

PRONOUNS IN THE WORKPLACE

As we strive to create inclusive workplaces, the use of pronouns has become more of a focus.



This guide is designed to support a better understanding of pronouns and provide practical strategies for using them respectfully. While this is an issue that can affect anyone, pronoun misuse can disproportionately impact trans and gender non-binary people.

WHAT ARE PRONOUNS?

Pronouns are a small set of words (such as I, she, he, you, it, we, or they) that are used as substitutes for nouns. In some languages, such as English, they serve the purpose of associating a person with a particular gender, e.g. she, he, her, his. In that regard, they can help us communicate efficiently and specifically, by allowing us to refer to and identify people more quickly. But this can also lead to false assumptions and therefore mistakes.

Not all languages are gendered in this way. With te reo Māori, for example, all pronouns are neutral by default.

WHEN PRONOUN MISUSE BECOMES A PROBLEM

Often we pass through daily life without giving pronouns a second thought, however the incorrect use of pronouns or the misuse of gendered words are a big deal for many people. Being identified in the wrong way can make them feel excluded or misunderstood, potentially even disrespected or demeaned.

You don't need to have any particular identity to be misgendered – pronouns apply to everyone and can be misused in relation to anyone, which can lead to embarrassing situations!

ASSUMPTIONS CAN LEAD TO MISTAKES

Gender assumptions are often based on people's appearance, behaviours, voice (especially in phone communications), and name (most commonly in emails, resumes and other written documentation.)

In a multicultural society we frequently interact with people who may have a name we've never come across before. If someone has a gender-neutral name, or an unfamiliar name, there is a risk we may make an incorrect gender assumption.

In many situations we are conditioned to associate a term with a particular gender. This may be because statistically, or historically, that term was more likely to be associated with that gender but that doesn't mean that will always be the case. This conditioning, or unconscious bias, can lead to us assuming, for example, that a doctor will be a "he" or a secretary will be a "she".

In many English-speaking countries we use the term partner to refer to the person we are romantically involved with as a substitute for more gendered terms such as husband, girlfriend or wife. If a man uses the term "my partner" it is easy to assume that such partner is a woman, but that is not necessarily the case. These assumptions can create uncomfortable situations for people in the Rainbow community.

PRONOUNS AND TRANS OR AND NON-BINARY PEOPLE

Many trans and gender non-conforming people have an experience of being repeatedly and directly misgendered. For people in these groups this can be a harmful experience.

Not everyone uses male or female pronouns either – and this may be because they are gender neutral, non-binary or gender-non-conforming. In many cases, the pronoun "them" is used, but they may use another pronoun.



GUIDELINES FOR ORGANISATIONS:

- Make sure all internal and external forms used to collect data, including those used in the hiring process, allow people to voluntarily state their pronoun or honorific. If you need to supply a pre-populated list, ensure there is a non-binary option.
- Use gender-neutral greetings when addressing groups of people. It's better to say, "Good morning everyone," than, "Good morning ladies and gentlemen".
- When asking people to introduce themselves at the start of a meeting, give them the option to include their pronoun if they are comfortable to do so.
- Agree on how pronouns can be included in your company email signature and communicate to your teams that anyone wishing to do so may add their pronoun to the email signature.
- Ensure communications are sent out internally to explain any changes in practice around pronouns and give managers the information and resources they need to answer questions from their teams.
- Encourage people to practice using pronouns appropriately and gently correct colleagues if they do make a mistake. Accept that will take people a while to break old habits – retraining your brain to use gender-neutral pronouns takes time.

GUIDELINES FOR INDIVIDUALS:

- State your pronouns when introducing yourself in public settings when you are comfortable to do so. This signals to others that they can too, so they are less likely to be misgendered themselves.
- Don't expect or force others to publicly express their pronoun. If somebody doesn't feel comfortable disclosing theirs, that's their choice.
- Once you do know someone's pronouns, use them. Don't feel the need to use gender-neutral terms all the time. Validate someone's gender simply by addressing them with their chosen pronoun.
- If you are not sure what pronoun to use, listen to how others refer to the individual and reflect that language. It's not a foolproof system, but it can provide clues on how to address people respectfully.
- Try to avoid making assumptions. Stop and think before automatically 'assigning' someone a gender.
- Mistakes happen – apologise, correct yourself and move on. If you make a mistake, don't dwell on it, even if to apologise further, as this may embarrass the person you're addressing.
- If you witness someone misgendering a person, especially if it's done repeatedly or maliciously, correct them. This applies whether the person being referred to is present or not.
- Consider adding your pronouns underneath your name in your email signature. This is a simple way of sending an inclusive, informative signal to those you haven't met yet or haven't revealed your pronouns to yet.