# Collecting LGBT+ Data for Diversity:
# Initiating Self-ID at IBM

## M. V. Lee Badgett
Professor of Economics,
University of Massachusetts Amherst

In this study of IBM's LGBT+ self-identification practice, we inaugurate a series of case studies of diversity and inclusion policies and practices adopted by innovative companies.

This report and the series are designed to explore the business rationale and goals of IBM and other companies when adopting inclusive policies and practices, to assess the impact of the policies and practices, and to provide insight for employers who might learn from the experiences of innovators. The series will also serve learning goals for students and other relevant practitioners. After a brief introduction, this report describes how IBM's self-ID process works. The second section describes how IBM arrived at this moment, and the third and fourth sections describe implementation and the uses of the data. The final section looks ahead to the future of the practice.

Center for Employment Equity
www.umass.edu/employmentequity · College of Social & Behavioral Sciences

IBM

# Introduction

Employers have been leaders in creating ways to be inclusive of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT+) people in the workplace. A recent survey found that 93% of Fortune 500 companies include sexual orientation in their nondiscrimination policies, and 85% include gender identity.[1] Half offer domestic partner benefits and 62% provide transgender-inclusive health benefits. The voluntary nature of these employer efforts has helped to fill gaps in the law. Laws in only 22 states (plus D.C.) prohibit sexual orientation discrimination in the workplace, and 21 of those also prohibit discrimination based on gender identity and expression. Federal law does not explicitly forbid discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity (SOGI), although the U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission currently interprets the law prohibiting sex discrimination as also including SOGI discrimination.[2]

This report follows IBM's practice of adding a plus sign to the acronym for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender.  In 2016, IBM added the plus to LGBT, using a positive symbol (+) to denote the inclusion of additional groups of sexual and gender minorities under the LGBT+ umbrella, such as intersex, asexual, or gender fluid people, as well as allies. This decision is discussed further in Section 5 below.

The frontier of LGBT+ inclusion has clearly shifted beyond non-discrimination pledges. Today companies are considering new ways of demonstrating their commitment to full inclusion, even in the absence of legal requirements. This report focuses on one particular practice —allowing employees to voluntarily report their sexual orientation and gender identity in a company's human resources data—and its adoption by one company, IBM.

## Why focus on self-ID?

Collecting data on employees' sexual orientation and gender identity, or "self-ID", has benefits for LGBT+ employees and employers. On a practical level, self-ID makes visible the diversity of an employer's workforce with respect to people whose difference may be otherwise invisible. Not every LGBT+ person will be completely open about their identities in the workplace, so confidential surveys or other methods of counting LGBT+ people are tools employers can use to promote nondiscrimination and equal opportunities. On a symbolic level, self-ID shows that an employer recognizes and values SOGI diversity, putting LGBT+ inclusion on a par with racial, gender, and other identities that employers collect data on. The Human Rights Campaign reports that 42% of the eight hundred-plus firms they survey for the Corporate Equality Index now allow some form of self-ID on human resources records.[3]

## Why focus on IBM?

Over the years, IBM has achieved recognition from LGBT+ organizations for being an innovator and leader in inclusion of LGBT+ employees. IBM appeared on some of the earliest lists of "Best companies to work for" for LGBT+ employees, and has received awards from many LGBT+ organizations, including the Human Rights Campaign, PFLAG, Workplace Pride, DiversityComm, NGLCC, and many others.[4]  IBM was one of the earliest companies to receive a perfect 100 score on the Human Rights Campaign's Corporate Equality Index, a feat IBM has achieved seventeen years in a row (through 2020). IBM was also one of the first companies to adopt voluntary "self-ID" for its employees and now allows them to choose the pronouns they use, making it an interesting model for other firms to study.

# What is self-ID and how does it work?

IBM makes it possible for employees in 40 countries (covering 87% of the IBM workforce) to provide their own self-identified sexual orientation and gender identity on their IBM human resources record. This declaration is voluntary, and employees can remove it at any time.

