

For Taiwan's LGBT tech workers, the fight for equality is still an uphill struggle

OCT 29, 2018 | IN ON THE CUSP | BY NICOLE JAO

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6 min read



Taipei's Gay Pride parade on October 27 draws hundreds of thousands to march for marriage equality and LGBT rights. Global tech companies including Google, Oath's Yahoo! and Airbnb also showed support. (Image Credit: TechNode/Nicole Jao)

For more than a decade, Wayne Lin, a 42-year-old Taiwanese software engineer living in Taipei, had stayed in the closet at work. It was not until this year that Lin began feeling more comfortable talking about his sexuality with his colleagues.

"I was worried that my sexual orientation may somehow reflect negatively on or interfere with work," said Lin, who works as a manager at one of Taiwan's largest telcos, "but I'm now more confident about where I'm at with my career."

Last Saturday (October 27), around 137,000 people took to the streets of Taipei, waving rainbow flags to the beat of loud music, at the city's annual Gay Pride parade—the biggest pride celebration in Asia. In 2017, some 110,000 people participated, according to organizers.

Yet even as Taiwan is seen as more progressive and liberal compared with mainland China and Japan, many companies still struggle to embrace diversity. This is especially true for companies in the country's tech sector.

Among tech workers in Taiwan, Lin is among the lucky ones. He has spent most of his career working for operations of large global tech companies such as Microsoft, most of whom typically have established diversity policies designed

to treat LGBT employees fairly.

For many who work for local Taiwanese companies, that's not the case. Some say that if Taiwan wants to maintain its competitive advantage in terms of attracting and keeping tech talent, it will need to make sure that, at the very least, it can offer work environments that are more welcoming to minorities, including sexual minorities.

Uphill battle

An [online survey](#) conducted by Taiwan Tongzhi Hotline Association in 2016 found that more than 40% of the 865 respondents believe their sexual orientation could affect their career. (The word *tongzhi* in Chinese originally meant "comrade," but is now sometimes applied to refer to gay people.)

Coming out at work (by industry)

Tech



Only 33.7% of the respondents working in tech-related fields said they had come out at work—lowest of all industries surveyed and well below the overall average of 51.1%.

Food & Beverage



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Source: 2016 online survey by Taiwan Tongzhi Hotline Association. (Image Credit: TechNode)

Coming out in Taiwan's largely conservative tech industry is even more daunting, the survey shows. Only one-third of respondents who work in tech-related fields said they had come out at work—which is the lowest of all compared with to other industries and significantly below the overall average of just over 51%.

Since Taiwan made big strides toward marriage equality in May 2017—the highest court ruled that [preventing same-sex marriage is unconstitutional](#)—the issue of LGBT rights has garnered international attention. However, while the legalization of same-sex marriage is closer to reality, it's not a done deal. Earlier this month, [three anti-marriage equality referendums](#) were approved by the Central Election Committee, which will go to the vote next month.

LGBT-inclusive workplace environments and policies have shown to be an effective way to attract and retain talent and increase a company's overall competitiveness. A [report](#) by global non-profit think tank Center for Talent Innovation found that 72% of non-LGBT respondents who support and advocate for equal rights said they are more likely to accept a job at a company that's supportive of LGBT employees.

Taiwan—currently ranked [third in the world for talent shortage](#) with 78% of companies in Taiwan reported having difficulties in recruiting—can choose to ignore that trend at its own peril.

Marvin Ma, one of the campaigners at this year's Gay Pride parade in Taipei, and the public affairs manager of

Airbnb, told TechNode that the tech industry is still very male-dominated and his company has been trying to increase diversity with its new hires through bringing in people of different races, genders, and sexual orientations.

“Millennials and creative individuals value diversity and inclusivity in the workplace,” said Ma. “If the work environment can ensure that, then it will give the company a competitive advantage in recruiting young talented people.”

