

Getting Gay-Friendlier

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The list of companies achieving a perfect score for LGBT equality this year on the Human Rights Campaign's benchmarking tool, the [Human Rights Campaign Foundation's Corporate Equality Index](#), includes companies in all 50 states.

Deena Fidas, director of the campaign's workplace equality program in Washington, says the fact that all 50 states were represented was likely prompted, in part, by companies' efforts to keep up with public opinion and to outpace lawmakers.

"The writing is on the wall for full, legal equality," she says. "Businesses want to be part of that arch of history. At the same time, we're seeing a significant social, cultural shift."

The [full report](#) on the index shows that over the past two years, the number of top-ranking companies jumped from 189 to 304, and hundreds of [businesses this year backed amicus briefs](#) urging the Supreme Court to strike down the Defense of Marriage Act and California's [Proposition 8](#).

Aside from the political arena, many company leaders who have been working on improving inclusiveness have seen its value, even down to profit margins, she says.

"You have this core group of a couple hundred companies steadily working on this who want to be best in class," she says. "It may simply have been a matter of updating benefits or more diversity training, and, this year, they did it."

To score a perfect 100, companies are measured on the following criteria: equal employment opportunity and employment benefits (65 percent), organizational competency (20 percent) and public engagement (15 percent). The top companies for LGBT inclusiveness are making equality a priority from the top down and the inside out, Fidas says.

"The strongest companies have a strong internal diversity and inclusion structure," she says.

They also display support in the community, Fidas says, offering Kentucky distillery [Brown-Forman](#), makers of Jack Daniel's whiskey, as an illustration. The company, which scored 100 on the index, holds events to link their marketing and branding to their index score, and company leaders fly a rainbow flag at their headquarters in Louisville. Other inclusiveness leaders, such as [Levi Strauss & Co.](#) have given employees the option of showing their support for gay marriage. The denim-makers were among the first to support gay marriage during Proposition 8 a few years ago, and they offered retailers the chance to display white ribbons during a White Ribbon Campaign, so shoppers could see where they stand.

"There are ways that companies are linking their broader image (to how the company treats LGBT workers), down to actual brands and products," Fidas says. "No one loses sight of the power of a visual like a rainbow flag in downtown Louisville."

While policies and equal benefits are important, they're just the beginning of creating a work environment that's LGBT-friendly, says Deb DeHaas, a senior partner appointed as Deloitte's chief inclusion officer. The New York-headquartered firm -- listed among businesses that offer at least one transgender-inclusive healthcare coverage plan -- made the top 100 for the seventh consecutive year this year.

"You can have programs and practices, and HR executives have a lot of ability to impact those," she says. "But at the end of the day, it's all about culture."

Deloitte measures the inclusiveness of the company's culture as part of an annual talent survey, completed anonymously and administered by an outside firm. Employees have the option to offer some demographic information, as well, including questions about sexual identity.

They've also implemented initiatives, [such as a "Share Your Story" video campaign](#) to spread the message to appreciate diversity. The videos are played periodically and at screenings in offices and break areas, she says, and they often are rolling at the [Deloitte University Leadership Center for Inclusion](#).

The company has partnered with outside resources to create research on the benefits of workplace equality ([see Deloitte's white paper co-authored by NYU Law Professor Kenji Yoshino on new approaches to inclusiveness here](#)) and also supports LGBT-related campaigns and organizations, such as Out & Equal.

Employees took part in Out & Equal's campaign to stop teen bullying by making an "[It Gets Better Video](#)" for posting on YouTube. Company leaders recently announced they are supporting the [Global Equality Fund](#) to advance global human rights issues related to the LGBT community.

"We're trying to promote an environment where people believe they can bring their authentic selves to work," DeHaas says.

Building an LGBT-friendly work environment is imperative to recruiting and retaining talent, says Nichole Barnes Marshall, who leads Aon's global diversity and inclusion efforts. The Chicago-based firm made the index's perfect 100 list for the seventh consecutive year -- each year since CEO Greg Case took the helm, Marshall is quick to point out.

Business resource groups such as the Aon Pride Alliance are key to promoting an LGBT-friendly workplace, she says. Alliance colleagues provide feedback on training courses, so that the LGBT perspective is woven into employee and manager training.

The firm has worked to "walk the talk" to its clients on the Aon Hewitt side, too, Marshall says.

"We've been helping our clients to understand recommendations on how to navigate the new landscape and the tax implications."

The firm's stance on inclusiveness is also part of its employee value proposition.

"Part of our story about why [to] choose us as an employer and as a business is we've taken in the perspective of the pride alliance and all of our resource groups," she says.

The firm also partners with organizations such as Out & Equal, and they work to support LGBT rights at client companies worldwide, Marshall says.

"We position ourselves not only internally to support our colleagues, but externally to support our clients with trying to create that culture, regardless of what's happening externally," she says. "It is well-stated and documented, but it can't be said enough that the fact is that companies that embrace and leverage inclusion outperform their peers in every category. It not only makes dollars, it makes sense to have an inclusive environment."