Spot the difference
Your disaffected colleagues hidden in plain view
The hidden engineers

Mark McBride-Wright reviews the alarming results of a new study into ‘minority’ employees and what engineering firms must do to improve diversity and inclusion.

As an engineer who is gay, I’m struck by how the engineering industry loses out on the best talent by not appealing to a wider, more diverse audience. Companies must do more to boost diversity and inclusion (D&I), and not just on gender and race but for ‘hidden minorities’ too.

Last year, IChemE’s London & South East Members Group founded a working group to promote D&I in chemical engineering. To help understand the state of D&I in our discipline, we conducted a comprehensive, anonymous survey of our members. The results confirmed our concerns – companies that employ chemical engineers have a great deal of progress to make.

**Sexual orientation**

279 members of the member group responded, and 6% stated they were lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender (LGBT). This is in line with UK government estimates that 5-7% of the UK population is LGBT. 53% of LGBT respondents said they were not open about their sexuality in the workplace. This is set against 34% for the wider UK community, and 41% in the US, according to figures from *The Glass Closet*, a book written by John Browne, the gay former CEO of BP.

20% of LGBT respondents said that they experienced discrimination, rising to 40% who observed it. These are alarmingly high percentages.

Browne says companies pay a heavy price in the productivity that is lost by employees who do not feel comfortable enough to ‘come out’ in the workplace.

I am constantly meeting new colleagues or clients, and when we discuss life outside of work I regularly take the decision whether to ‘come out’ to these people. I do make a conscious effort to be myself now, but there is always ‘that moment’ when I consider playing the pronoun game, and saying “she” instead of “he”. Opting for “partner” is ambiguous, but can euphemistically imply a same-sex relationship. But I should be able to say “husband” without fear of judgement.

Furthermore, progress and acceptance within the workplace for those in the LGBT community is hindered by homophobic language where “gay” is an expression denoting something negative. I have experienced this at work. It may be casual banter for some, but for me it resonates with childhood bullying and must be challenged and stamped out. Keep an ear open for it in your own workplace.

Companies can help LGBT employees by promoting an open and inclusive work environment, and considering LGBT when setting up diversity initiatives. I have not yet worked in a company which has had an LGBT network. I would like to see one set up in my current workplace and also more across other engineering firms. I expect it would not only make me happier but help attract and retain a wider pool of talent (see *Establishing company networks*).

There are challenges for companies to overcome including the collection of data on LGBT employees (see *Barriers to companies succeeding*) and considerations to make for companies operating in less inclusive countries (see *When company culture clashes with national culture*). Establishing a company LGBT network is an essential first step to table the discussion, find solutions and promote inclusion.

I believe in the need for D&I so passionately that I have set up an initiative called InterEngineering to help connect, inform and empower LGBT engineers. Along with the Royal Academy of Engineering and the gay rights group Stonewall, we co-hosted an employer roundtable on 11 May with senior managers from companies including Arup, BG Group, BP, Buro Happold, IBM, KBR, RAF, Rolls-Royce, and WSP. The focus of the session was to work out how to improve equality within engineering.

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The event generated a lot of discussion identifying that the issue around LGBT equality within engineering remains an uncomfortable conversation. Companies represented are all at different stages of their respective journeys, but what was clear is the need for collecting data on the workforce from which improvement over time can be benchmarked. Other key points – in terms of benefits of industry supporting its LGBT employees – included: productivity gains; ability to meet supplier clauses/bidding requirements related to demonstrable inclusion; removal of barriers to staff progression; establishing a culture where concerns can be raised; creating a positive

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Establishing company networks

A company network for women is typically the first diversity network established by firms looking to actively promote D&I. The second is a network for minority races. However, companies should establish networks for other minorities too including LGBT, disability, age, early-career etc. An effective network delivers a platform for employees to have their voices heard, and to foster a culture of inclusion where every employee can be open and themselves, and empowered to fulfil their full potential, without any barriers.

These networks can be well integrated into an organisation so as to maximise communication channels with management, and share resources to avoid duplication of effort. A member of the executive team would champion the initiative. Networks are created for each minority group with elected chairs. The chairs come together to form the diversity leadership group (DLG). From here, they interface with the champions of the DLG from the executive management team. The networks are run by employees, for employees. They are for anyone who supports the cause of the minority – ie men can go to women’s network events.

When company culture clashes with national culture

Minorities face significant challenges in ‘less inclusive’ societies. Being gay can affect your career choices. There are some countries where LGBT people can face life imprisonment and, at worse, the death penalty. Simply for being who they are. To operate (survive) in said societies, you have to repress who you are, and you have a constant worry that you will be ‘found out’.

It has been said to me that companies are not lobbying organisations, and are not there to change the law of the land in the countries in which they operate. However, they have a duty of care first and foremost to their staff. An employee should not be expected to take on a foreign assignment if it will put them in a country where they will be at risk. Companies should have a policy whereby the employee should be able to turn down this request and it not negatively affect their career progression. If an employee is at risk, then companies need to have policies and procedures in place to ensure their safety on overseas assignments. Some companies even recognise that LGBT employees will not be able to have their husband or wife visit in-country, and so will offer flexible rotations so they can meet at the nearest safe country.

Companies can also have some influence in the countries of their operations. They should use this influence to affect positive change. This also applies to IChemE and other professional engineering institutes.

Impact on individuals during recruitment and delivering a better perception of the company overall.