In the original self-ID question implemented in 2006, employees could check a box in the human resources record stating, "Yes, I am LGBT (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual or Transgender)" and some countries still use that response. Since 2017, a new system being implemented across IBM has eight different options that employees can choose from in the countries that choose to offer them. Those new options combine the original option for the declaration with a particular gender identity, for instance, "Yes, I am LGBT (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual or Transgender) and I identify as a Transgender woman." Employees also have an option to not self-declare or to state, "No, I am not LGBT (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual or Transgender)." Currently, IBM offices in the United States, Canada, Latin America, and a few European countries include the eight options, while the others retain the yes, no, or undeclared.
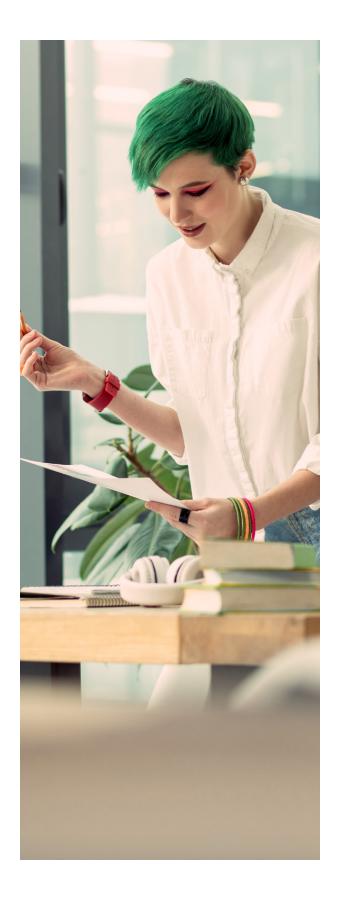
## Consent forms and access to the data

IBM includes a consent form (called a "disclaimer" by IBM) in the section of the database that includes these options. The self-ID consent form explains how the SOGI data are handled, used, and updated, and notes specifically that the employee's team members, peers, and managers will not see their designation. Today, only four people in the company ever see self-ID connected to names of employees, and those individuals must sign non-disclosure agreements before they can see the data. The form notes that the data may also be shared with others in an aggregated form that prevents the identification of individuals. Employees must give explicit permission before their names can be shared for professional development opportunities in a way that would identify their membership in the LGBT+ community.

## Steering employees to the self-ID option

Because the question is optional, employees must proactively go into the system and answer it. New employees are informed about how to fill out personal information in the HR system as part of IBM's onboarding process. They also are given the opportunity to provide information on gender, date of birth, marital status, veteran status, disability, nationality, and citizenship there. (There is no option for job applicants to declare whether they are LGBT+.) For existing employees, or those new hires who initially chose not to declare their LGBT+ status, IBM takes advantage of many opportunities to inform and remind employees about the self-ID option via blogs, videos, and internal website posts, such as during the company's annual Pride celebration. In 2018 IBM launched a video campaign to encourage employees to use self-ID. Several "out role models" from IBM offices in six different countries spoke in their native languages about the importance of self-ID and why they chose to self-identify: making their contributions as LGBT+ employees visible, being themselves at work, and supporting IBM's inclusion efforts.

# How and Why IBM Created the Self-ID Program

When it rolled out in 2006, IBM's self-ID program was one of the first in the world. Why did IBM decide to innovate, given the absence of legal requirements or examples from other employers? The data collected for this report suggest that one key reason was that LGBT+ employees wanted the company to recognize them in the same way as other demographic groups tracked by the company. Those employees also saw practical value in IBM's being able to communicate directly with LGBT+ employees. The resulting self-ID practice was also shaped by the company's perception of the value of self-ID for employees and for the company. Other important factors affecting the decision and the program design included concerns about legal issues, particularly related to privacy laws related to data, to the potential for the data to be used to discriminate, and for the safety of employees in countries with laws that criminalize or harm LGBT+ people.

## Encouragement from LGBT+ employees

LGBT+ employees at IBM have actively engaged in influencing IBM policies for several decades. As early as the 1980's some IBM employees participated in an organization called High Tech Gays, which advocated for nondiscrimination policies and domestic partner benefits in the tech sector.[5] By the mid-1990's, IBM began to seek formal input from gay and lesbian employees directly.

In 1995, IBM convened eight Executive Task Forces, including a gay and lesbian group, to advise the company on changes in culture and policies that would make various groups of employees feel more welcome and valued and would maximize worker productivity.[6] The Gay and Lesbian Executive Task Force was made up of 25 high-level gay or lesbian executives and employees at IBM. They interviewed and surveyed other gay and lesbian employees about their experiences and needs, and the task force collected data from other companies. The final report of this select group made recommendations to the company, prioritizing the education of employees on gay and lesbian issues, sponsorship of an affinity group, and domestic partner benefits. Among the other detailed recommendations, the task force included the collection of data on sexual orientation on employee surveys and addition of a field for sexual orientation to the personal information section of the human resources database.

