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Gender pronouns: How to navigate using them in the workplace

The inclusive pronoun movement has reached the workplace with employees encouraged to learn the new lingo to show support.

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The inclusive pronoun movement has reached the workplace.

“She/her”, “he/him” and “they/them” labels are increasingly popping up in email signatures and now LinkedIn here has joined Instagram in encouraging members to add pronouns to their profiles.

The dedicated pronoun feature allows professionals to express the way they want to be identified and to communicate that they respect the way other people self-identify, LinkedIn Australia and New Zealand’s Shiva Kumar says.

“We had seen an increase in our members adding gender pronouns in the first and last name fields on the profile so we expect the feature to be popular with members,” he says.

Pronoun fields have been available on LinkedIn in the United States, United Kingdom, Ireland, Canada and Sweden since the end of March, and were introduced in Australia last week.



LinkedIn's Shiva Kumar expects the new pronoun feature to be popular on the professional social media platform.
Picture: Supplied

The move comes as research by job site Indeed reveals many Australians do not feel they can be their true self in the workplace.

Almost two thirds (62 per cent) say they conceal parts of their identity when at work.

Career insights head Jay Munro says there are no longer clear boundaries between work life and home life so people should be able to be their full self in both settings.

Inclusive pronouns are still new to many, so how can workers navigate this in the workplace?

HOW TO SHARE YOUR PRONOUN

Human resources expert and Corporate Dojo founder Karen Gately recommends people who want to be referred to with a new pronoun should bring this up in a non-confrontational way.

She advises against calling a meeting and “making an event of it”.

“It’s about finding the balance between being firm in what you are willing to ask people to call you – because that’s them being respectful – and not making people feel so uncomfortable they just don’t call you anything,” she says.

With close colleagues, Gately advises raising the issue in conversation, but, for more distant colleagues, it may be easier to ask the boss to share that information.

“It makes sense to make the boss aware anyway so they can lead by example and use that pronoun,” she says. “Respectful people will follow suit.”

WHEN TO SHARE YOUR PRONOUN

Gately says it is not always a good idea to bring it up in the job application phase as there is still a risk of discrimination.

“(Some people say) ‘if an employer doesn’t want to give me a job because of that, I am better off not working there’, but at the same time, some people desperately need a job and what’s the lesser evil?” she says.

“It’s a judgment call depending on your circumstances – it annoys me that it has to be a thing but it’s a fact of life.”



Indeed's Jay Munro says the boundary between personal and professional life has blurred. Picture: Supplied

Munro – whose colleagues at Indeed have been including pronouns in work email signatures for more than a year – agrees he would like to recommend that jobseekers with a gender neutral pronoun include this in their cover letter when applying for a job but, in reality, it is not always advised.

“I don’t know if we are there yet,” he says. “Some hiring managers may not know how to act or speak to you.

“There needs to be more education around it.”

WHAT IF YOU DON'T WANT TO

Gately says people do not have to share their pronoun at work just because their colleagues do.

“It’s great that it’s encouraged, but if for whatever reason that is something you do not want to be involved in, that’s also fine,” she says.

“You don’t need to project defensiveness in your response to it, but you can confidently stand in your space that you don’t think that is relevant ... to your performance and ability to do your job.”

HOW TO ASK SOMEONE THEIR PRONOUN

Wait to be told is the recommendation from Gately.

“Go with tradition until you are told otherwise,” she says.

“If people request a certain pronoun, have the decency to respect that request, but we don’t need to pry or be overly hesitant or cautious.

“Just respond well when that information is shared with you.”



HR expert Karen Gately says purposefully and repeatedly using the wrong pronoun for a colleague could be considered workplace bullying. Picture: Supplied

WHAT IF YOU SLIP UP

If you use the wrong pronoun for a colleague by mistake, Gately says the best response is to apologise and promise to remember for next time.

If you use the wrong pronoun on purpose, however, this may be considered workplace bullying.

“Someone who does that is outright disrespectful and you could almost argue if they keep doing that they are stepping into the space of bullying,” Gately says.

“If they persist, talk to your manager around intervening because that’s just not OK.”

Munro says business leaders need to speak up, too.

“HR should be very supportive and vocal in providing education and making it clear that they will take action in response to poor behaviour,” he says.

OTHER WAYS TO BE SUPPORTIVE

Herd MSL senior account director and diversity and inclusion lead Blake Mason says the public relations agency has a dedicated LGBTQIA+ committee to help all colleagues be able to come to work as their full and true self.

It has identified small, tangible ways to support these communities, such as including pronouns in work email signatures and the internal company communications platform; colleagues self-identifying when introducing themselves at certain meetings; and organising workplace talks about trans rights.

Mason says the easiest thing people can do to be more supportive is be considerate of their language.

“If you take one thing away, think about gendered language and remove it,” he says.

“Instead of saying ‘hey guys’ or ‘ladies and gentleman’, say ‘hi folks’, ‘hi peeps’ or ‘distinguished guests’.

“If you have been working with a group of people and it’s fine for you to call them ‘guys’, that’s fine, but if you are giving a speech at a big event, steer clear of that.”



Herd MSL diversity and inclusion lead Blake Mason and group managing director Skye Lambley encourage employees to include their pronouns in their email signatures. Picture: Tim Hunter.

WHAT TO SAY

Common gender-neutral pronouns include:

THEY/THEM/THEIR

For example: Ash did their work because they were busy.

ZE/HIR/HIR

Pronounced “zee”/“here”/“here”

For example: Ash did hir work because ze was busy.

NAME ONLY

For example: Ash did Ash’s work because Ash was busy.