Addressing stigma at work

Workplaces should pay more attention to the impact of stigma on employees, a visiting US psychologist said.

Michigan State University organisational psychology professor Ann Marie Ryan was in Brisbane last month for the ninth Industrial and Organisational Psychology Conference. She told the Star Observer workplaces need to train managers to better identify and handle instances of discrimination.

“There’s a lot to do in awareness and making individuals aware of not just the direct biases and prejudices … but actually looking more at subtle ways we might be exclusionary or not accepting or not allowing people to be free to be themselves,” Ryan said.

“Managers are not really given the skills to manage work groups of diverse people … so certainly organisations could do a lot more.”

Ryan said along with stigma people with disabilities or those with different ethnic or religious backgrounds may face in the workplace, homophobia remains an issue.

A 1999 Sydney University report found that 59 percent of GLBTI workers had experienced some form of homophobic behaviour in the workplace. Just over 67 percent of lesbians, 57 percent of gay men and 75 percent of transgender people surveyed had experienced poor behaviour or treatment. Negative experiences ranged from homophobic jokes, unwelcome questioning about sexuality, gender identity or HIV status to physical threats and violence and prejudicial treatment affecting career progression.

Although global workplaces are increasingly diverse, stigma in the workplace, Ryan said, often manifests in quieter ways.

“Co-workers might be aware of an individual’s orientation but if their partner comes to meet them for lunch, if they’re a heterosexual couple they’d give them a hug in the lobby of the building, but a gay or lesbian couple might not do that simply because they’re sensitive to how that’s going to be perceived by co-workers,” she said.

Ryan said while most research suggests being open about your sexuality or gender identity in daily life is overwhelmingly beneficial, there are still personal costs to individuals and it still largely depends on the workplace.

“I think that’s what intrigued me about this area. There’s a general tendency in psychological research to say affirm your identity, acknowledge it and that will have more positive outcomes,” she said.

“But in many workplaces there may be a lot of interpersonal costs affirming your identity strongly, which is going to lead to more negative [reaction] and we know that because there is [societal] bias. That’s the dilemma people face and those interpersonal costs associated can be pretty severe and have long-term negative effects on the individual.”
Ryan said it’s up to organisations to be more aware of the issues workers may face. “The primary responsibility is still with employers to create a work environment that’s conducive for people to be productive and to feel valued and respected,” Ryan said.

Not-for-profit organisation Pride in Diversity operates in Australia to assist Australian employers to include LGBT employees. This year IT giant IBM was named Australia’s most gay-friendly employer.