

Transcript:

Interview with Katherine O'Donnell, co-chair of our LGBTQ+ Affinity Group

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I'd like to welcome Katherine O'Donnell, who joins us today as part of our pride at GatenbySanderson series. Katherine is a senior researcher in the digital data and technology team, and she's spent her career with US recruiting management professionals across a really diverse portfolio. She's really passionate about supporting and developing diverse leaders and future talent within technology. And there's also one of our three co chairs of our newly formed LGBTQ plus affinity group here at GatenbySanderson. Katherine, thank you for joining us.

My pleasure, Jen.

So, let's start with a bit more about you. Can you tell us about your career journey so far?

Sure thing. It's actually been a really interesting one as to how I ended up here, because I actually studied biomedical science at university.

I always think it's a bit of a shame that we chart our futures when we're teenagers because we have no idea what we're actually going to end up being. And I have to say that teenage Katherine was not very sociable at all. So, the idea of spending my life in labs, working on research and medical research at that, that really appealed. But what I found out as I went further into things and did some lab work.

Was that stuck in a lab from 9:00 to 5:00 with artificial lighting? No one else to talk to was really not my thing. And that, unlike my teenage self, I grew beyond it. And I'm actually quite sociable, and I enjoy working with others. So, whilst I was trying to figure out my life, I suppose and where I go from there.

A good friend of mine told me to work at Carillion. In the meantime, and Carillion was one of



the largest. I suppose building and built environment companies in existence, at least in the UK, and I will say I got out before they imploded into themselves, but that was my first career step really into the internal recruitment team at Carillion so.

Very much the built environment, so construction professionals, um infrastructure and the like and so.

After I left Carillion, I briefly worked in finance recruitment, and then I moved across into high level executive search from within the built environment. So that's very much everything you see around you. So that's Rd rail infrastructure, connectivity building and what rooms alongside it was very much the tech piece. So it all had to entwine. And so that was my real foray.

Into the world there I then moved to put on a white hat, so to speak, during COVID, and I decided to work for the public sector. So, I worked for the Greater Birmingham and Solihull Local Enterprise Partnership, which was really where the public sector and the private sector meet. So, it was quite a privilege actually to be able to support local companies to the Greater Birmingham area with their development, their recovery and I suppose also their existence.

At a time when there were so many pressures, so that was for professional services and technology. So, with lots and lots of tech companies that were growing and creating a, suppose a safe landing bed for them. And at that point, I I suppose I wanted to move back into that high level recruitment, but I couldn't really move away from the public sector too much. Hence you find me at gating me, Sanderson, who obviously worked in the private work at for the public sector.

And a housing and the like. So, it's felt quite perfect.

Absolutely it is there anything else that made you once joined?

Ohh actually it was the people so might have lost a few bids to you in the past and in a in a previous life, but it was the people that I knew here so recommendations from those that I trusted and that I knew put me in touch with some of the individuals that GatenbySanderson and everyone came across as very, very genuine. So real people who were still doing really important.

Work. And so it was, I suppose, that reputation as well, so that, that, that reputation for integrity and fairness, I suppose it drew me in.



And you've taken on a new role here at GatenbySanderson alongside your, let's say, your day job as one of our co-chairs of our new affinity groups. So, can you tell me a bit more about the LGBTQ plus Affinity group and your role within it?

Of course, so.

An affinity group is a safe space really. At its core, it is there to represent people in the company and as you as you know, we come from all walks of life and we already had some really well developed affinity groups. The Women's affinity group, the Disability Affinity Group and the Race Affinity group and I I I felt torn when I joined because I don't really join one, I suppose.

And I thought but, but I'd be marvellous to join or be an ally to all of those. But you didn't have an LGBTQ plus affinity group, and I know that it's because people have been asked historically if they want it there, but I I believe other's passions and time went towards some of those other groups or other priorities.

But it it felt like there wasn't necessarily a safe space or the obviousness and the visibility there for that group and as a part of that, I I suppose I did quite a bit of self reflection as well. And I thought this is something that I would have wanted and needed her various points in my career. And so to be to be able to give that, to give both a safe space for those within the community.