The task force saw the issue of data collection as an important one, both symbolically and practically. They noted that the company collected data on various minority groups but not for gay and lesbian employees. They argued that collecting data on gay and lesbian employees would be an important symbol that "IBM is sincere about equal treatment." Practically speaking, data would also allow the company to "count and communicate with gays and lesbians without compromising their anonymity."[7] Data would make gays and lesbians visible collectively to the company and to other employees.

The 1995 report put self-ID on the agenda for IBM, but it took another eleven years before it was implemented in the United States. In the meantime, IBM was implementing different policies to expand inclusion of LGBT+ employees, including implementing domestic partner benefits in the U.S. in 1996, and adding sexual orientation and gender identity to global nondiscrimination policies by 2002. Although unofficial groups of LGBT+ employees existed in the U.S. and Canada, the first official LGBT+ affinity group was formed in 1997—Employees Alliance for Gay **and Lesbian** Empowerment (EAGLE) at IBM—**and** the Executive Task Force continued to exist, supporting ongoing efforts to continue to make IBM more LGBT+ inclusive.

## Being able to say "I'm one"

As IBM's diversity commitment to LGBT+ employees deepened after 1995, the adoption and implementation of the self-ID practice became necessary to support many other diversity efforts. In particular, IBM wanted to find high-performing LGBT+ employees and to offer them opportunities for professional development and access to leadership programs. Connecting LGBT+ employees with mentors, networks, and other internal resources, it was argued, would also help make IBM more welcoming and inclusive. The challenge in each of these situations was to be able to identify who those people were. As one former IBM official who was involved in the self-ID development and rollout put it, the company needed "some type of indicator to say, 'I'm one.'"

## Seizing an opportunity

The turning point came when the company redesigned part of its HR system in 2005-2006, adding a portal called "About You" for employees to enter personal information. This new system created an opportunity to add data fields. In addition to LGBT+ self-ID, the company wanted to add indicators for people with disabilities and for employees who were veterans (tracking veteran status was required by a new law). The LGBT+ Executive Task Force, other senior executives, and the chief diversity officer were all on board, agreeing that the time was right for an LGBT+ indicator given the progress in other policies and in the number of LGBT+ executives who were publicly out.

# Implementing Self-ID at IBM

In the planning of the new self-ID option, company officials were suitably cautious about how the data would be used. To encourage employees to exercise the option to self-identify, the main focus was on benefits to the employees— connecting them with opportunities and resources. Potential benefits to corporate performance were not front and center, although later the benefits to IBM's recruiting efforts and marketing efforts were mentioned by company officials.

## Avoiding inappropriate uses of the data

IBM's intention with self-ID was to expand opportunities for LGBT+ employees, but the planners also acknowledged the potential risks involved for employees. The biggest potential concern was that an employee who volunteered that they were LGBT+ could be at risk of adverse treatment. That concern shaped the promise to employees that their managers and peers would not have access to that information. All of the intended uses would be managed by HR officials rather than line managers. In addition, only a very small number of employees— mainly those in charge of creating reports on the data—have access to the personal data that matched names to LGBT+ information. The strict confidentiality rules about access to the data have been preserved from the beginning.

## Identifying the right countries

Once the decision was made to go forward with self-ID, the next key question concerned where. As a global company, IBM now operates in more than 175 countries,[8] ranging from LGBT+ inclusive countries and to very LGBT+ hostile countries. According to one IBM official, 27 of those countries still criminalize being LGBT+. Ted Childs, the chief diversity officer at the time of implementation, took on the issue as a high-level champion. According to others working on the self-ID project, Childs and senior executives saw this as an international issue and did not want to focus only on LGBT+-friendly countries.

To decide where to rollout self-ID, IBM analyzed each country. Countries where IBM offered domestic partner benefits and had LGBT+ affinity groups were automatically in. Some countries with particularly conservative cultures and hostile social environments were ruled out, while others were included as a result of other considerations. Other criteria were technical. For instance, not all countries were going to have the About You platform, and some possible countries could not be included

because they shared an HR platform with countries that had been ruled out.

The legal landscape was (and is) complex, creating some barriers. IBM's legal counsel analyzed two areas of law—data privacy and employment law—to provide advice about which countries could implement self-ID and how the data could be handled and collected.  Current decision-making and implementation is still guided by these country-level legal requirements. For example, the European Union's General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) lays out requirements for data collection and use that IBM and other companies with self-ID must comply with.[9] Some very LGBT+ friendly European countries are not included in self-ID because of their data regulations, for example (see box).

