
Transsexuals in the Workplace

A Survivor's Perspective

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About the Author



Donna Rose is a nationally respected writer, speaker, and advocate on transgender and transsexual issues.

During the first 40 years of her life Donna was a world-class collegiate wrestler, a body builder, a bouncer, a husband, a father, and a successful local businessman. Few people had any inkling of the confusion and frustration that was brewing below the surface.

Donna had a secret. It was a secret she had resisted, hidden, denied, fought, and had hoped to outgrow for most of her life. It was a *feminine* component to a masculine body and demeanor that had been a source of confusion, shame and fear since early childhood. Ultimately, the pressures of being forced to live a lie and the need to find some peace helped to overcome the fear that had kept things bottled up for so long. In 1996 Donna actively started investigating her “other” side.

Donna’s resulting transition from man to woman has been an extraordinary one. Very few who meet her today have any inkling as to her unique pedigree. And although her initial goals were to fade into the fabric of society and leave the difficulty of her past behind, she has come to realize that her unique journey isn’t just a journey of changing genders, it’s a journey of self-discovery and self-acceptance that just so happens to involve gender.

Today, Donna is one of the most active and visible advocates of the transgender community in the country. Some recent accomplishments include:

- Donna’s memoir, *Wrapped In Blue: A Journey of Discovery* (Living Legacy Press, 2003), has been hailed as one of the most intimate and revealing portrayals of the physical and mental upheavals involved in a gender transition ever written. It earned an invitation to the 2003 Texas Book Festival. Her book is used as a textbook at universities, as a selected reading by book clubs across the country and as a therapeutic aid by psychologists working with gender dysphoric patients.
- Donna is invited to speak at universities, conferences, and workplaces across the country. A dynamic and effective speaker, she enjoys the opportunity to meet others face-to-face in an effort to overcome the barriers, stereotypes, and misconceptions that have hindered the transgender community for so long.
- Donna has been selected as one of 25 corporate leaders (and one of two transsexuals) representing GLBT issues in the workplace on the Human Rights Campaign (HRC) Business Council. She works with companies around the country to enact supportive transgender workplace policy.
- Although generally wary of the media, Donna has an active media presence. Some examples:
 - She has consulted with producers from CBS News 48 Hours, and the Oprah Winfrey Show.
 - An article about her transition appeared in the Rochester Democrat and Chronicle in October, 2002.
 - An article about her workplace transition that was published in DiversityInc Magazine was nominated for a 2003 GLAAD Media Award.
 - Donna featured in a 2003 documentary broadcast on The Learning Channel titled “The Sex Change Capital of the World”
 - Donna was featured in an article that appeared in the November issue of Marie Claire magazine.

Donna’s website, <http://www.donnarose.com>, is a well-known source of information on the “transgender experience”. In addition, it provides hope to others around the world dealing with similar gender questions that there is an opportunity for a happy and fulfilling life on the other side of a gender transition.

Feel free to contact the author at donna@donnarose.com with any questions or comments.

Overview

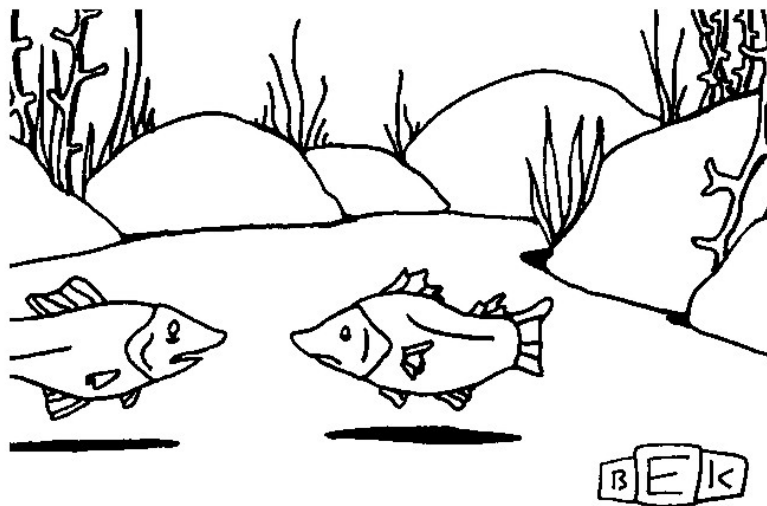
There is nothing else like a workplace gender transition. Anywhere.

