Diversity in the workplace
Finding the right employer for you
Let’s get right to the point: diversity is good for business. Differences in culture, background, language, race, gender, education and more all influence the way teams perform in a dynamic marketplace, and the direction of that influence is generally positive. Indeed, a landmark 2009 study of US companies found that organizations with more racial and gender diversity in their workforces do better on sales, customer numbers and other measures of business success (2009 *American Sociological Review* 74 208). So when companies push for greater diversity in hiring, they aren’t enacting policies out of a philanthropic philosophy. On the contrary, they realize that diversity feeds into their bottom line via some fairly simple maths: more diversity = better innovations = better products = larger market share = $£.

One business leader who shares this view is Seema Kumar, who holds a bachelor’s degree in physics and is now vice-president for innovation and global health communications at Johnson & Johnson. “Diversity isn’t something that sits on the side,” Kumar attests. “It should be part of the DNA of who we are as people, groups, companies and societies.” With 135,000 employees and millions of customers worldwide, she explains, if Johnson & Johnson doesn’t think about diversity and inclusion in its workforce, then “we are missing opportunities. Innovation is our lifeblood, and it is inspired by a diversity of people and viewpoints”.

Miriam Keshani is another strong advocate of diversity in the workplace. A physicist who earned a Master’s degree in nanomaterials from the University of Cambridge, Keshani works at Sparrho, a London-based start-up that created a novel search and recommendation engine for scientific information. As the firm’s “chief happiness officer”, she explains, her job is to represent the interests of people who use Sparrho’s products. Doing that well requires her to be open to different perspectives, and it helps that in her small firm of five people, there are five nationalities represented and seven languages spoken. “Managers who hire only in their own image lead to a monoculture, which [stifles] innovation,” Keshani says. “We won’t succeed if we can’t develop something innovative, and we can’t be innovative if we don’t include diversity in the way we make product development and hiring decisions.”

Despite the evidence and the experiences of some enthusiastic champions, though, not all employers are fully on board. It is one thing for an organization to sing “hooray for diversity”, but something quite another to ensure that its mission, hiring practices and policies all line up in support of a more inclusive zeitgeist. And unfortunately, the low numbers of women and minorities working in physics-related fields suggest that much remains to be done. So how can physics graduates find employers whose commitment to diversity goes beyond lip service?

**Truth or public relations?**

A good starting point for analysing a company’s devotion to non-uniformity is to examine the set of policies that fly under the banner of diversity, inclusion and equity. The details matter. For example, not all diversity policies specifically mention transgender people.

Ruth Mills, an IT specialist with a Master’s degree in chemistry who works at Connect Advertising and Marketing, a Shrewsbury-based advertising agency, notes that this can be particularly concerning for those who are still in the process of transitioning to their new identity. Mills is transgender, and her own experience was positive: when she transitioned full time to female in 2013, her employer was very supportive. “If you have someone who is transgender who can transition and work as themselves, it is so much more natural and they become so much happier, and more productive, creative, engaged, communicative and collaborative,” she says, adding that prospective employees should look for policy language that specifically mentions transitioning, rather than “a blanket diversity statement”.

When you research a company or university, it’s also worth paying attention to the images you see on its website, annual report or videos. Do you see a mixture of faces? Or a sea of clones? According to Meg O’Connell – president of Global Disability Inclusion, a firm that consults with companies to implement inclusive policies and programmes for people with disabilities – marketing materials can reveal a company’s hidden successes or obvious biases. In particular, she looks for photos of people in wheelchairs or with other visible disabilities in corporate publicity material, as this may be a sign that the firm supports those with disabilities and is willing to provide accommodations and tools to help them succeed.

Others, however, are sceptical about whether diversity in promotional products reveals anything useful about the true diversity of a company. Chanda Prescod-Weinstein, a cosmology postdoc at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, is a longtime advocate for under-represented minorities in science. She says that
in her experience, “pictures are always public relations”.

