

NEWS RELEASE

UP Study Reveals Impact of Office Gossip on Black Gay and Lesbian Individuals in Workplaces



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A study by University of Pretoria (UP) researchers that investigated the effects of office gossip on black gay and lesbian South Africans has revealed the significant challenges faced by these individuals in South African workplaces.

Industrial psychologist Professor Nasima MH Carrim of UP's Faculty of Economic and Management Sciences embarked on this study with colleagues after recognising the need to delve deeper into issues of "otherness" and marginalisation. Through in-depth interviews, the study aimed to shed light on the impact of workplace gossip on a marginalised community.

Despite efforts to discourage gossip and promote diversity, many participants reported feeling isolated and marginalised due to negative rumours and discriminatory behaviour. Office gossip not only perpetuated stereotypes and prejudices, but also exacerbated feelings of anxiety and distress among those targeted.

The research also suggests that black African lesbian women at lower organisational levels experience greater marginalisation in the form of gossip compared to black African gay men. Furthermore, the perception among participants was that gossip related to sexual orientation is more rooted in black African communities than in white, coloured and Indian South African communities. The concern of sexual identity disclosure and the overlap between the community and workplace was also apparent.

“It’s not easy to change people’s mindsets around certain beliefs as these are strongly held values that stem from religion and long-held belief systems,” Prof Carrim says. “But we can teach employees how to embrace differences without becoming toxic and to respect people who hold a different set of beliefs to our own. We all have different world views; therefore, we need to create awareness around differences, and not unjustly hurt and impede people’s careers because they have a different set of values. So in workplaces, the idea is not to negate anyone’s belief systems – the idea is to teach people how to embrace difference.”

The research proposes promoting cross-cultural management and understanding, and providing support for marginalised employees within the company by undertaking various initiatives into consideration to create a more diverse and happier workplace. There are several ways in which corporate organisations can better structure training and orientation to curb gossip and foster a place of inclusivity:

Diversity and inclusion training: Incorporate comprehensive training programmes that include *LGBTQIA+ issues, cultural sensitivity and unconscious bias. Provide employees with the knowledge and tools to recognise and challenge discriminatory behaviour.

Promote open dialogue: Create opportunities for open dialogue and discussion about diversity and inclusion in the workplace. Encourage employees to share their experiences and perspectives, fostering empathy and understanding among colleagues in a respectful and dignified manner.

Establish clear policies: Implement clear policies and procedures for addressing discrimination, harassment and gossip in the workplace. Ensure that employees are aware of their rights and responsibilities, and provide avenues for reporting incidents of misconduct.

Lead by example: Ensure that leadership sets a positive example by championing diversity and inclusion initiatives. Promote a culture of respect and acceptance from the top down, demonstrating a commitment to creating an inclusive work environment.

Provide support resources: Offer support resources and employee assistance programmes for individuals who may be experiencing discrimination or harassment. Ensure that employees have access to confidential support services and counselling.

It is also essential to extend awareness and education beyond the workplace to families and cultural communities to promote unity and understanding.

Community outreach programmes: Partner with local community organisations and leaders to develop outreach programmes that promote acceptance and understanding of LGBTQIA+ individuals.

Support networks: Establish support networks and peer mentoring programmes for LGBTQIA+ individuals and their families within cultural communities. Create safe spaces where individuals can share their experiences, seek guidance and receive support from others who understand their cultural context.

Advocacy and awareness campaigns: Launch advocacy and awareness campaigns to challenge stigma and discrimination within cultural communities. Use media, social media platforms and community events to promote messages of acceptance, tolerance and inclusion.

By implementing these strategies, corporate organisations can create a culture of inclusivity where all individuals feel valued, respected and empowered to bring their authentic selves to work.

* LGBTQIA+ = Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer/Questioning, Intersex, Asexual/Allied + many other terms such as non-binary and pansexual

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ABOUT THE UNIVERSITY OF PRETORIA

The University of Pretoria (UP) is one of the largest contact and residential universities in South Africa, with its administration offices located on its Hatfield Campus in Pretoria. This 115-year-old institution is also one of the largest producers of research in South Africa.

Spread over seven campuses, it has nine faculties and a business school, the Gordon Institute of Business Science (GIBS). It is the only university in the country with a Faculty of Veterinary Science, which is ranked the best in Africa. UP has 120 academic departments and 92 centres and institutes, accommodating more than 56 000 students and offering about 1 100 study programmes. It has the most academic staff with PhDs (70%), NRF-rated researchers (613).

The [2024 Times Higher Education subject rankings](#) placed UP first in South Africa in the fields of Law, Veterinary Science, Accounting and Finance; Agriculture and Forestry and Electrical and Electronic Engineering. Quacquarelli Symonds (QS) ranked the University among the top five in Africa, as part of their [2024 World University Rankings \(WUR\)](#). UP was the only South African university featured in the [2023 World University Rankings for Innovation \(WURI\)](#), falling within in the 101-200 range of innovative universities.

For more information, please go to www.up.ac.za