I was once told that a successful workplace transition is one where nobody dies or quits. I find that a little harsh, but it's a good indication of the difficulties and potentially tragic consequences involved.

During my own gender transition I found the fact that I was naïve, and ignorant to the fact that my company could have fired me simply for admitting that I was transsexual; that protections I had assumed all Americans enjoyed regarding discrimination and workplace ethics covered me, as well. One minute, I'm a valued employee – a senior resource involved with mentoring others in the group, with a proven record of success - and the next I'm at risk of being fired simply for “outing” myself as transsexual? It would have scared me to death to have known that at the beginning.

Sadly, no federal law protects employees from workplace discrimination based on their gender identity or expression. Since the 1970's a growing number of states and localities have enacted laws prohibiting discrimination based on sexual orientation. At the same time, employees have been modifying their non-discrimination policies to extend protections for gay, lesbian, bisexual workers. Today, three-quarters of Fortune 500 companies include sexual orientation in their written non-discrimination policies.

This document provides a broad overview of this topic. It is designed to give employers a general understanding of the complex issues at hand, and some direction for addressing potential disruption in their own workplaces.



“To tell you the truth, even when I'm in water I don't feel that comfortable.”

Terms/Definitions

The following definitions explain many of the different terms that are necessarily part of any discussion of transgender issues. Although there is some level of ambiguity surrounding some of these terms, the definitions provided here explain the meanings used throughout this presentation.

- **Sex:** A physical state of being male or female. Determined by chromosomes and reflected in various primary and secondary physical attributes associated with being male or female
- **Gender:** The complete set of culturally based norms, expectations, roles, and expression based on a person's physical sex.
- **Gender Identity:** A person's innate, deeply felt psychological identification as being male or female, which may or may not correspond to the person's body or assigned sex at birth.
- **Gender Expression:** The outward appearance that a person uses to portray their own unique sense of gender identity. It may or may not conform to accepted norms and stereotypes. People exhibiting atypical gender expression are not typically transsexual, and do not seek to permanently change their physical sex. Rather, they perceive their appearance to be an opportunity to express their own unique sense of their gender.
- **Gender Identity Disorder (GID) / Gender Dysphoria:** A psychological diagnosis, recognized by the American Psychiatric Association, of severe distress and discomfort caused by the conflict between one's gender identity and one's sex at birth. Some, but not all, people who experience this condition or who are diagnosed with GID is transsexual.
- **Intersexed:** One who is born with sex chromosomes, external genitalia or an internal reproductive system that is not considered "standard" for either male or female. Although many intersexed people do not identify as transgender, many of the workplace issues relating to transgender people overlap with those that affect intersexed people. (*Old term: Hermaphrodite*)
- **Sexual Orientation:** The preferred term used when referring to an individual's physical and/or emotional attraction to the same and/or opposite gender. Sexual orientation is NOT the same as a person's gender identity.
- **Transgender:** An umbrella term referring to a person whose gender identity or gender presentation falls outside of stereotypical or traditional gender norms. This can include anything from a masculine acting woman or a feminine acting man all the way to a person who seeks to surgically change their physical sex. Some terminology related to different groups considered to be part of this umbrella term are:
 - ❑ **Cross Dresser:** One who wears the clothing and accoutrements that are considered by society to be more appropriate for a gender other than the gender that person manifested at birth. Contrary to common stereotypes, many cross-dressers self-identify as heterosexual men or women. Unlike transsexuals, cross dressers typically do not see to change their physical characteristics and/or manner of expression permanently. However, many transsexuals self-identify as a cross-dresser before they realize the true nature of their situation. (*Old term: Transvestites*)
 - ❑ **Drag Queen:** Typically, a homosexual man who assumes a flamboyantly feminine persona as part of a performance. Unlike transsexuals, drag queens do not seek to permanently change their sex.
 - ❑ **Transsexual:** A person who identifies with the roles, expectations and expressions more commonly associated with a sex different from the one he/she was assigned at birth. A transsexual may seek to relieve this dissonance by permanently changing his/her sex through surgery. Transsexuals can be either Male-to-Female (MTF) or Female-to-Male (FTM). It is important to note that due to perceived consequences and negative cultural stigma, not all transsexuals acknowledge their condition to others. In addition, not all transsexuals seek or receive Sexual Reassignment Surgery (SRS) to relieve their dissonance. And, the fact that a person may be a transsexual has no direct or predictable connection to his/her sexual orientation.

