

NEWS

Higher bills as Rudd proposes changes to capacity market

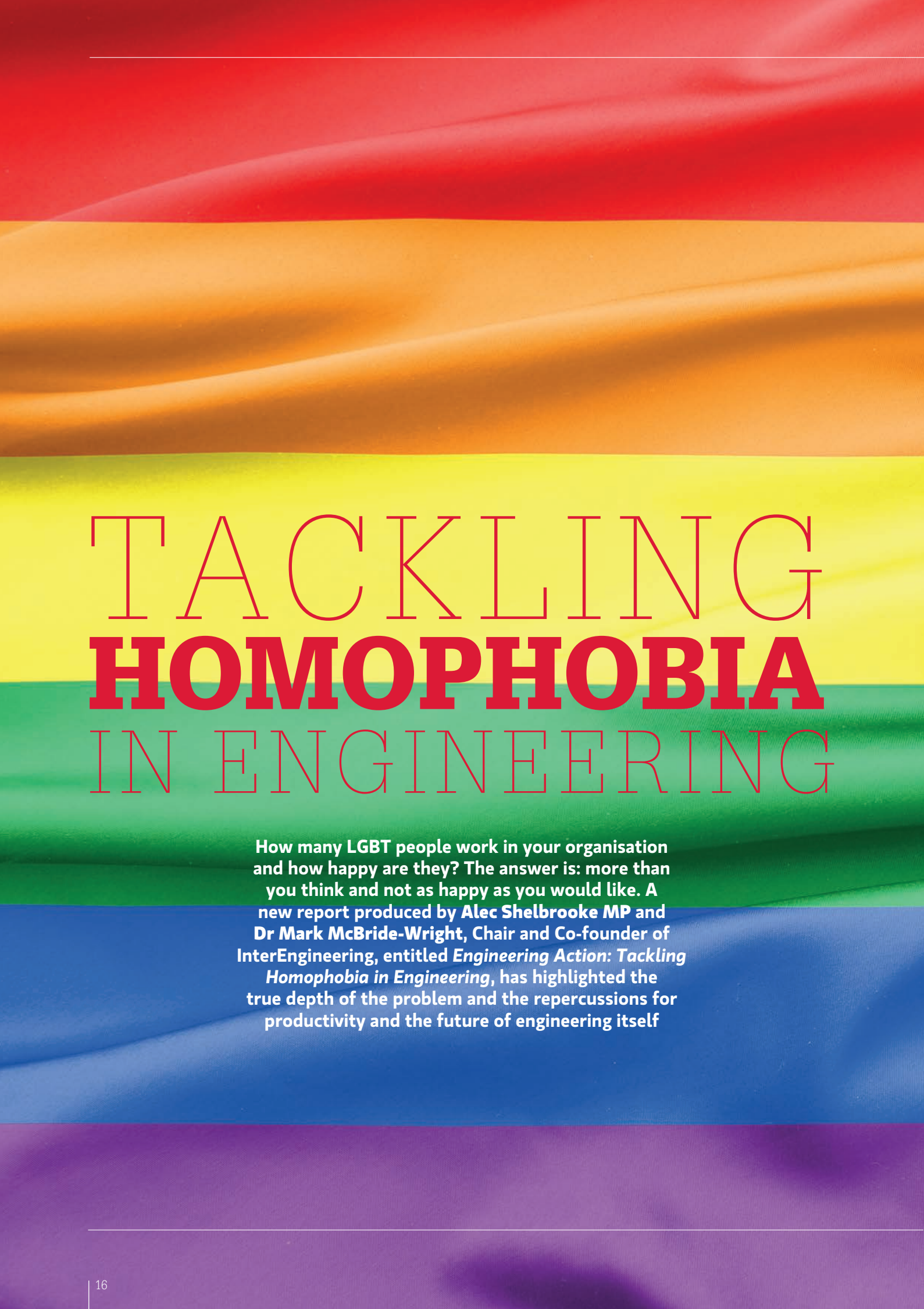
'Limited' future for gas in the UK without carbon capture