Also to give learning and support to those that might have questions or they just want to grow as an individual or they want to know how to support others, I felt was incredibly important. And as as a Co chair, you can tell that there's others that felt as passionately about that as I do. And so we had some conversations internally about as opposed to setting that up and to provide that service to our current and future colleagues.

Yeah, it's fantastic and obviously that I finished group, you know, not necessarily having had it before as well. It's obviously all of those great things. But why is it so important to you?

Is this something of a difficult question to answer in the? I have never been out within a corporate setting. I mean I'm I'm a bisexual woman and I am an invisible statistic. There is something within the community and outside of it called by erasure.

In that because my partner is a man, I am.



Not considered to be by some, I'm not considered to be a part of that community. I am like considered to be a straight cisgendered woman because they think that is a choice that I have made and whereas conversely, if I've been dating a woman, then I'm gay. So you it's one or the other and that's the pressure from inside and outside the community and.

I'll be honest, the the word itself to be a bisexual is often almost fetishised outside of that community as well. So it's a very loaded word and it took quite a lot of, I'll be honest, it was quite scary to be to put my hand up and say I'm a member of this community. Once I was outside of it because it's not obvious. If you look at me on the surface.

You can't tell from a glance, but you also can't tell from my partner because it's not. It's not obvious in any of my social media presence, both professionally and personally, and I suppose I made that choice a long time ago, because the built environment, the very area that I worked in, is not historically well known for being diverse or inclusive or supportive in those ways and.

I I wish that I had had the representation that I potentially needed when I was younger, that I could see leadership or just someone in my team, or that the wider function that I say ohh.

Because I I've actually had members of my team come to me before, more junior members struggling with certain challenges and the like, and they felt they couldn't tell me because they didn't know that I was a member of that community. So it must have taken huge courage for them.

And to to have to make that choice and that decision over and over again, I wish I hadn't had to feel that way, that I had to make that choice because it would have been very lonely.

At a time when there was number visibility anywhere and that feeling of aloneness is quite damning and difficult to work through, and I suppose so, feeding back to your original question, why is it so important?

To me, at least, it's that people have that space to make that choice. You know, it's it's a space to be yourself where it's private and it's you can choose to get this, that support visibly or privately, but also that you have those that have proven.

That that choice can be made in a good way so that they have the I keep going back to visibility, but it's a privilege to be visible.



It really is at times and the fact that we now have the privilege as part of society that I will not get repercussions for being out.

Within this workplace is. It's quite a powerful thing.

Thank you so much for sharing that. I think it's really important to be able to create that visibility and like you said, as a an invisible statistic and within the community itself.

You know the it really speaks to things of like visible identity of versus invisible and all of those things. And I think just applaud you for your courage as well, because by being courageous and brave yourself like you said, you're able to create that space for others to do the same.

And do you have said it in to me in other workplaces? You you felt you've had to hide a part of yourself and you've sort of touched on it a little bit, but.

Is there more that you'd like to share there? What? You know, what were some of those barriers for you?

So Ohh, obviously I I'm. I'm happy to talk about Carillion because it's gone. It's not a thing anymore, so hopefully no one will feel bad moving forwards, but you couldn't see it at the top. They talked a lot about their values, but the reality of it was I was talking to and directly working with and that my direct team were wonderful. I'm sure there would have been an issue. That was my first big job and it's entering into that.

Graduate environment where you're trying to be the adult that you're going to be, so you're still shaping yourself and.

Honestly, it's quite exhausting having to self police as well. So thinking about what to say constantly and it felt almost easier not to be that person and it not to be my real self because you're trying to portray your best self and sometimes our focus is aren't necessarily what they should be when we look back and.

Depending on what you have seen as success and at that time success was, well, what does the leadership team look like? And I'll be frank, it was a bunch of.

White senior males, predominantly and there was no LGBT visibility that there was very little



female visibility and there was certainly very little gain. Visibility and Carillion was one of the better organisations for diversity within that world at the time and I suppose and moving on from that when I was in a previous place of work.

I had a I suppose it wasn't termed and affinity group but it was but it didn't feel very authentic.