- **Passable:** A term used to indicate that ability of an individual to *pass* or blend well in their new gender. This includes appearance, demeanor, movement, speech, and other signals we use that are consistent with our apparent physical sex. Transsexuals often go through any number of procedures to improve their opportunity to *pass*: cosmetic surgeries (i.e. Facial Feminization Surgery (FFS), breast augmentation, etc.), voice and speech training, comportment training, image consulting.
- **Stealth:** The ability of a person to live totally and completely undetected as a transsexual. Those who pass so well as to avoid detection sometimes choose to become stealth.
- **Standards of Care (SOC):** An internationally accepted protocol of treatment for those diagnosed with Gender Dysphoria (the technical term for people suffering a mental/physical gender dissonance) by the Harry Benjamin International Gender Dysphoria Association. (*see below*)
- **Real Life Test (RLT), 24/7, Full-Time** – All refer to the period of time (at least a year) that a person must live full-time in their new gender role before obtaining Sex Reassignment Surgery (SRS).

Some Statistics

Prevalence of Transsexualism – It was once estimated that one in approximately every 80,000 people was transsexual. Recent calculations based on population sizes, numbers of sex reassignment surgeries, and other measurable metrics indicate that the prevalence of transsexualism is much higher than originally thought. In fact, it is now estimated that 1 in ever 250 to 500 births involves some degree of transgender involvement.

Anger and Violence

Through the years, transsexuals have gained an undeserved negative stigma based on outdated stereotypes and misconceptions. There are those who disagree with the very notion of transsexualism for a variety of reasons:

- ❑ Religious. Some consider transsexuals to be sinners and morally corrupt.
- ❑ Sexual. Some consider transsexuals to be freaks and perverts
- ❑ Discomfort. The thought of being around a transsexual can make people uneasy, even angry.

Transsexuals remain a target for harassment and violence.

- ❑ On average, one transgendered individual is murdered each month somewhere in the United States simply for being transgendered.
- ❑ Countless more are victims of assault, although providing accurate statistics is difficult because very few are actually reported. One report published in 2002 by the National Coalition of Anti-Violence Programs (NCAVP) reported that an average of 20 transgendered people were victimized by a hate crime each month. Many find that number to be conservative.

Suicide

- Recent research indicates that upwards of 50% of transgendered people attempt suicide.
- For every “successful” GLTB suicide there are between 30-50 attempts
- Suicide is the third leading cause of death for people 18-24
- GLBT youth comprise at least 30% of all teen suicides

Workplace Attitudes

In 2002, the Human Rights Campaign included some questions regarding transsexuals and the differing reactions to them in their State of the Workplace questionnaire. The results indicated a substantial difference in perception of transsexuals based on whether or not the respondent had had any contact with one in the past.

Which of the following is closest to how you would feel about working with a transgender person?

I would have no problem working with a transgender person	48%
I could work with a transgender person, but it would be a little uncomfortable	26%
I could with with a transgender person, but I would not like it	15%

	Responses among those who know someone who is transgender	Responses among those who DO NOT know someone who is transgender
Positive feelings	48%	18%
Neutral	36%	53%
Negative feelings	16%	29%

Source: The State of the Workplace For Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Americans 2002 (Human Rights Campaign)

What is a Gender Transition?

