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Council was visionary in '95

by Chris Luna

Ten years ago this month, the Dallas City Council amended the city's personnel policies to prohibit employment discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation. I was on the City Council at that time and was the co-sponsor of this amendment. At the time, many critics predicted doom and gloom if this policy change was approved. What actually happened?

Some social conservative leaders vowed to field a slate of conservative candidates for City Council. It didn't happen.

Some conservative organizations threatened to conduct a petition drive to force a referendum on the new policy. It didn't happen.

Some of my colleagues, in voting against the policy, predicted it would result in legal complications and lawsuits. It didn't happen.

All that has happened is that governmental entities and the private sector have adopted similar provisions. Dallas leaders were visionary and ahead of the curve. In supporting this anti-bias policy change 10 years ago, a *Dallas Morning News* editorial pointed out that at least 100 other cities had policies that prohibited discrimination based on sexual orientation. Today, more than 290 cities, counties and local governments provide protection against employment discrimination based on sexual orientation.

Equally important has been the companies that include sexual orientation in their nondiscrimination policies. The Human Rights Campaign, the national equal rights advocacy group, reports that 72 percent of the Fortune 500 companies included sexual orientation in their written nondiscrimination policies. And 49 of the Fortune 50 have this policy; ExxonMobil Corp. is the lone exception.

Why has so much changed over the past 10 years? Two words: public acceptance.

The increasing prevalence of this particular nondiscrimination policy is not surprising when you consider that a Gallup poll in May 2003 found that 88 percent of Americans support equal job opportunities for gays and lesbians. And a more recent *Los Angeles Times* poll found that 72 percent of Americans favor a law that would protect gays and lesbians from job discrimination.

But apart from catching up with the public's sentiment, why is this type of nondiscrimination policy so important to a business? Two more words: bottom line.

Attracting and retaining the best workers are important. Companies that prohibit discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation have a competitive advantage in recruiting from the largest talent pool. And employers that offer the best employment policies increase their chances of retaining their top workers.

Employee turnover is bad for business. Hiring and training new workers is costly and time-consuming. This is a bigger problem if workers are leaving or being terminated for reasons unrelated to job performance. As more employers include sexual orientation in their policies, it is increasingly easy for gay and lesbian workers to select more inclusive employers.

Inclusive policies can increase employee productivity. An October 2004 study from the University of Massachusetts found that the benefits of having employees openly acknowledged as gays or lesbians included increased job satisfaction, better relationships with co-workers, and lower anxiety and stress. The report concluded that gay- and lesbian-inclusive workplace policies – and the perception that a workplace supports gays and lesbians – promote coming out in the workplace.

Gay and lesbian consumers spend money, too. As gay and lesbian purchasing power grows, companies realize that many gay and lesbian consumers make buying decisions based on whether a company has gay and lesbian supportive policies. Many companies have successfully leveraged their inclusive policies into marketing opportunities to increase their brand loyalty and market share.

So, 10 years after this policy change, Dallas City Hall is still standing. And a simple, forward-thinking change for fairness and equality has been validated by other local governments, in the public's attitudes and in companies' best practices.

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