

Positive Inclusion Award Winner: Simpson Grierson

Video Link: <https://vimeo.com/137895015>

Embracing diversity gives new lease of life to Law profession “Law is a very conservative profession and to come out of the closet could cost a younger lawyer his career”.

This is the message that a young, “in the closet”, law graduate heard from his friends and family as he started his career at law firm, Simpson Grierson. His fears of being “found out” were affecting his performance, attitude, and self-esteem; it was becoming apparent to his managers that there was a deeper issue. After a conversation with human resources, the young graduate revealed his concerns and told the team that he had been depressed and had at times, even felt suicidal.

This was a serious red flag for Human Resources: in a profession that has more than its fair share of depression, anxiety and unfortunately the odd suicide (lawyers are 3.6 times more likely to suffer from depression and anxiety than any other profession) this young man’s story struck a chord. At the time, mental health was a concern in the law profession – which the firm experienced firsthand when one of their own partners had taken her life a few years earlier.

Something had to be done: it was after that meeting that the HR team at Simpson Grierson made a decision. It was time for a change – they decided to embrace rainbow diversity to ensure no-one else ever felt like being out would ruin their career. They decided it was time to take a leadership position in what was a very traditional sector.

The HR team needed to convince the partnership that this was a good idea. So Jo Copeland, Director of HR, met with the partners and told them the young man’s story. They were shocked to hear that young LGBTI employees were afraid of “coming out of the closet” for fear that it would ruin their careers. She also told them that she was aware of a number of employees who were in the closet and also felt it would be very career limiting to come out at work. They said that sexual orientation was irrelevant to their work and quickly agreed that something needed to be done to change perspectives.

The next step was taking that sentiment and putting it into motion: Simpson Grierson already had diversity and inclusion policies in place, as well as the corporate values that highlighted the importance inclusiveness, but now the firm had to put those policies into action. Jo Copeland and her colleagues knew that while the industry itself was slow to change, Simpson Grierson had made diversity a priority which meant that it needed to be embraced in all of its’ forms. And their diversity policy was clear: the firms aim was to lead the profession for diversity and inclusion.

They started with the goal of becoming the first organization ever to receive the Rainbow Tick: as part of this, they created an internal Pride Network, the first of its’ kind for a New Zealand law firm, with the purpose of providing peer-support for staff internally, creating a business network to leverage opportunities for their LGBTI people, and raising awareness and acceptance of LGBTI issues amongst all of their staff.

Through the Pride Network, Simpson Grierson connected with the Auckland Law School to help them launch their LGBTI network. This experience highlighted a major need for LGBTI role models in the industry and encouraged the team to host a number of prominent LGBTI guest speakers, sponsor an award for individuals who contribute to Rainbow Law Issues, and create a mentorship program with the Law School.

Simpson Grierson then conducted a comprehensive diversity, inclusion and engagement survey which gave them benchmark figures against which they can measure their progress in the future.

The firm also became the first law firm in New Zealand to develop a gender transition policy. This groundbreaking initiative combined with the implementation of unisex bathrooms, speaking out publicly in support of LGBTI issues, and offering sexual orientation and gender inclusivity training, contributed to Simpson Grierson not only receiving the Rainbow Tick but also reaching their target of becoming a leader on LGBTI issues in the legal field.