In the early to mid-1900s, many people who were diagnosed as being gender dysphoric were treated as mentally deranged or otherwise ill. Attempts to “cure” people included electric shock therapy and other severe, and ultimately ineffective, aversion techniques.

Since the early 1960s, treatment strategies have shifted based on the recognition that gender roles are not fixed across cultures and time, and that the formulation of gender identity is complex. Once formed, a person’s sense of gender identity is immutable. As a result, a more effective treatment approach – designed to relieve this mind/body dissonance and provide the best chance for improved quality of life – is to modify a person’s body to match his/her gender identity.

There is an internationally accepted treatment protocol for those diagnosed as being transsexual. First established in 1979 by the Harry Benjamin International Gender Dysphoria Association (HBIGDA), the Standards of Care (SOC) outlines specific guidelines/steps to be followed by both transsexuals and care givers treating transsexuals.

Usually, a transsexual’s treatment regimen is facilitated by medical and psychological professionals in accordance with SOC guidelines. Some of the steps of treatment:

- Initial psychological testing to rule out other diagnoses.
- Ongoing psychiatric monitoring and counseling, over several months, to assess the extent of the condition and understand options, consequences, and obstacles.
- Health evaluation for hormone therapy
- At the recommendation of a mental health professional, administration of hormones generally attributed to the person’s new gender (HRT)
- Continued monitoring to assess reaction to hormone induced mental and physical changes.
- Trial living period of at least one year to ascertain level of comfort and probability for success in reassigned gender (While every person’s transition is deeply personal and unique, most transsexual employees will approach management about their transition at this stage of the process)
- Physical changes continue throughout transition. MTF transsexuals often undergo extensive and lengthy electrolysis/laser treatments to remove facial hair (it is not affected by administration of female hormones), voice/speech therapy to help talk in a manner more appropriate to their new gender, etc.
- If the transitioning person so decided, continued hormone administration and life in the reassigned gender is sometimes, but not always, accompanied by permanent surgical reconstruction of primary and secondary sex characteristics. This can include Facial Feminization Surgery (FFS), breast augmentation or reduction, and ultimate genital Sex Reassignment Surgery (SRS).

This very difficult extended therapeutic process has been designed to minimize the chances of making a frivolous or hasty decision to make permanent changes that cannot be undone. As a result, in the overwhelming majority of cases, the transition is successful and the person goes on to live a well-adjusted life in his/her reassigned gender. The degree of success, however, can be influenced by (1) whether the person is able to maintain a stable job and income and (2) whether he/she works in a supportive work environment.

Gender Transitions and the Workplace

An employee has just approached a manager, or an HR representative, and indicated that he/she is transsexual and is planning to begin living as the opposite gender in the near future. What do you do?

First, appreciate what has led to this point. This employee has probably struggled with this issue for his/her entire life. He or she has probably done everything possible to hide it, pretend it doesn't exist, resist it – and the point of “coming out” at work is the realization that none of those tactics have worked. The employee is often facing difficult and stressful situations at home with family and friends, if often filled with anxiety, and the step of unleashing their gender issue into the workplace can be terrifying. This disclosure must be handled with great sensitivity and empathy.

The goal of a workplace transition, from a business perspective, is to minimize disruption and distraction. How companies handle this disclosure directly affects those two goals. And, considering what is about to happen, that may be easier said than done.

Some steps that the transitioning employee will have done to prepare for his or her Real-Life Test.