To me in that I couldn't see any senior leadership as part of the community. There were allies everywhere, but I couldn't see any real traction or support. It felt it was a good thing to do.

To know that people were there and you could talk to them, but it felt almost. Tokenistic at times, and I know that wasn't what there they were trying. They were trying, but it just didn't feel lived in or comfortable. I felt that people would have judged me, I suppose. And I don't know if that was my own insecurities talking, but.

It can be very difficult in a workplace environment to again have that courage to beat to, to be the visible individual to suppose.

Out yourself in that environment and. Then so I didn't.

And it's understandable. And also then that expectation on you within the Community to have to be the one that has to come out like it, the burdens on you in that emotional Labour.

It is. That emotional burden that all of the heavy lifting is being done by me. Rather than Others asking questions or not assuming and it to be a bit more inclusive in language so many years ago, I deliberately made the choice to refer to.

My partner using the word partner and that that way it would be safer for those in the Community and I've encouraged all of my friends and people that I've worked with to use the word partner, because then you don't know off hand if I'm talking about a man or a woman or someone who might be nonbinary, there's no way of knowing off the top of it. If more people use inclusive language. So potentially using the word they and them more often.

In your language, if you're not sure, so I suppose it's more about not making assumptions in language rather than assuming that someone fits into certain criteria about being a bit more open with your questions and being.

Supposed accept that you'll get it wrong at times.



Yes, in LGBTQ plus Affinity group launch. We had a guest speaker Dan and he said a lot about that discomfort of getting comfortable with being wrong or getting it wrong and sitting in that discomfort. And I think that's really important, especially for allies to the Community as well.

Ohh absolutely, I've got it wrong all the time. It it's assuming that if you're a part of the community that you can't make mistakes that if you're an ally it will be even worse if you make mistakes. One of the biggest drivers for for me to come out within getting be Sanderson was that I joined at the same time as one of the other Co chairs. David who is non binary and I struggled with my generalisation of, you know, my pronouns.

I I've I've got in it wrong a couple of times and David has been incredibly gracious because they know that it's not intentional, that I'm I'm working hard to do it and the more I have used the inclusive pronouns, pronouns and inclusive words, the easier it comes. Even if you have to take a second to just reassess what you're about to say. So it it's accepting that discomfort. And I suppose if you look at children.

That brilliant. They are brash and sometimes not necessarily uncaring. They will go up to anyone and anything and ask about it. They will walk up to someone disabled and ask them why they can't do a certain thing or what a difference is, and nine times out of 10, that individual would rather be asked and have someone get it wrong, then not be asked at all. So the courage that children exhibit because they're learning about everything is something of a lesson.

Be courageous enough, inquisitive enough to ask. Accept that you might not get a kind answer all the time, because that one time in 10 someone will be tired or frustrated, or potentially in pain, depending on what it is. So it it's the onus on us to make those steps and to take them and to learn and grow.

I think that is a fantastic piece of advice for everyone's take on board and and not to make assumptions about anybody that you meet or you work with for sure. So were there any other specific things about GatenbySanderson, and you've mentioned about David and when they joined the business at the same time as you, so that helped, but there wasn't an affinity group for LGBTQ plus at the time. So is there anything else that specifically made you feel safe to come out at work?

All of my team and everyone that I spoke to was incredibly genuine. I know that I said that before, but it might be a reflection of the fact that most of us are working from home as well. Over the past few years, home and work have intersected in a way that they haven't before. So historically you'd only ever see individuals suited and booted.



For the office or for the workplace and.

It was easier to have that device. You saw people more as their job at times what they did, because that's what they put forward. But all of a sudden you're seeing children wandering into rooms, you're seeing someone apologising that they're having to sit in a cramped little room because the other room has something else in or the Wi-Fi is not working. And I think it's helped people be more open about their whole selves. So you'll have people.

Saying ohh sorry, I've got to go and pick the kids up or I went for a run this morning and I tripped over and it was ridiculous. And you have people being a lot more honest about themselves because they feel they can be so it it. It's that reflection we have. We can only ever.

