



WHAT IS THE Q?





# QUEER: INCORPORATING THE “Q” IN LGBTQ

Throughout the decades, workplace culture has become increasingly familiar with the “LGBT” acronym and what the letters within it represent: Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender.

Language plays a crucial role in the formation, implementation, and execution of diversity and inclusion initiatives in any arena. Thus, companies must take careful consideration when crafting messaging and policies surrounding these issues.

As progress towards LGBT workplace inclusion is achieved, many are newer in their journey of incorporating an important, but often omitted, piece of the LGBT puzzle—The “Q.” While some employers have begun the process of incorporating the “Q” into messaging, fewer are familiar with what the letter stands for and/or how to define it.

# BACKGROUND AND HISTORICAL IMPLICATIONS

The term itself has a troublesome history. Originally understood to mean unusual or peculiar, 'queer' took on a darker tone when individuals began to use it as a slur against gay men in the late 1800s. Distorting its original definition, 'queer' became a derogatory term meaning "homosexual," and negatively implied that LGBTQ individuals were themselves abnormal and strange.

Over time, LGBTQ activists decidedly worked to reclaim the term 'queer' and aimed to disempower the anti-LGBTQ voices who used it. In present day, many LGBTQ individuals—particularly those in younger generations—commonly use the term as a powerful label with which to identify, as well as a useful way to describe the community as a whole. Incorporating the "Q" to LGBT is also a common practice in media and most national LGBTQ organizations, in addition to a growing host of companies across the globe.



# BACKGROUND AND HISTORICAL IMPLICATIONS

However, because of the harm caused by the word itself, some LGBTQ individuals—particularly those in older generations—still find it to be an offensive and hurtful term. Many have personal experiences in which ‘queer’ was used as a tool to debase and dehumanize them, inflicting lasting trauma and emotional harm.

It is for this reason that some Employee Resource Groups (ERGs) find themselves debating whether to adopt the term in their messaging. In any conversation regarding the word, it is important to validate and carefully consider its historical context, as well as any negative experiences individuals may have surrounding it. Globally, ‘Q/Queer’ is not universally adopted and employers should be flexible and responsive to their local employees’ preferences and needs for communicating inclusion.

However, it is also important to note that, while some have negative experiences with ‘queer,’ many find it to be a compelling label and force in the sphere of LGBTQ inclusion.



# DEFINING QUEER

“Queer” is a nuanced word, multi-faceted, but also bold and heavy with meaning. It is a word that resists definition, as well as a word that holds a variety of meaning for people across the spectrum of sexual orientation and gender identity. With the multiplicity of definition in mind, it becomes easier to understand that “queer” to one person may mean something completely different to the next:



# ***MULTIPLE MEANINGS***

- Individuals often use queer as a shorthand way of referring to lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer individuals as a whole group.
- For others, the term is also used as a specific self-identification. Individuals sometimes use queer to denote their existence on the continuum of sexual orientation or gender identity.
  - For example, some individuals may use the term queer to represent their gender identity as non-binary.
  - Non-monosexual individuals may also use the term queer to identify their attraction to more than one gender identity, while others may use the term bisexual or pansexual.



# ANTI-NORMATIVE AND POLITICAL

- Queer is also often understood to mean: a behavior or identity which does not conform to conventional heterosexual or cisgender\* norms or assumptions.
  - Queer is not so much defined by “what it is” but rather by “what it isn’t”: conforming to societal norms and expectations for performance/behavior surrounding sexual orientation and gender identity.
  - In this way, queer can be a political term—one used to counteract, to subvert, and call into question traditional ways of being.
  - It “may be more productive to think of queer as a verb (a set of actions), rather than as a noun (an identity, or even a nameable positionality formed in and through the practice of particular actions).”<sup>i</sup>

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<sup>i</sup> Sullivan, Nikki. 2003. *A Critical Introduction to Queer Theory*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

\* Refers to those individuals whose internal sense of gender identity matches their sex assigned at birth.



# ***RESISTING DEFINITION***

- In many circles, there is great resistance to developing a clear definition of the term queer.
  - Queer is often used to challenge the idea of labeling itself, to call into question the societal structures which create and shape those identities, to simply be human.



# WHY YOU SHOULD USE THE Q

The LGBTQ community has largely reclaimed the word queer from its pejorative use. Queer is now a powerful term representing not only members of the LGBT community, but also those who do not fit neatly into pre-existing labels or terms. Queer effectively represents the fluidity of identity and the idea that sexual orientation and gender identity exist on a continuum, rather than a fixed binary.

Furthermore, the term also provides inclusive space for those questioning their sexual orientation and gender identity to explore and go deeper in their understanding of themselves without necessitating that they ascribe to a particular identity.

Adopting the Q is a powerful way to show solidarity, unity, and inclusiveness with the LGBTQ community. It takes us all one step closer in the journey from diversity to inclusion, to the ultimate goal: belonging.



# HOW TO PRACTICE QUEER INCLUSIVITY IN THE WORKPLACE

There are a variety of ways individuals and companies can ensure they demonstrate inclusivity of queer-identified employees.

- Use “LGBTQ” in internal and external communication. While adopting the “Q” in your company’s messaging should be a collaborative decision ultimately made by your LGBTQ leaders, Out & Equal sees the inclusion of the “Q” as a best practice in LGBTQ workplace equality. Furthermore, this incorporation parallels the important movement towards reclaiming ‘queer,’ and demonstrates critical awareness of the evolving face of LGBTQ inclusion.
- Queer holds different meanings depending on the individual. Thus, it is best not to make assumptions about why someone may use this label. Instead, use curiosity: What does queer mean to you?



# HOW TO PRACTICE QUEER INCLUSIVITY IN THE WORKPLACE

- Listen to and validate individuals who have had negative experiences with the term queer. It is important not to minimize the harm 'queer' has done to others.
- Because of its history, allies should use the term itself with careful consideration. In general, use queer when quoting someone who self-identifies this way. For example: Janie identifies as queer.

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# ADDITIONAL TIPS FOR INCLUSION

While the following tips are not entirely specific to queer-identified individuals, they are important ways to demonstrate LGBTQ allyship in the workplace, particularly towards those who identify outside of the binary.

- Include pronouns in email signatures
- Continue to provide domestic partner benefits
- Implement gender-neutral dress codes
- Remove gendered language where possible
- Provide all-gender facilities

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