Brexit 'could leave UK with blackouts, gas shortages'



A BRIGHTER FUTURE

Tackling homophobia in engineering



TACKLING **HOMOPHOBIA** IN ENGINEERING

How many LGBT people work in your organisation and how happy are they? The answer is: more than you think and not as happy as you would like. A new report produced by **Alec Shelbrooke MP** and **Dr Mark McBride-Wright**, Chair and Co-founder of InterEngineering, entitled *Engineering Action: Tackling Homophobia in Engineering*, has highlighted the true depth of the problem and the repercussions for productivity and the future of engineering itself

The engineering industry is losing a potential £11.2 billion due to lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) engineers remaining in the closet resulting in a 30 per cent reduction in productivity.

Engineering is behind the curve in terms of equality and diversity for LGBT people. A culture of homophobia and transphobia has become embedded among workers and this is having a negative impact on both workers and productivity.

Engineers are afraid to come out for what they perceive to be both personal and professional risks in the workplace. The subtle atmosphere is interspersed with openly homophobic incidents that are swept under the rug, leading to people putting more of their efforts into concealing their true identity and suppressing their private lives when at work.

Significant fears are held by people about coming out as LGBT and the effect that this homophobic culture would have on their career progression.

Surveys have shown that around half of LGBT people employed in engineering are now choosing to remain closeted. A lack of visibility is created that feeds on itself as fewer people feel confident enough to come out and act as role models to others.

Businesses that employ engineers also suffer as a result of a homophobic culture. Hiding one's sexuality can reduce an employee's

productivity and engagement at work by up to 30 per cent and is likely to have a knock-on effect on the people who work around them.

Discriminatory attitudes towards LGBT engineers have no place in today's society, yet they continue to blight the sector, contributing to the growing opinion that the engineering profession is being left in the past. Just three companies that employ a large number of engineers were featured in the leading LGBT rights charity Stonewall's 2015 Top 100 Workplace Equality Index: BP, EDF Energy, and the armed forces.

Surveys conducted within the sector to gain the views of LGBT engineers indicate that this problem is rooted far deeper than would be expected of such a highly-regarded profession. Less than half (46 per cent) of gay engineers said they would be comfortable being out about their sexuality in the workplace.

LGBT in engineering

Engineering employs around 5.4 million people in the UK across all functions accounting for 17.4 per cent of the UK workforce. Issues affecting the productivity of the workforce affect the economic output of the industry. Since homophobia in engineering is an ongoing issue, this needs to be urgently addressed.

Understanding and solving the problem of homophobic attitudes requires an understanding of exactly who is affected by a widespread intolerance of LGBT employees within

the engineering industry.

It is essential to consider the full LGBT spectrum of people when discrimination becomes a problem. In a survey conducted using a sample group of 279 engineers, six per cent said they were LGBT, fitting in line with the UK government's estimation that 5-7 per cent of the UK population is LGBT.

The study further demonstrated that of these people, 53 per cent of LGBT respondents said they were not open about their sexuality in the workplace, or were 'closeted'. A stark contrast appears when we compare this to the UK national average where figures show 34 per cent of the UK LGBT population chooses to remain in the closet.

Figures show that less than half of all gay engineers are comfortable being open about their sexual orientations with their immediate colleagues and this number falls to just eight per cent among those working on construction sites.

Lingering sexism also has an influencing role in the industry with lesbian and transgender engineers at a particular disadvantage from a classically straight-male dominated profession.

Individuals working in open, diverse, inclusive environments have higher levels of engagement and satisfaction, leading to greater productivity. They are more likely to speak up with suggestions to improve performance, and to "go the extra mile" and contribute to the culture of the company.

Targeting homophobia in the engineering sector will fit in with the government's aim to increase the productivity of the UK economy as this will end the reduced productivity that accompanies employees' decisions to remain in the closet. We estimate that if homophobia were to be totally eradicated in the workplace, the industry would stand to generate up to an extra £11.2 billion for the UK economy.