- He or She will have legally changed his/her name to one more appropriate to their new gender. This will require them to change all credit history, all education transcripts, and all identification to reflect the new name. This will include the workplace, where email, security, badges, payroll, benefits, Social Security records, etc. must be changed to reflect the new name (similar to a woman who marries and adopts her husband's surname).
- In many states, a letter from the employee's doctor and/or psychologist will allow the Department of Motor Vehicles to re-issue a new driver's license where the gender marker is changed to reflect the person's new gender. Some states will not make this change until after sex reassignment surgery is complete.
- Often, psychologists provide a letter to transitioning patients to provide if questioned about their appearance. It explains that the person has been diagnosed as being gender dysphoric, and that cross-dressing is part of the accepted standard therapeutic regimen for this condition.
- When the employee begins their workplace transition, they will adopt the dress and mannerisms appropriate for their new gender. This can be a shock. For example, for an MTF transsexual this may include wearing skirts and dresses, makeup, feminine hairstyles, polished nails, jewelry, and other “feminine” items. For some, it can even include extreme facial plastic surgery to feminize bone structures of the face, breast enhancement, or other procedures that the person deems necessary to provide the best opportunity to living a quality life in their new gender.

Gender transitions can be awkward even under the best of circumstances. The transitioning employee is facing new emotional challenges and trying to adapt to roles and expectations for which they were not trained. Sensitivity, patience, and empathy should be used.

Appearance can sometimes be a big deal. Often, it's an odd paradox in that if the transitioning employee is not perceived as “passable” in their new role others may feel uncomfortable around him or her, but if they are TOO passable there is a different level of discomfort. The fact that someone who was originally perceived as a man is now growing breasts, or who was originally perceived as a woman is now growing a beard and is losing his hair, can be difficult for employees to accept. As a result, expectations need to be set early about what's going to happen, and why.

The most contentious issue is often the Bathroom Issue. For MTF transitioners, women may be uncomfortable about having the employee in their bathroom. It is inappropriate to force her to use the Men's room, as well. As a result, an isolated bathroom with a lock is often the most reasonable compromise.

Gender appropriate pronouns should be used as soon as the transition begins. The day that John begins transitioning as Jane, she should be referred to using her new name female pronouns. This may take some getting used to, and the transitioner needs to be sensitive to the fact that it may take some time and that there will be mistakes. However, some people use this as their opportunity to express the fact that they don't accept what's happening, and to make a subtle statement by refusing to recognize the transition.

Building the Business Case

Why should companies support transitioning individuals? Some reasons:

- **Corporate Reputation.** Diversity awareness and creating a culture of inclusion have become important considerations in many workplaces. GLBT talent comprise a significant, and talented, portion of the workforce. In addition, the GLBT market has been identified as being in excess of \$10 billion. Companies that support GLBT employees gain visibility through a number of important channels (HRC Corporate Equality Index, DiversityInc).
- **Competitive Advantage.** The GLBT community is close knit, and fiercely brand-loyal to businesses that are perceived to be GLBT “friendly”. In contrast, they are vocally opposed to companies that are not. In addition, as new workers enter the workforce they often use GLBT policy as a barometer of corporate culture when making employment decisions.
- **Changes in the Law.** As of August 2004, four states (Minnesota, California, New Mexico, Rhode Island) explicitly include ‘gender identity’ in their anti-discrimination laws. Two others (Kentucky, Pennsylvania) have enacted provisions that prohibit discrimination against transgender state employees. Several other states (including Connecticut, Florida, Illinois, Massachusetts, New Jersey, New York, and Vermont) have interpreted existing discrimination statutes on the basis of sex, sexual orientation, personal appearance, or disability to also prohibit certain forms of discrimination against transgender people. Additionally, as of May 2004, 61 cities and counties have provided discrimination protection for transgender workers.
- **Cost.** Valuing employees is good for business. The cost of replacing good employees is steep. Employee morale and dedication is directly linked to productivity.
- **Legal.** Discrimination lawsuits are costly in terms of time, legal fees, and good will.

Potential Workplace Issues

- Bathroom/Locker Room Issues
- Pronouns
- Appearance
- Legal Issues
- Practical Considerations
- Harassment
- What happens if the transitioner changes his/her mind and wants to go back?

