

Trans-Gender Expressions – International Transgender Peer Support

Employer's Guide for the Transitioning Transsexual

Transsexualism is a condition in which a person's sense of identity as a man or woman does not correspond with their genitalia and/or other physical sexual characteristics. The exact cause is unknown at the present time, although current research in this area has found significant indications that it may be related to biological factors during early pre natal development. Individuals affected by this condition often live with a struggle to reconcile their natural personality, gender identity, and body image with their physical body and social status until a time in their life when the conflict becomes too great to bear and they must seek medical help to change their anatomy and/or social role. This is necessary because no effective psychotherapeutic treatment for transsexualism exists, gender identity (even a mismatched one) cannot be changed, therefore the only effective treatment is to change the gender of the body to align with the person's natural gender identity

What is transition?

Transition is done with the help of medical professionals, in accordance with recognized standards of care that have been in use since the 1960s. In general, this process involves the following:

Initial psychological testing to rule out other diagnoses, followed by psychiatric monitoring and counseling over several months to assess extent of the condition and understanding of consequences, obstacles, etc.

Health evaluation for hormone therapy, the administration of hormones, and continued monitoring to assess reaction to hormone-induced physical changes.

A trial living period of at least one year to ascertain level of comfort in reassigned gender (it is usually at this stage that an employer is given notice of the employee's diagnosis and intentions).

Finally, if the transitioning person so decides, continued hormone administration and life in the reassigned gender. This is usually, but not always, accompanied by surgical reconstruction of primary and/or secondary sex characteristics, facial structure, etc.

This therapeutic process exists to make a frivolous or hasty decision impossible since the steps involved in such a transition are progressively irreversible. In the overwhelming majority of cases the therapy is successful, and the person goes on to live a well adjusted life in the reassigned gender. The degree of success, however, can be influenced by (1) whether or not the person is able to maintain a stable job and income during transition, and (2) whether or not a supportive work environment exists. As an employer, your cooperation does make a difference.

What is the transsexual employee's legal status?

Generally speaking, "at-will" (i.e., non-contract, non-union) employees, have little legal protection in cases of workplace gender nonconformity. Yet, there are differences in details of how administrative law handles such cases from state to state, and city to city, and it is becoming increasingly popular to include "gender identity" in anti-discrimination legislation. Consult competent legal counsel to understand the law in your jurisdiction.

Does this affect the productivity of an employee?

In the past, transsexuals were advised to quit their jobs and start over as members of the opposite sex. However today, more and more are choosing to remain on the job while they transition, a process that can take several years to complete. The result of this is that often an employee that is accepted in their new gender role is more productive and produces higher quality work than in the past, due to the improvements in their self-esteem and motivation.

Additionally, by treating the transsexual employee with respect and understanding, you build trust and commitment. Moreover, other employees watch how management treats particular workers, and make decisions about loyalty to the team and the employer based on what they see. Employers should not casually discard the investment they have made in a transsexual employee, but consider the employee's experience, history, overall record, and bear in mind that this employee has probably thought long and hard about coming out as transsexual. This is not the type of decision a person makes without a great deal of soul-searching..

How can this transition be made easier?

As with most other business activities, organization and planning are the keys to a smooth and successful transition. Some key points to consider when preparing for an employee's transition are:

Set a date for transition, this will allow time to make the appropriate changes such as name tags, employee IDs, email addresses, organizational charts or schedules, etc. Making sure all of the necessary changes have been prepared ahead of time will help prevent any unnecessary confusion when the time comes.

Arrange a meeting including all of the transsexual employee's co-workers, workgroup, or department. Ideally a manager or department head should make the announcement about the employee's transition, explain company policy and recommendations, and make it clear that the TS is a valuable employee and has management's full support in making this transition. If possible, do some general education on the subject for the employees, many local therapists that specialize in transgender issues often offer workshops or sensitivity training for both management and co-workers.

Allow for co-workers concerns, generally there is no valid concern that cannot be worked out through compromise with the minimum amount of inconvenience for all involved. Often these concerns are simply a matter of getting to know and accept the transsexual employee in their new social role. The most commonly expressed concern is over restroom access, in this area the employer must balance the needs of the transitioning employee with the emotional responses of co-workers to the idea of sharing facilities. Problems of this nature can sometimes be resolved through use of a unisex or handicapped restroom if one is available, or by the use of a sign, or notice system through which non-transgendered employees can choose not to use facilities when a transitioning employee is inside. Of course, it should be stressed that this is a temporary solution since once their transition is complete, a transsexual employee has the right to the same access as a non-transsexual employee of the same gender.

Consider adopting a permanent HR policy, your company may never have another employee transition on the job, however having a specific policy already in place will simplify matters greatly if you do. Additionally, maintaining a strong HR policy affirming the value of diversity in the workplace, and emphasizing a commitment to having a workplace where all employees are valued and respected can be a positive step in maintaining a safe and secure work environment. Hostility and harassment often can be prevented before it starts when management communicates to employees its interest in a fair workplace in which employees are judged on their work, not on their personal characteristics.

When an employer and a transsexual employee can discuss the employee's transition in advance and agree on the steps to be taken, their timing, and work together on the issue, transition usually proceeds without incident. The employee is able to take the necessary steps toward self-fulfillment, while remaining at a job where he or she is competent and valued. The employer retains the expertise of the employee thus saving the expense of hiring and training a replacement, and may even find the employee to be more productive and easier for others to collaborate with as he or she becomes a more whole, and authentic person.

Does this affect company medical insurance?

Typically the answer is no, most insurance providers specifically exclude coverage for treatment related to transsexual issues at the present time. However, there are some indications that this attitude may be changing, most notably the decision by the city of San Francisco, California to extend health care benefits for city employees to include genital reconstruction, hormones and other medical matters such as hysterectomies and mastectomies for transgender individuals once a doctor deemed the procedures medically necessary. The city estimates that 17 of its 37,000 current employees are transgendered, and that as many as 35 might make use of the new benefits in the first year. Implementation of the coverage changes, which include hearing aids and acupuncture, will increase each employee's monthly insurance premium by approximately \$1.70, the bulk of which will be paid by the city.

How have other companies handled this?

Large corporations because of their wide employee base may encounter a transsexual employee every few years, and often set up internal guidelines for dealing with the issue of transition in the workplace. In nearly all cases, a memo is circulated among co-workers informing them simply that the employee will return to work at a certain date as an employee of the opposite gender. Some companies call a short meeting of co-workers at which management and the employee is present to inform them of the change and to answer any questions which may appear; this technique is particularly effective in keeping the transition smooth.

Most of the specific suggestions presented in this article were drawn from the experiences of other employers in dealing with transitioning employees. Because of the increased public awareness of transsexuals today, the major problem remaining is that the employee is an object of curiosity among co-workers immediately following their appearance in the new gender role. The first few hours on the first day will usually involve many new introductions, yet the novelty does wear off and work returns to normal. Over time, as people get to know the person in the new gender role, it becomes old news.