Explicit abuse

Explicit homophobia is the most obvious form of discrimination within the industry. Jokes and slurs targeted at gay employees are commonly reported and are especially prevalent on building sites. Over half of lesbian, gay and bisexual white-collar employees have reported harassment



Engineering Action: Tackling Homophobia in Engineering was launched at Westminster in February. L-R: Philip Greenish, CEO, Royal Academy of Engineering, Dr Mark McBride-Wright, Chair & Co-Founder of InterEngineering, Debra Wilfong, VP Technology, BP, Alec Shelbrooke MP and Ruth Hunt, CEO, Stonewall UK

as a result of their sexuality in the workplace, having been snubbed or slighted at work.

Open homophobia, particularly expressed from a manager, can be a serious problem as it can set the tone for the whole office, but also increases the professional risk of coming out as gay. For instance, the employee's sexuality may act as a barrier to career progression and promotion. When surveyed, 33 per cent of LGBT engineers reported they felt their sexuality had acted as a barrier to their career progression.

It should also be noted that transgender employees face the most severe consequences for coming out when it comes to explicit abuse. One company in the US saw 90 per cent of its transgender employees report harassment and discrimination over their sexuality and/or gender identity. A further half also felt they had been fired, not hired or overlooked for promotion as a result of their sexual identity.

An underlying current

Homophobia is one of the few aspects left directly unchallenged on site. Racism was rife in the 1980s, and this has been significantly reduced due to it being challenged. While explicit abuse is the most obvious form of homophobic discrimination, it is the tacit, latent homophobia that shows where the problem is so deeply ingrained in the engineering industry. Only 7.7 per cent described open abuse and discrimination at work, but many found there was a subtler undertone within the industry.

Casual jokes without intent, comments made in passing, or the use of the word 'gay' as an insult or to express frustration are all commonly reported in engineering. Many who engage in this form of discourse see comments as 'banter' and may be a result of the 'macho' culture that is expected within the engineering and construction industries.

People who can be identified as homophobic may also express this in clever, concealed ways that may jeopardise engineers who choose to come out, such as through peer reviews or denial of career progression. A Human Rights Campaign survey found that 48 per cent of LGBT workers felt

enforcement of the non-discrimination policy depends on the supervisor's own feelings toward LGBT people.

This adds to the professional risk that is seen to exist by LGBT employees when they are considering whether or not to come out in the workplace. The possibility of harming their careers because of tacit homophobia within a workplace setting can lead to LGBT people choosing not to come out as a result and therefore suppress their sexuality and private life.

A further dimension of underlying homophobia faced by lesbians and bisexual women is the instance of men being fascinated by their sexual orientation, in addition to the fear of homophobic rejection.

Ignoring the problem contributes to a homophobic atmosphere as much as actively engaging in it. By not challenging employees on their comments and remarks at work, a ripple effect results in the attitudes eventually becoming embedded within an office, site or company.

'Anti-gay' laws

As a global industry, engineering firms in the private sector require employees to work across the globe, and this can lead to logistical issues for LGBT engineers in countries that still have homophobic laws. Seventy-seven countries continue to outlaw homosexual acts between consenting adults, with the risk of deportation and imprisonment. In five of these countries the offence still carries the death penalty.

For example, in Uganda, attempts have been made to reinstate the death penalty and a poll showing that 96 per cent of Ugandans believe "homosexuality should not be accepted by society". In 2014, a now defunct Ugandan newspaper ran with the headline: "EXPOSED! Uganda's top 100 homosexuals". In Russia, under Putin, a populist campaign of widespread homophobia has been exploited, leading to a 2013 bill outlawing the teaching of "homosexual behaviours" to minors.

In the United States, laws protecting LGBT employees from workplace discrimination are murky at best. Only 21 out of 50 state legislatures have passed laws preventing such practices and

repeated attempts to pass a federal law in Congress have failed in the House of Representatives.

These laws create an additional facet of personal and professional risk for LGBT engineers working overseas, particularly when working on projects in the Middle East or Africa with local companies that have no respect for LGBT staff. Engineering institutions are advising employees to take caution over their behaviours while working on projects in foreign countries.