### Data Barriers in LGBT+ Inclusive Countries

France and Spain are two countries with very positive public policies and social acceptance related to LGBT+ issues. French employment laws and data privacy policies are barriers to corporations who want to collect private information from employees, so IBM does not have a self-ID module in its operations in France. Initially, Spanish law allowed the LGBT+ module when the new GDPR was implemented. However, later updates to Spain's data privacy requirements led to IBM removing the self-ID module in Spain.

# How IBM Uses the Self-ID Data

Since the introduction and implementation of self-ID, IBM has used the data for several purposes. First, all self-identifying LGBT+ employees get some potential benefit. Without revealing names outside of the handful of people authorized to see them, the company sends information to newly self-identified LGBT+ employees about company resources, including the IBM Pride Gateway, the LGBT+ employee groups, Slack channels, and benefits policies. IBM also uses the data broadly to ensure representation of LGBT+ people in different contexts. For example, when IBM hosts events in different parts of the world, the company uses the self-ID data to ensure it is inviting a representative group of employees to participate.  IBM also can match results of the company's engagement surveys to self-identified LGBT+ employees to look for any differences across groups of employees that should be addressed.

A second use for the data comes in the company's efforts to provide a diverse group of people access to internal opportunities. For example, high-performing LGBT+ people might be made aware of professional development opportunities for which they are qualified, or they might be offered the opportunity to express an interest in participating in prestigious internal councils or conferences. One possible future use of the self-ID list will be to create sponsorship relationships between current leaders and potential protégés, thus expanding IBM's talent pipeline. Without the self-ID data, enhancing SOGI diversity in future leaders would be very difficult to accomplish broadly.

The company also uses the data in a third way once it is aggregated. Company leaders can see a numerical report on the number of people self-identifying by country and by job hierarchy or other variables. (The data analytics staff are careful to ensure that no individuals can be identified.) For example, an increasing number might lead to a discussion about setting up an LGBT+ Business Resource Group, also known as an employee resource group. Or changes could reflect other LGBT+ employee considerations, as when employees in India had a surge of self-identification in reaction to nationwide efforts to decriminalize homosexuality by repealing Article 377 of the Indian Penal Code (effectively achieved by a 2018 Supreme Court decision).

**Section 5**

# Looking to the future

While the self-ID program has been in place for 13 years, it has not been static. Most obviously, the self-ID options are changing, and more countries have added the self-ID program. New developments have emerged very recently or are on the horizon: rethinking the "LGBT" acronym, declaring preferred pronouns, and expanding countries included in self-ID.

**LGBT becomes LGBT+:** When the discussion of self-ID began in the 1990's, the focus was on gay and lesbian employees. Bisexual people appear to have been folded in once the affinity group was formed, and transgender employees were explicitly added to company efforts beginning in 1999. The meaning of and terms for sexual and gender identities continue to evolve, though, and questions emerged internally about why other terms were not included, such as queer or allies. Adding letters to the acronym for additional terms came with disadvantages, however. Some non-LGBT+ people outside the U.S. were already confused about the self-ID options and adding to the acronym might have increased confusion. Adding some letters but not others would have been controversial and potentially divisive within the communities of sexual and gender minorities.

IBM decided to take a different path to manage those tensions. In 2016, IBM added the plus sign to LGBT+, using a positive symbol (+) to denote their intention to include additional groups of sexual and gender minorities under the LGBT+ banner, such as intersex, asexual, or gender fluid people, as well as allies. After the plus was announced the company saw an increase in the number of people self-identifying as LGBT+.

**Declaring pronouns:** Part of the internal discussion about LGBT+ was related to input from employees who were transgender, gender nonconforming, or nonbinary. They also educated company officials about the problem of misgendering employees. As a result of that education, in June 2019 IBM made it possible for all employees—whether transgender or cisgender allies--to declare which pronouns they want to use, including the option of "They/Them/Theirs" along with She/Her/Hers and He/Him/His. The declaration comes in the self-ID part of the human resources system, so it is only available in the countries with self-ID. Like self-ID, the pronoun declaration is completely voluntary and can be turned on and off.

One important difference from self-ID, which is a private, confidential piece of information, is that declaration of pronouns is public. Those pronouns are automatically included in the employee's listing in the "Blue Pages," IBM's internal directory that lists all IBM employees worldwide. Pronoun choices might be particularly important to employees who identify as transgender or nonbinary (those who do not identify with either male or female). The announcement of this option also pointed out that in some countries gender cannot be easily determined by names, broadening the applicability of pronoun declarations. The pronoun designations make it easier for those employees to clarify the pronouns that should be used in emails or other forms of written communication, for example.