Jabbar Bennett, associate provost for diversity and inclusion at Northwestern University, agrees that appearances can be telling, yet deceiving. Suppose you’re on an interview, he says, and “you are a woman or a person of colour, and the only people you’re seeing during the interview are women and people of colour”. This could be a sign that there is something amiss, he explains, “as these individuals alone most likely do not constitute the entire search committee”. Misguided, ignorant, or plain inappropriate hiring practices may “put people of colour in a pool because they need a person of colour on the list to say they are diverse”.

But while the presence of diverse faces in marketing materials or among a company’s current employees is not a cast-iron guarantee, O’Connell argues that their absence is probably worse. When she scrutinizes a diversity mission declaration and finds that the extent of the company’s stance on inclusiveness is simply the statement “we don’t discriminate”, she says, “that tells me they are not being open, welcome and inclusive”. Similarly, if the company’s careers page doesn’t mention employees with disabilities, notes O’Connell, “the talent will go elsewhere”.

In the hiring line
The actual hiring process can be another useful guide. When Rolf Danner, an openly gay physicist, was recruited by global security firm Northrop Grumman, “a big part of the decision-making process was whether they offered domestic partner benefits”, he says. “They were listed as achieving 100% on the Human Rights Index and on the policy side they checked all the boxes.” The corporation also had a non-discrimination policy based on sexual orientation and related affinity groups. “I was really excited about this!” he exclaims.

At the same time, though, Danner was also cautious. “People’s thinking takes longer than policies to catch up,” he warns. “What’s more important is what it’s like at the everyday working level. ‘Acceptance’ is not good enough for me.” Danner took a number of steps to determine how inclusive his potential company would be. In his interview, he told the decision-maker that he was openly gay and asked what the work environment was like. He also contacted the people with whom he would be collaborating to “gauge their comfort level” and took note of the language they used in chatting with him. For example, a red flag might have been if “I said something about my husband, and they echoed back ‘your partner’” – an indication that the speaker was not fully comfortable with the idea of gay families and relationships.

Reassured by what he heard, Danner accepted the job, and after he was hired in 2004, he got in touch with Northrop Grumman’s LGBT affinity group. Although the fact that the affinity group existed was a good sign of the company’s stance on diversity, Danner recalls that when he first met with the chair of the LGBT group, the other man asked Danner if it was okay for them to be seen together in the cafeteria – implying that there might be a concern over Danner being “outed by affiliation”, he says. “I was surprised by this. If this is what employees are worried about, then they self-censor,” and can’t do their best work.

Nowadays, Danner works for the Jet Propulsion Laboratory, and “the world for LGBT employees has really changed a lot in these 12 years”. His CV lists his affiliation with the US National Organization of Gay and Lesbian Scientists and Technical Professionals – in part, he says, as a shortcut to save time as to whether an organization is even worth his time. “Do your due diligence,” he recommends. “You don’t want to regret joining the company after you make the investment. Ask questions, even if they are hard. The company may just surprise you.”

How firms find the best employees
Companies dedicated to diversity and inclusion will devote resources to recruit at conferences and events and through publications and networks that attract diverse individuals. For example, to broaden the pipeline of STEM professionals from underrepresented groups, Kumar points out that Johnson & Johnson has teamed up with the New York Academy of Sciences and major firms PepsiCo Foundation, ARM and Cisco to launch the Global STEM Alliance, which consists of 250 partners in more than 100 countries. The New York Academy’s senior vice-president for education, Meghan Groome, explains that its purpose is to diversify and keep more people in the STEM pipeline.

But positive actions aren’t limited to large organizations. Keshani notes that to improve its market potential, Sparrho regularly recruits at regional networking events. “In London, there are lots of events that celebrate diversity,” she says, “and we make it a point to go there.” Sparrho is also involved with organizations such as Code First: Girls, which works to increase the number of women in tech careers.