Another marcher at the parade, Malcolm Rix, says “at the end of the day, if companies promote a positive workplace environment, it’s good for business.” Rix is originally from the UK but has been living in Taiwan for the past 15 years. He now works for HP as a senior program manager.

Rix told TechNode his company has non-discrimination policies that apply to minority groups—women, LGBT, people with disabilities—and it serves as a means to attract them into the workplace. “They can pick the best people from everywhere,” said Rix, “it doesn’t matter if you’re gay or straight or man or woman, the question is whether you can do the job.”



Tech companies express their views on the dividing issue of marriage equality. (Image Credit: TechNode/Nicole Jao)

Foreign tech companies are contributing significant fuel to push ahead the LGBT movement in Taiwan, and many representatives from these companies turned up to march alongside LGBT people at the parade.

Taiwanese tech corporates, by comparison, seem to be dragging their feet.

“Whenever I hear about global companies proclaiming their support for the LGBT community, whether it is their inclusive workplace culture or LGBT-inclusive policies, it’s quite conceivable,” Dai You-xun, the coordinator of Taipei Pride Parade, told TechNode. “But in Taiwan, it’s not the same.”

Typically in Taiwan, workplace culture and its views on high-profile issues like same-sex marriage are dictated by “those who sit at the top,” said Dai.

Speaking of his own experience of working with tech companies on the parade, Dai noted that often these partnerships advance at a slow pace with incremental progress. LGBT advocacy efforts or sponsorship are, in many

cases, initiated by the employees rather than the those in the leadership position. In Taiwan, where corporate culture is typically rigid and top-down hierarchies are still very much ingrained, such an endeavor is very difficult, he said.

On top of the broader corporate environment, there is usually a clear separation between work and life where private matters like sexuality are rarely brought up at workplaces, said another member of the Taiwan gay community who declined to be named as he's not out to his family.

What's worrisome for Dai is that dividing issues like same-sex marriage and equal rights are not spoken about often, if at all, in workplaces. If the groups' needs are not being voiced and communicated to their employers, Dai said, Taiwanese companies would see little value in providing the support and implementing the policies that extend to LGBT groups.

Taiwan's tech industry is largely dominated by hardware and electronics manufacturing companies. "A lot of the electronics manufacturers and chipmakers are not consumer-facing but rather more business-facing, so they may not feel as much pressure or need to promote their corporate image around issues like LGBT rights," said Ho Jen-Hsuan, a Taiwanese engineer who now works for Dutch semiconductor company ASML in the Netherlands.

Ho said that this is why companies in finance and consumer goods are generally quicker to take a stance and express their stand on these issues.

LGBT in emerging tech

Even though in Taiwan's tech industry diversity may be falling short, there are glimmers of hope. Abbygail Wu, an information security engineer and a blockchain specialist living in Taipei told TechNode that in her field, LGBT workers are less discriminated against.

In 2008, Wu came out as a transgender when she was still in high school after almost taking her own life. Over the past 6 years, Wu worked in a number of tech startups in Taipei. There haven't been many negative experiences at work that really stood out "except for occasional verbal teasing about bathroom use," Wu said in a casual tone.

Other transgender people who work in the hardware sector encounter much more hurdles, she added.

Wu also noted that she always makes sure to screen potential employers for red-flags like asking odd questions during the interview or having opinions about on her long hair and gender.

As stereotypes persist, [suicide rate for transgender in Taiwan is high](#) and as many as 50% of transgender are unemployed or working temporary jobs. "Just as the saying goes 'the devil is always hiding in the details,' discrimination is always under the table," Wu said.

Wu and her partner founded a non-profit organization five years ago dedicated to provide transgender people with the support and resources they need and help fight for fairer treatment at work.

While foreign companies are the ones taking more prominent roles in promoting inclusive workplace culture and policies, they set the tone for local companies as they slowly come to recognize the importance of diversity in the workplace and recruitment practices.

"LGBT is only part of a wider community of minorities," said Ho, the R&D engineer. "A company that is LGBT-friendly, means that it embraces diversity."

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