**Countries participating in self-ID:** Finally, over time there will be changes in the countries that participate in self-ID, currently at 40. Some country offices of IBM have dropped the program because of new data privacy laws in those countries (including, most recently, Spain), and if more countries adopt new laws of that kind, the number of countries could fall. But self-ID has come to new countries, too. The additions will come as laws and attitudes change in places that are currently not welcoming of LGBT+ people. Of the 175 countries where IBM operates, 27 still criminalize being LGBT+ in some way, so they will not make it through the internal process.

# Conclusions

On one level the self-ID process may seem like a small step in the larger process of making workplaces more inclusive of LGBT+ people. However, IBM's story shows how important self-ID has been. The practice gives the company the tools to make its diversity practices inclusive of LGBT+ people to connect the company to an otherwise difficult-to-find set of employees. For 25 years LGBT+ employees have pointed to the need for the company to collect this information, and they have embraced and promoted the option where it is available. The program has evolved with the LGBT+ community, and IBM continues to respond with expansions and upgrades.

# End Notes

[1] Human Rights Campaign, "Corporate Equality Index 2020," Washington, D.C., 2020, https://assets2.hrc.org/files/assets/resources/CEI-2020.pdf.

[2] However, the U.S. Supreme Court heard challenges to that interpretation of sex discrimination in the fall of 2019 and is expected to rule in 2020.

[3] Personal communication with Beck Bailey of Human Rights Campaign, Sept. 25, 2019.

[4] IBM LGBT+ Pride timeline, https://www.ibm.com/thought-leadership/LGBT+pride/?lnk=ushpv18cs1&lnk2=learn#timeline, last accessed 1/31/20.

[5] See, for example, "IBM Brings Forward Its Non-Discrimination Policy," High Tech Gays, Monthly Newsletter, May 1991.

[6] Like many companies in the 1990's, the initial focus at IBM was on gay and lesbian employees, but as discussed later, bisexual and transgender people were eventually added to the LGBT+ umbrella term.

[7] IBM Gay & Lesbian Task Force: Cultural Change Team Report, Oct. 4, 1995: "We do not track demographic data on gays and lesbians in the work force the way we do for other minorities. Collecting demographic data is one of the first steps that will indicate that IBM is sincere about equal treatment. Currently we do not know how many gay and lesbian employees there are in IBM or how to contact them. We need to find ways to count and communicate with gays and lesbians without compromising their anonymity. Until there is real evidence of IBM's sincerity, gs and ls will continue to feel less valued than other minority groups.

[8] IBM 2018 Annual Report, p 26.

[9] Out Leadership and Ropes & Gray, "Visibility Counts: Corporate Guidelines for LGBT+ Self-ID," (2019). https://outleadership.com/content/uploads/2019/05/Visibility-Counts-Corporate-Guidelines-for-LGBT-Self-ID-FINAL-.pdf.

# Methods

Several types of information sources were used for this report. The author worked with Kimberley Messer, Business Development Leader, North America, Workforce Diversity & LGBT+ Markets, to gather data needed. Ms. Messer also provided background on the history and general approach to LGBT+ issues at IBM. Data came primarily from interviews with current and former IBM employees who were instrumental in creating or are currently implementing the self-ID program: Joy Dettorre, Office of Diversity and Inclusion, Global Leader; Sumi Shukla, Global Diversity Compliance & Analytics Program Manager; Jaimie Herr (Angerami), Communications Leader, IBM Diversity & Inclusion; and Brad Salavich, Retired IBM. Other information on the self-ID program came from internal company documents made available by IBM. In addition, other externally available and independent publications that provided context and details are included and cited in the report. Donald Tomaskovic-Devey also provided very helpful comments on earlier drafts. We thank Beck Bailey of the Human Rights Campaign for providing unpublished data from the Corporate Equality Index.



To learn more about IBM's history of supporting LGBT+ inclusion, explore the IBM LGBT+ Timeline: https://www.ibm.com/thought-leadership/LGBT%2Bpride/.



The Center for Employment Equity is dedicated to documenting progress, and when necessary regress, toward our shared national goals of equitable and diverse workplaces. We provide scientifically careful analyses and curated data to the community of citizens, employers, and policy makers concerned with promoting equitable workplaces.