



The inclusive wave wiping out binary gender perspectives

————— Dr J. Harrison —————



Dr. J Harrison shared their story with the Inclusive.Hiring audiences on the art of not fitting in. They spoke about how their social identity is constantly challenged within recruitment processes, and how you can make simple steps towards being an inclusive workplace.

Dr J Harrison from ThoughtWorks delivered a hugely personal, hugely impactful talk about being GenderQueer in a corporate world.

Throughout their life, Dr J has struggled to fit in. Whether this fitting in related to their family life, social life or their working life, the struggles have been the same. Dr J has long felt the alien trying to come to terms with the world around them. For a long time, this was the easiest way of coping with the feeling of being different.

In the past, in their childhood, the words to describe their feelings and experiences did not exist or did not come easily. No surprise, then, that they felt different, unable to fit in. Not feeling comfortable with society's expectations was anything but straightforward, particularly when they felt the only one in such situations.

At different times during their career, despite a stellar CV, Dr J has found it hard both to get a job as well as to progress within a job. On many occasions, they have found themselves opposite an interviewer who could not see how they would fit in from a cultural perspective. For example, an interviewer who was quite clearly, at best, awkward, and at worst hostile towards their appearance. For Dr J, being different and being visibly different in the workplace brings with it costs.

Do the visibly non-binary progress within your organisation? Or are there invisible barriers preventing this?

At this point in their career, Dr J felt disinclined to have to try to fit in to an apparent cultural and corporate norm, as well as not wanting to hide this fact.

We should not forget either that making an effort to fit in is energy sapping. This is energy much better harnessed for more productive reasons within an organisation. Does forcing people in an inauthentic attempt to conform impact on productivity?

Life and work constantly want to force people into boxes. Into norms. Into parameters. Dr J wants no part of such restrictions.

Why should employers force people into boxes via their application forms, for example? In all too many cases, gender is largely binary on such forms. Male, female or 'other'. People are being forced into making a choice they do not want to make. There is no opportunity for individual expression or identification. Dr J has fought battles both within their own organisation and further afield. They identify as being Transgressive Non-Binary GenderQueer – and this has now been officially accepted by the New Zealand government.

Within your own organisation, do application forms and their internal equivalents work for everyone within your organisation? Or do they force people to feel different? Apart? Unwelcome?

Progress is being made. Dr J and others are the harbingers of change. But such change will become a wave rather than a trickle as today's young find their voices.

But are organisations and their application processes ready for such a change? Do we risk forcing Generation Z and their younger siblings into the same boxes we have corralled older generations?

How do we greet people during interviews, for example? To what extent do we put them at their ease in terms of pronouns? We may well be more understanding of a broader, less binary, set of pronouns, but do we initiate this? Or do we let an interviewee take the lead? How welcoming does this feel?

If a non-binary candidate gets the wrong sort of welcome at interview, how might they imagine the rest of their employee experience might be?

We all know the dangers of assuming but this is, in essence, the nature of the challenge for such people.

The same assumptions are likely to apply to every aspect of the workplace – even the loos! For Dr J, the plumbing you need is more important than the plumbing you possess.

Language is so important and language does not stand still. What was inclusive a generation ago might not be so welcoming today. Take the word 'guys'. For many, this has ceased to be gender neutral and is increasingly synonymous with a room full of tech bros.

How do we process the language around us? Are there internal guidelines? Do people grasp the parameters and impact of what they are saying?

Again, the theme of belonging is key to this debate. Organisations need to consider difference and divergence in its broadest sense. For Dr J and ThoughtWorks, there are ten overlapping/intersectional working groups within the organisation, from gender, to ethnicity, disability, culture, age and sexuality. Many people will belong to several such groups. People who actively work towards diversity and equality within the organisation has grown from a handful to a quarter of a large, multinational organisation.

Whatever someone's background or essence, they belong.

Dr J touched on the aftermath of the horrendous mosque shootings in Christchurch. New Zealand's Prime Minister, Jacinda Ardern went out of her way to immediately stress the togetherness of all New Zealanders, Muslim or otherwise.

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**They are us
- Jacinda Ardern**

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People do not become lesser individuals when they work together. Just the opposite. Raising us up does not pull individuals down. This is about bringing people closer, not leaving them outside. Unwelcome.

Think about your own organisation, how does it encourage its people to come together? Could it be better about welcoming and including everyone?

To return to perhaps the key point from Dr J Harrison's session, part of their feelings of exclusion at any early age were down to lacking the language, vocabulary and potential role models to express themselves. This is changing rapidly. More and more young people are becoming more comfortable sitting outside binary parameters. Dr J Harrison estimates that up to 7% of their own workforce do not identify as male or female. Such percentages are only likely to increase as people's confidence in their own identity grows.

Those people will feel less and less need to fit in, both at home and in the workplace. They are also likely to be less and less inclined to put up with a workplace that doesn't feel inclusive and welcoming.

Key Contributor



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