A major aspect of attracting top talent is ensuring that job advertisements do not convey a misleading impression of who

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Signs of a supportive employer</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Do they have a noticeably diverse employee base?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Do they have policies relating to hiring people from different backgrounds and accommodating the needs of people of different abilities?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Do they have any high-profile executives who are open about being (for example) disabled, gay or transgender in their public profiles?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Do they have an executive dedicated to diversity initiatives, such as a chief diversity officer?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Do they advertise with and recruit at events put on by organizations that foster diversity, such as the Women in Science and Engineering (WISE) campaign?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Are they participating in formal initiatives to support diversity in science, such as the Athena SWAN campaign or Project Juno?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Are there groups within the company to help mentor and support women and members of other under-represented minorities in science, technology, engineering and maths (STEM)?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Is there “top-down” support for these groups, as opposed to employees needing to organize them on their own in an unofficial or ad hoc fashion?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Do they use the same language as you do in describing yourself? For example, if you mention your spouse, do they respond by using the word “partner” instead?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Do they provide opportunities for prospective employees to communicate with current staff and inquire about their experiences at the firm?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Companies realize that diversity feeds into their bottom line: more diversity = better innovations = better products = larger market share
Suppose you followed all the advice, did your due diligence, and found a company or university that seemed welcoming and supportive of you and your professional goals. But then, unfortunately, something changed. Maybe your wonderful manager left and was replaced by someone much less inclusive. Or maybe your initially friendly and warm PhD supervisor turned out to be “friendly” in a decidedly uncomfortable, unprofessional and inappropriate way. Once you find yourself in a nasty situation, with a boss or a colleague who has crossed the line, how do you escape?

In academic science, especially, there is no easy answer. Protégés’ reputations are tied to their principal investigators’ outputs. The overall community is small, and your sub-sub-field may be practically picosized, with perhaps only three other people on the planet who understand your area of expertise (and who seemingly hold all the cards in terms of job opportunities). And at the centre of this minute cluster is “Dr Wolf”, the individual who is causing you trouble and distress.

In this kind of situation, the first thing to do is to recognize that you are not imagining it. “Don’t internalize it and talk yourself out of it. Don’t play it down,” stresses Miriam Keshani, a physicist who works at a London-based IT start-up called Sparrho. “Question the incident rather than questioning yourself. Understand the issues, and then talk to someone who can offer neutral advice.” Indeed, Andrew Faas, a workplace consultant and author of The Bully’s Trap: Bullying in the Workplace (Tate Publishing, 2015), affirms “you must rely on your gut instinct that there is something out of the norm”. This is especially critical when others might try to “rationalize the behaviour and say ‘oh, that’s just his management style’”. If you feel there is something wrong, there is something wrong.

Faas recommends making a record of all of the things Dr Wolf is doing, from seemingly small actions (such as excluding you from meetings) to larger actions such as unwelcome touching or overtly offensive and demeaning language. Take note of when and where the incident occurred and who may have witnessed it. Educate yourself about your legal rights (which will vary depending on where you live and, sometimes, who your employer is), and seek out “safe harbours” of groups who can assist you. Astronomy Allies is one such assembly that has emerged in recent years; according to its website (www.astronomyallies.com), its primary purpose is to “listen, and to provide you with a safe space to air your frustrations and talk through what you want to do next”.

The decision of what to do next will depend on your individual circumstances. However, do bear in mind that you have a right (not merely a privilege) to work in an environment that is physically and mentally safe. You do not have to “take it”. No matter how powerless you may feel, you do have the power to extract yourself from Dr Wolf’s clutches, and part of that power is determining how you will do this. For some, this will involve seeking help from others, sharing what has taken place and filing formal (perhaps even criminal) charges. For others, it may mean that you physically remove yourself from Dr Wolf’s orbit. You are a sovereign person, so you and only you get to decide what you want to do. And if you need a bit of motivation, consider this: “Life’s too short,” says Keshani. “Leave if you are not happy.”

…”