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Transsexuals in the Workplace, A Guide for Employers

by Barbara L. Chambers

To the employer

Possibly you were presented this material by one of your employees, quite likely soon after learning the employee was undergoing or had already undergone a "sex change." Much information and misinformation abounds in the media, but little of it is helpful to the employer in comprehending the new status of their employee.

Also, small or new companies are unlikely to have ever encountered such a change in status before; hopefully the text that follows will be useful and informative. This article is written in respect to the case of the male-to-female employee; however, most of the information applies identically to the female-to-male employee if the sense of the pronouns and the gender-specific statements are reversed. The remainder of this text is presented in question-answer format.

What IS a transsexual?

The answer to this question is best given in rather technical medical terms. Strictly speaking, a transsexual is a person with the condition known as Gender Dysphoria Syndrome, a psychiatric term which means "feeling of conflict and discomfort felt by a person due to the anatomical gender of their body."

Research indicates that Gender Dysphoria Syndrome is the psychological condition which results from a birth defect in the matching of brain and body, similar and perhaps related to the condition known as intersex, in which a child's body at birth has genitalia which are not clearly either male or female or has characteristics of both male and female. In other words, transsexuals are persons born with a perfectly normal and healthy brain of one gender, but in a body with perfectly healthy and normal anatomy of the opposite gender. The affected person lives with a struggle to reconcile their natural personality, gender identity, and body image with the physical body and social status until a time in their life when the conflict becomes too great to bear and they seek medical help to change their anatomy and social role.

No effective psychotherapeutic treatment for transsexualism exists, since the only defect is the mismatch of body and brain, and a healthy gender identity (even a mismatched one) cannot be changed; therefore the only effective treatment is to surgically change the gender of the body to align with the person's natural gender identity, a "sex change." Such treatment is effective in relieving the secondary problems of depression, low self-esteem, and anxiety which often accompany gender dysphoria, and the patient is often able to pursue a normal life in their new gender.

Today, transsexuals are potentially valuable research subjects in the new studies of pre-birth programming of gender identity and personality into the brain during fetal

development, though the rarity and desire for privacy of transsexual persons often makes the gathering of data difficult. At present, there is little agreement in the medical community as to the cause of a person being born transsexual; researchers and physicians today are largely divided into groups advancing theories of either genetic causes or fetal-development causes. Environmental conditions seem to have an effect on how long the individual is able to adapt to their reverse-gender life situation before seeking medical help to correct it. Transsexualism is rare, occurring at a rate of one in every ten thousand births. Currently, there is no known method capable of detecting the condition at birth.

Why aren't there any female-to-male transsexual persons?

There certainly are: about 45% of all transsexuals are female- to-male. Male-to-female transsexuals receive the largest amount of exposure through the media of TV and print, apparently because they are considered more "newsworthy" in our traditionally male-oriented society.

Are transsexual persons homosexual?

No, transsexualism has nothing directly to do with sexuality at all. The "sex" root of the word refers to gender rather than sexual preference. This misconception, largely disappearing today, apparently resulted from public confusion of transsexuals with two much larger groups: effeminate homosexuals (gay males imitating feminine mannerisms or dress as an expression of their sexuality) and transvestites (males, usually heterosexual, who find enjoyment in wearing female clothing); neither of these two groups has the body-identity gender conflicts which are experienced by transsexuals and lead to an eventual change of physical gender.

Transvestites outnumber transsexuals by at least 50 to 1; gay males outnumber transsexuals by about 900 to 1. In addition, these other two groups are composed entirely of males only; transsexuals are nearly evenly divided between male- to-female cases and female-to-male cases. Transsexuals, both before and following surgery, may be heterosexual, bisexual, lesbian, or celibate, with the proportion of celibacy being somewhat higher than with the general population of women. Transsexuals are NOT members of any known AIDS high-risk group.

Does this affect our company's medical insurance?

Often, the employee in their new gender role is more productive and produces higher quality work than in the past, due to the improvement in their own self-esteem and motivation. Time off from work to recover from surgery procedures may be necessary, however—but it should be noted that your employee will have no need for maternity leave in the future since she will not be able to bear children, so net time lost from work may prove to be less than in the case of your female employees. The process of changing gender usually takes several years to complete, with surgical, hormonal, and social changes progressing at different rates with different individuals; you can expect a dramatic change in her appearance and in the expression of her

personality.

Your employee may already have completed much or most of the transition before advising you.

Transsexuals are often conservative individuals and frequently set high standards on their appearance and performance following their gender change.

If your employee is doing heavy physical work, bear in mind that her entire muscular structure will change to female norms, and she may not be able to handle tasks requiring physical strength as easily as she did before. (The opposite applies to the female-to-male, of course.)

How do other companies handle this?

With the increased public awareness of transsexuals today, the major problem which remains is that the employee is an object of curiosity among co-workers for several days following her appearance in her new gender role.

Very large corporations with large numbers of employees may encounter a transsexual employee every few years, and often set up internal guidelines. In nearly all cases, a memo is circulated among co-workers informing them simply that the employee will return to work at a certain date as a female employee. Some companies call a short meeting of co-workers at which management and the employee are present to inform them of the change and to answer any questions which may appear; this technique is particularly effective in keeping the transition smooth.

One company (IBM) also transfers the employee laterally for several months to a different department; at the end of that time, she is given the option of either returning to her original department or staying in her new position. If the employee is new to the company, sometimes no action at all is necessary, since her former gender status may be undetectable to others, or even to management itself.

What is my employee's legal status?

Upon completion of her surgery, under state law in every state, she is considered to be female, and is entitled to all the considerations applying to that gender. There are differences in details of how administrative law handles such cases from state to state. Your employee will take care of any needed legal matters concerning state and federal identification papers, tax status, social security, and legal name change. Please note that your employee may now be a "double bonus" person, fitting into both the female and handicapped categories, and entitling the company to a substantial subsidy (details vary from state to state).

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