Give the best of ourselves so that integrity of everything we do that comes together, it really showed itself in everyone that I spoke to, even if it was little things like the team catch ups. It's not just work, work, work. It's also ohh. How's your dad doing?

Or ohh, how was your holiday and genuinely wanting to hear the answer as well as being professionals who got on with the job, so it it's it's a more grown up environment and boat by grown up I mean the authentic because when we're younger we're trying desperately hard to be grown up and cool and everything we ever wanted ourselves to be but I'm probably far cooler than I ever was.

In my early 20s and my teens, because I've relaxed, I'm more confident in myself and that that that's more what being a grown up is, is more about being authentic to yourself and admitting when something is hard or difficult or you know, you're just not feeling great that day and trusting those that would support you. So, yeah, I think we've all been there at times where we've had to look around and go. Is there another adult here and is there an adult and you're going?

Oh. Oh, that's me. That's me. But it doesn't scare you as much anymore.

Yeah, we're all in this in the same boat, aren't we?

Ohh thank you for sharing that. So just to wrap up, do you have any messages or any message for members of the LGBTQ plus community during pride?



I suppose my message is just one of solidarity because there's more of us than is always visible, and that can often be for very good reasons.

Um, I know that, as an aside, my father came out when he was in his 50s. He grew up in Northern Ireland on the border as part of a Catholic family. It's a very difficult thing to do, but the support that he got from the community up to that point because previously he'd been an ally.

And it was that safe space and that self reflection that allowed him to be his true self, that the support, and I suppose the commitment that we give to being our authentic selves and to supporting others at whatever stage of their journey.

It really comes through in the end, and that pride is a difficult time right now with all the challenges that are happening across the world. So I'd say to have the strength and the courage to lean on others as well. So to not be as.

A fright to rely on those that are around us, even when we've been bitten before, because it can really lead to lifelong friends or even just a few months of support from someone that you'll never see again. I'm sure we've all had those fleeting friendships, but they mean so much at the time. So I'd say that togetherness and that strength to keep going would be more my messages at the moment in pride.

Thank you.

And finally, do you have any messages for allies during pride? You know, how can we help alleviate the emotional and educational burden from community members, given it such difficult time as well as a celebration?

Yeah, I mean it don't get away from the fact that it is a celebration of everything that people have achieved over history. There's no way I could be sat here talking to you about this topic without those pioneers at the time during the stone wall riots, during all the activism. And I mean, pioneers are difficult word because at the time, people don't see themselves as pioneers. They're just doing what needs to be done.

And I suppose the onus on allies especially right now, is to have that strength within yourselves, to have the the compassion, the the courage. And I suppose the curiosity to.

Ask us how we are ask questions about what? What whatever you might want to know



about the community, but also to not necessarily put all of the onus on us to answer it. So if you've got a question or you want to find out more, there's so many brilliant resources out there.

Google is your friend, OK?

I mean, even if you do do do a quick look on YouTube or something else, there's so many in instructional videos and the like of ohh if you're not sure what questions to ask, what not to ask can sometimes be pregnant. Google is your friend.

But also it is a celebration. And so to I suppose, try immersing yourself. Is it for 10 minutes, half an hour, a day, and just enjoy the culture that you might not be used to. Look at the literature, the books, the films, the Media, Podcasts, Radio, music. There's so much is so vibrant that.

I think you'll really find something that resonates with you as well and just yeah, enjoy this time and don't forget that pride, maybe for the month. But we're here all year round, so don't feel that if this is a bad time for you and you're going through something or you know, you just you're really busy, don't feel that the opportunity has passed you by. Once pride is over because that community always exists.

I will always be here. So at anytime of the year, please immerse yourself or or just ask and so would be delighted to give any kind of guidance or answers that you might want to know.

Thank you so much, Katherine. I really appreciate how honest and open you've been and in sharing your story and some advice as well for the community and for allies as well. So thank you for taking that time. I think it's so important that we amplify voices and experiences of LGBTQ plus community and their experiences in the workplace as well, and how organisations, leaders and colleagues can make a difference as our lives and community members. So thank you so much for sharing your story with us today.

Oh, thank you Jen. It was a pleasure to be here.