Invisibility breeding invisibility

Lack of awareness among the workforce can be a contributing factor of the casual, tacit homophobia endemic in the engineering industry. Through not being made aware of LGBT issues, employees are unaware of the impact negative language has on those around them and the negative connotations it perpetuates. Employees should challenge unacceptable behaviour when it is witnessed in the workplace, and engineering firms should enforce zero tolerance policies.

Lack of communication and education has been responsible for a permanent undercurrent of discrimination and that has led to the invisibility of any LGBT figures at the top of the engineering world. The absence of open role models in an industry can put off LGBT employees who have no one to aspire to, no one to give them the confidence to come out in the workplace.

Tackling the problem

The 2013 Perkins Review outlined a need for a significant flow of engineers by 2050 to remain competitive in the market. If young students can see engineering as inclusive, then this will increase take-up at university level.

The government's 2015 Productivity Plan has outlined significant benefits for companies who can improve their productivity levels. For example, matching the productivity of the US would raise GDP by 31 per cent, equating to around £21,000 per annum for every household in the UK.

Many firms also now focus on creating high performing organisations. Such organisations place behavioural



“Lack of awareness among the workforce can be a contributing factor of the casual, tacit homophobia endemic in the engineering industry

training at the core of their values, and recognise that better company performance means deploying measures for creating high performing teams. Diverse teams play a central role to this, and it's something Rolls-Royce has been addressing over the past three years. The company officially launched PRISM, its LGBT network, in October 2015, and should be considered as a good case study in the early stages of its journey.

BP has BP Pride which hosts graduate outreach insight days specifically for LGBT students. The network also collaborates with other BP employee resource groups such as the BP Positive Ethnicity Network where they hosted a joint event on Ramadan in the workplace, considering the intersection between being LGBT and being Muslim. This is a good example of cross-collaboration between networks which in turn helps facilitate better communication channels in a firm. The Transport for London (TfL) LGBT network

OUTbound is over ten years old. While continuing to promote inclusion within the company, the network has also been used to show positive support for the LGBT community externally with rainbow buses around London and its "RidewithPride" campaign. This is a good example of using a network for external marketing purposes.

Staff networks are found to be an effective first step towards improving inclusivity. Employee network groups play a vital role in delivering workplace equality for LGBT people. Increasingly, network groups are finding more sophisticated and innovative ways to support gay staff in the workplace and support their employers across all business functions. From increasing understanding of sexual orientation equality amongst employees to improving the external reputation of an organisation, network groups are an important tool to support business objectives.

Diversity of thought at leadership

level has been shown to lead to more inclusive workplaces and thus contributing to a more successful company performance.

Companies that visibly support LGBT diversity often see the benefits of an inclusive business culture by encouraging other underrepresented groups. In engineering, this includes women.

Across a range of sectors, there has been a notable growth in the implementation of equality and diversity programmes across firms of various sizes. Big players in the worlds of business, politics and law have all made significant strides in promoting diversity among their companies and between their employees. Gender, race, disability and LGBT equality have become the norm rather than the exception and companies have seen increasing diversity and productivity of their workforce increase as a result.

Engineering employers have the potential to generate an additional £27 billion per year from 2022 - equivalent to the cost of building 1,800 secondary schools or 110 new hospitals. If the UK is to benefit economically from this, we will need to meet the forecasted demand for 257,000 new vacancies in engineering enterprises in the same timescale. The lack of LGBT diversity as a result of latent homophobia is jeopardising this aim. Meanwhile, potential LGBT engineers are being pushed towards more inclusive sectors.

A clear set of goals needs to be established and universally adopted by engineering companies and supported by institutes to ensure there is a reversal of the outdated attitudes preventing acceptance of LGBT people in engineering. Diversity and inclusion programmes, allies, LGBT role models, unconscious bias training and reverse mentoring should be implemented to ensure homophobia is eradicated from engineering. ■

■ **Engineering Action: Tackling Homophobia in Engineering is available to download from the InterEngineering website. InterEngineering is a grassroots initiative supported by the Royal Academy of Engineering and Stonewall. Visit www.interengineeringlgbt.com**