We think [gender identity](#) doesn't have a place at work. We think of work as a task-driven thing. But the reality is, and the reason the bring-your-whole-self-to-work movement is becoming so popular is, because it's folly for us to think that our identities outside of work don't have a bearing on who we are at work."

Another surprising finding, the KU researcher said, was that implicit outness didn't help trans workers feel any better. On the contrary, it was negatively associated with life satisfaction.

"We interpret that as what we call a suppression effect," Piercy said. "When you advocate for trans identities but you don't advocate for yourself ... it actually harms your life satisfaction. What you're saying and what you're doing are at odds with each other."

On the other hand, the authors write, "The explanatory power of perceived authentic behavior and identity communication for trans folks at work is dramatic. In total, this model explained almost a quarter of the variance in both job ... and life satisfaction."

The authors write that they were trying to tease out benefits of alignment between the workers' internal and external identity portrayal, or, to put it another way, by eliminating the difference between their real and less authentic selves. This aligns with the theory of "crystallized identity," Piercy said.

"The idea is that we've got many different sides," Piercy said, "and, as you turn the crystal, it refracts light differently, and people are just like that. We have an identity that we might portray in an interview with a news reporter, versus when you're with your spouse, versus an identity that you portray when you're talking with a co-worker that you like, or a co-worker you dislike, and those together represent a dynamic and ever-changing identity. We really liked the theory because it acknowledges that people are complex beings."

The authors write that the paper's dramatic findings "reveal the importance of communicating in ways consistent with how one sees oneself" and "add to the growing evidence and theory suggesting value in communicating the self holistically, especially at work."

Piercy and Baumler list examples of research-supported actions employers could take to make their trans employees' lives better: "... taking the initiative to use inclusive language that transcends traditional gender binaries, providing allyship workshops to foster inclusivity, assessing policies to ensure they accommodate trans employees, and fostering [interpersonal relationships](#) ..."

They also call for "additional research on creating supportive workplaces where all workers, regardless of their identity, can practice crystallization."

"In my view," Piercy said, "this is the tip of the iceberg. If we see these huge relationships to job and life [satisfaction](#), the question becomes how does that turn into commitment or persistence at work? How does it reduce turnover? My suspicion—and you can see this in the participants' quotes—is that workplaces that allow people to be themselves are less likely to experience negative work outcomes."

More information: Rebecca J. Baumler et al, Crystallized Trans Identity: How Authenticity and Identity Communication Affect Job and Life Satisfaction, *Communication Research* (2024). [DOI: 10.1177/00936502241234840](#)

Provided by University of Kansas

Citation: Authenticity on the job dramatically benefits trans workers, study finds (2024, June 3) retrieved 22 June 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2024-06-authenticity-job-benefits-trans-workers.html>

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