


# When you don't feel safe to be your real self at work

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Patti Flynn, a rising executive, walked away from her job as she transitioned from male to female.

Until June, Patti Flynn worked at a suburban manufacturer owned by her family and employing about 150. She'd returned to Chicago in October after more than two decades in California, where she had transformed an underperforming plant and quadrupled revenue. In February, she took over as president and chief operating officer. Four months later, she walked away.

Two years earlier, Flynn, now 48, confronted her longtime questions about her gender identity and decided to transition from male to female. Even as she came out to a widening group of family and friends, worries about others' reactions kept her closeted at the office. Hormone therapy ultimately forced her to make another decision.

"There's a finite amount of time you can hide this if you're medically transitioning," she says. "I was having to wear a chest binder. My hair, my face changed. I had to do something. I was either going to have to quit, or I was going to have to come out. In my brain, it seemed easier to leave."

Gay, lesbian and transgender people have won a number of civil rights victories in the last decade, most notably the right to marry in 2015. Last year the U.S. Court of Appeals in Chicago outlawed workplace discrimination based on sexual orientation. Todd Solomon, an employee benefits partner at McDermott Will & Emery in Chicago, has gone from drawing 15 people to his talks on domestic partner benefits to 200 people who want to hear about transgender health benefits. Jennifer Pritzker has been public as transgender for five years. Boeing and Hyatt sponsored floats in Chicago's Pride parade this year, and in July, Beth Ford at Land O'Lakes became the first openly gay woman to helm a Fortune 500 company, joining LGBTQ execs Tim Cook at Apple and James Fitterling at Dow Chemical.

Despite these gains, a report released in June by Washington, D.C.-based Human Rights Campaign found that 54 percent of employees are out at work—an increase of just 5 percentage points from 2009. The Equal Employment Opportunity Commission settled a case against a Chicago debt collector in July where an employee said supervisors and co-workers had pummeled him for 19 months with anti-gay slurs. Gov. Bruce Rauner vetoed a bill this month that would have prohibited businesses with fewer than 15 employees from discriminating based on sexual orientation.

Nine Chicago-area companies received poor or mediocre scores on Human Rights Campaign's annual rating of LGBTQ-friendly policies and benefits: Allscripts, Anixter International, Ingredion, LKQ, Old Republic International, Telephone & Data Systems, Tenneco, Univar and USG. Univar spokesman Dwayne Roark says in an email that the company rejects discrimination and harassment, offers a competitive benefit package and plans to "contact the Human Rights Campaign to ensure . . . the score received properly reflects our policies and commitments." Ingredion declines to comment, and the rest did not respond to a request for comment.

## **MORE OPEN**

Certain industries generally are more open to LGBTQ employees, according to an analysis of HRC's annual ratings. Professional services firms and companies in finance and insurance are likely to have policies and benefits accommodating gay, lesbian and transgender employees. At the other end of the spectrum, construction, mining, and oil and gas extraction are less likely to have these.

## INDUSTRIAL EQUALITY

Human Rights Campaign surveyed 947 businesses and awarded a perfect score of 100 to those meeting all benchmarks for LGBTQ-friendly policies and benefits.

### PERCENTAGE OF BUSINESSES WITH A PERFECT LGBTQ-FRIENDLY SCORE

Industry	Percentage with a perfect score	Businesses surveyed
Professional, scientific & technical services	79%	224
Finance & insurance	68%	189
Information	57%	112
Accommodation & food services	54%	26
Retail trade	53%	100
Manufacturing	46%	241
Health care & social assistance	43%	30
Utilities	43%	40
Transportation & warehousing	36%	31
Construction	13%	15
Mining, quarrying, oil & gas extraction	7%	45
Wholesale trade	7%	15

Note: Survey is of Fortune 500 and large private employers nationwide.

Source: Corporate Equality Index 2018 from Human Rights Campaign, Crain's analysis

Even so, say Beck Bailey and Liz Cooper, who focus on workplace issues at Human Rights Campaign, an individual's work environment ultimately is determined by their bosses and co-workers, who may be less welcoming than the company's official line. "It takes lots of work to really change culture and how people interact with each other and how that expresses itself," Bailey says. "LGBT people have seen a lot of progress in a relatively short period of time, and this research points out we have a long way to go."

Workers stay closeted for different reasons. LaSaia Wade, executive director of the Brave Space Alliance in Washington Park, says that the current political climate makes LGBTQ people hesitant to come out. In other cases, white men want to preserve the power of that identity by maintaining the illusion of heterosexuality.

For Flynn, it was worry over how others might react and whether she could continue to lead the organization effectively. As a midsize private company, there was no HR road map for how to handle the situation. "The discomfort that I had coming out was entirely my own," she says. "It's a good company, and they do good things. I just wasn't a fit there anymore."



Companies should be committed to engaging LGBTQ employees year-round, “instead of just waiting until Pride month,” says Jerome Holston, director of the LGBT Chamber of Commerce.

Denise Bowker, 56, a vice president at Northern Trust who maintains the company's public websites, had that road map. A 10-page document outlines how the bank handles employee transitions. She discussed the situation with her boss and then human resources more than a year before going public at work, to alert them to the substantial time off she would need for medical appointments.

But she knows transgender friends at smaller businesses who weren't treated that way. Some were harassed, while another was laid off, ostensibly for unrelated reasons. One was demoted for diminished productivity.

Transitioning does sap an employee's productivity, Bowker says, due to medical leave combined with the stress and newness of change. She has a standing doctor's appointment every Friday afternoon until the end of the year. But after eight to 12 months, productivity returns to normal, enhanced by gratitude toward a supportive organization and the relief of no longer being out “24/7, minus 40.” “The emails I received when I came out here were everything from ‘Oh, my God, I had no idea’ to ‘Welcome to the club,’ ” she says. “I worked here for 31 years. Everybody knows the old me, and nobody screws up.”

Even at companies that score highly on HRC's annual ratings, a list that in metro Chicago includes AbbVie, Groupon, MillerCoors and United Continental Holdings, many people will stay in—or return to—the closet, says John Barry, a vice president at Northern and a longtime

Human Rights Campaign volunteer. People who came out in high school will hide their sexual orientation or gender identity at their first job. They wait to come out until they feel secure in their environment and career trajectory.

When companies appoint LGBTQ employees to senior positions, it shows entry and midlevel employees that they can succeed at an organization, says Jerome Holston, director of the LGBT Chamber of Commerce. That year-round commitment is better "instead of just waiting until Pride month."

Coming out at work is a bigger issue than people realize, says Anthony Kreis, a professor at IIT Chicago-Kent School of Law. The freedom to be out that some affluent, urbanized workers command fuels the impression that their experience represents the totality of LGBTQ people's experience, obscuring the stories of those who lack that same freedom. "It's surprising how deep the fears run in employees," he says. "Even in 2018."

Flynn doesn't call it fear, but for her, transitioning has meant embracing deeply uncomfortable situations in order to push past them. "I traded in a lot of privilege for my freedom and my sanity," she says.

She's still pushing. Last month, drawing on her operational success in California, Flynn launched her own business in Logan Square, [Phase N Consulting](#). She plans to offer clients expertise in business process optimization and change management.