Factors influencing success

- Corporate culture
- Flexibility
- “Passability”
- Management support
- Proactive education
- Type of job
- Employee history
- Overall motivation to make it work

Best Practices

Following are some guidelines that are considered “Best Practices” when it comes to workplace gender transitions. These practices will minimize disruption, and increase probability for a successfully managed transition:

- ❑ Be Proactive
- ❑ Include protections for ‘gender identity and expression’ in your corporate EEO statement.
- ❑ Provide diversity training that specifically includes GLBT awareness.
- ❑ Train HR and Management about specifics of transgender issues
- ❑ Develop a written set of guidelines to manage workplace gender transitions. It should be flexible enough to be individually tailored, but specific enough to provide guidance. These guidelines should cover topics such as name change conventions, communication plan, roles/responsibilities, bathroom policy, attire policy, harassment policy.
- ❑ Leverage your GLBT Employee Resource Group (if you have one)
- ❑ Adopt a zero-tolerance harassment policy
- ❑ Review company policies for any blatantly discriminatory provisions
- ❑ Provide opportunities for those who may be curious, angry or who do not like the workplace transition to vent or ask questions.
- ❑ Ensure that roles and expectations are clearly understood and followed.
- ❑ Form a transition team including representation from HR, management, the transitioning individual, and perhaps a qualified psychological professional who can assist with the transition.
- ❑ Establish a timeline.
- ❑ Encourage communication.
- ❑ Develop a backout plan in case the transitioning individual decides that a life in the new gender isn’t going to work for them, and decides to go back. Note: this is not considered an *unsuccessful* transition. Rather, the Real-Life Test did its job of providing an opportunity to make some informed decisions based on experience and comfort level. Also, just because someone may decide to go back does not mean they are not transsexual.

References

The following sources were used in developing this paper:

- 1) Transgender Issues in the Workplace: A Tool for Managers. A Human Rights Campaign Foundation Report (June 2004).
- 2) State of the Workplace 2002. A Human Rights Campaign Report.
- 3) Managing Transsexual Transition in the Workplace by Janice Walworth, MS. A white paper written for SHRM (the Society for Human Resource Management)

Additional Resources: Transgender, Transsexuals, and Workplace Transitions

Books:

Brown, Mildred L. and Chloe Ann Rounsley. 1996. *True Selves - Understanding Transsexualism for Family, Friends, Co-workers, and Helping Professionals*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers.

Janis Walworth. 1999. *Transsexual Workers: An Employer's Guide*. Bellingham, WA: Center for Gender Sanity.

Janis Walworth. 1999. *Working With a Transsexual: A Guide For Co-Workers*. Bellingham, WA: Center for Gender Sanity.

Rose, Donna. 2003. *Wrapped In Blue: A Journey of Discovery*. Round Rock, TX: Living Legacy Press.

Internet Resources

- ❑ Gender Sanity: Home of **Transitions That Work**, a consulting service for transsexuals who plan to transition on the job, their coworkers, and their employers: <http://www.gendersanity.com>
- ❑ Article: Managing Transsexual Transition in the Workplace <http://www.gendersanity.com/shrm.html>
- ❑ TS Successes – Profiles of some Successful Trans Women and Men <http://ai.eecs.umich.edu/people/conway/TSuccesses/TSuccesses.html>
- ❑ Human Rights Campaign (HRC) Worknet Transgender Information http://www.hrc.org/Template.cfm?Section=Transgender_Issues&Template=/TaggedPage/TaggedPageDisplay.cfm&TPLID=26&ContentID=13304
- ❑ Out and Equal Workplace Advocates – Provide workplace GLBT training. (Note: Their annual Workplace Summit is a very worthwhile event) <http://www.outandequal.org>
- ❑ Transgender At Work. <http://www.tgender.net/taw/>
- ❑ Donna Rose: The author's personal website. <http://www.donnarose.com>
- ❑ Dr. Anne Vitale. A respected psychologist. <http://www.avitale.com/>
- ❑ Lynn Conway. Renowned engineer and computer scientist. <http://ai.eecs.umich.edu/people/conway/>
- ❑ Jamison Green. Perhaps the most well-known and visible FTM <http://www.jamisongreen.com/>