Do contact me if you are interested in getting involved with InterEngineering.

Social mobility

Being LGBT can be hard during your teens when you are discovering your identity, and for some this means coming to terms with it. This can affect your performance in school. If you couple this with coming from a disadvantaged background then you can have a lot of obstacles to overcome.

Surprisingly, our survey found that just 9% of respondents came from a disadvantaged background. This seems very low, and again reinforces the point that engineering firms would have a wider talent pool to fish from if we could get more students from disadvantaged backgrounds to choose engineering.

The most remarkable statistic was the difference in the proportion of chemical engineers’ mothers who attended university. 26% of male respondents’ mothers had degrees, compared to 52% of females. This indicates that better-educated women are more likely to disregard gender stereotypes and encourage their daughters into a career in engineering. If a student comes from a socially disadvantaged background they may not readily have access to a wide pool of knowledge.

For those students needing more support directly, the Social Mobility Foundation (SMF) does a fantastic job of supporting top-performing students from lower status schools. The charity aims to make a practical improvement in social mobility for young people from low-income backgrounds. I would encourage you all to consider offering a week’s work experience
to children from a school nearby which may not readily have such instant access.

disability
We asked people whether they considered themselves to have a disability, as defined in the Disability Discrimination Act. 1.8% of respondents replied yes, set against 16% in the wider working society, according to UK government figures. The difference for this irregularity is not clear. It could perhaps be that the type of work done in engineering precludes people with some disabilities, therefore they do not enter the profession.

To support disability, some companies have established company networks to connect individuals and raise their profile as employees, and educate managers and the wider workforce on their needs.

BP's Disability Network is a very good example of how to boost the inclusion of disabled employees.

On the whole though, disability within engineering is an area that requires much greater research.

gender
Having covered the 'hidden minorities', we can now look at the feedback on gender and race. Again, the results are not encouraging.

Discrimination based on gender was the most reported form. 56% of all female respondents said they have witnessed or experienced sexist discrimination.

Comments ranged from feelings of exclusion to outright sexist remarks. Over half the cases of discrimination were not resolved.

This number is significant, and is very high despite all the work that has been done over the past 30 years by organisations such as Women into Science & Engineering (WISE). I would like to see companies commit to turning policies into practice. The best way to make a difference is to sustain a dialogue between both sexes about the importance, benefits, barriers and challenges of gender initiatives for both the organisation and the individual. Setting targets for the number of women as female group leaders and in senior management by 2020 is a starting point, and this has to be sponsored by existing men on the board to create top-down cultural workplace change.

No men reported personally experiencing discrimination based on gender and only 7% reported observing discrimination based on gender. This is a low percentage which suggests that men may not be aware of the barriers facing women. An active dialogue between both sexes will raise awareness for both parties.

black, Asian & minority ethnicity (BAME)
BAME covers ethnic groups outside of Caucasian. Over 28% of respondents were from BAME groups, and racial discrimination was the second most commonly-reported form of discrimination at nearly 10%. Of the BAME respondents, 23% had experienced discrimination personally whilst 29% observed it in the workplace. Comments included being

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Barriers to companies succeeding

Under the Data Protection Act, there are lots of aspects that restrict what a company can report. Thus, D&I statistics are reported based on “measurable” aspects such as gender, age and ethnicity. The hidden aspects of diversity often go unreported. Companies should collect this data for tracking the diversity of their workforce, and look to establish metrics to assess improvement on an annual basis. If employees trust their firm and see a commitment to D&I for LGBT employees, they will participate.

A common problem with D&I is the disservice to white Caucasian males. This group may commonly feel excluded when talking about D&I initiatives. This group comprises the majority within engineering, and so it is pivotal that they are included in discussions and actions relating to diversity. It would be ironic for them not to feel included given the whole aim of D&I practices. The key is within the “I” of “D&I”. It is critically important that networks are inclusive, as opposed to exclusive. This allows for individuals from minority groups to flourish as they can be their entire self at work, and permits supporters of the groups to also be included. Voicing the needs of a minority group to which you do not belong will make you one of the strongest advocates for its needs; an ally for its cause.

Stonewall’s annual Workplace Equality Index. In 2015, this number had risen to 10. By contrast, only two engineering firms (BP and EDF Energy) appeared in the top 100 in 2015.

While IChemE is a signatory to both the Royal Academy of Engineering and Science Council Diversity Concordat, it can do more to help boost D&I in the sector. Our data provides a snapshot and a benchmark for our region but a national survey would be more meaningful. I’d like to see IChemE commit to carrying out national and global surveys of members. D&I needs to be implemented from the top down and have active buy-in from the executives of a firm to be truly meaningful. IChemE can prompt companies to boost D&I by setting requirements in its Corporate Partner Scheme, and providing best practice guidance to companies who want to succeed. An award could even be introduced at the annual IChemE Awards to recognise those best promoting D&I.

If the profession is to appeal to the next generation, we must be more inclusive. So, this is a call-to-arms, klaxon-blasting request to all engineers out there: IChemE members, Member Groups, SIGs, companies, and everyone directly and indirectly within the IChemE network, please get in touch and share your thoughts and ideas, and let us know if your organisation fully embraces D&I initiatives. Together through collaboration we can move engineering forward to shed its image of an old and tired sector, to one which is vibrant, modern and thriving, with a workforce that is welcoming and accepting.

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