



Episode 6 – Title VII: A win for workplace dignity now and in the future

[MUSIC PLAYING]

SUZANNE MCANDREW: I think there's work to be done on just overhaul of inclusion and diversity as a business imperative, not just an HR volunteer imperative.

JOHN JONES: Podcasting from Detroit and New York, this is Eye on I&D, a continuing podcast series from the human capital experts at Willis Towers Watson. I'm John Jones and I lead Willis Towers Watson's talent business in North America, and I'm joined by two distinguished panelists as we tackle how organizations can continue creating a safe and supportive environment for all employees.

First up, we have Rob Talmas. Rob is the global VP of Total Rewards at WW, formerly known as Weight Watchers, and has held various leadership roles. In 2015, Rob, his husband, and son, were three of the 32 plaintiffs named in the US Supreme Court discussion to legalize marriage for all. As part of his passion for modernizing Total Rewards, he continues to serve as a pioneer for bringing diversity and inclusion forward in the workplace. Thank you for being with us today Rob.

ROB TALMAS: Thanks, John. I'm really happy to be here.

JOHN JONES: Joining Rob we have Suzanne McAndrew, our global talent business leader and global LGBTQ+ inclusion network leader. Thanks for joining us again, Suzanne. Always great to have you.

SUZANNE MCANDREW: Yeah, it's my pleasure to be back, and I'm so glad I'm here with Rob as well.

JOHN JONES: As a reminder, full bios of our panelists can be found on our website at willistowerswatson.com/inclusion. Specifically, we're going to talk about how moments like the landmark Title VII Supreme Court ruling to protect LGBTQ workers from discrimination can, and should, act as a spark for organizations to push the already evolving I&D agenda even further.

Well, let's dig right in. Although the Supreme Court ruling had a bit of notoriety, can we expect much change in larger organizations? And I guess the question really is, does anything really change?

ROB TALMAS: My opinion is, I think, for those organizations that have been conscious of just being considered a better place to work, and participating in HRC surveys or ratings, policies and awareness have always been a goal. So I don't see a lot of that necessarily changing. I think there's a lot of organizations that work towards that goal, and making sure that they're inclusive. I think the ruling probably reinforces the importance of it.

And from those who weren't aware, just aware now that it's an important factor in your employment practices and how you hire. And just sensitivity in the workplace. So, probably heightened awareness of just that this is a group of individuals in the organization that we should be considerate of, because they're not as obvious as, let's say, other minorities. LGBTQ employees can kind of hide in plain sight, and so I think this just helps organizations fine-tune their awareness and sensitivity to it.

SUZANNE MCANDREW: Yeah, this past weekend I was actually reflecting on this. I was listening to another popular podcaster, Brene Brown. John, I don't know if you have as many followers--

JOHN JONES: Oh, sure.

SUZANNE MCANDREW: --as her yet. I hadn't listened to the podcast she did the interview with Laverne Cox, and as Laverne was just thinking about this milestone, it was an emotional day. It is such a representation of just what isn't working. Just the assumptions we make, because some of us work for great organizations like WW and WTW, where we might take for granted that organizations lead with a policy, an approach, of not excluding anyone on this basis.

JOHN JONES: What are things that organizations need to be aware of? Or what are the concerns that employees are going to continue to have that employers need to be focused on?

ROB TALMAS: You know, John, I think what's interesting-- just to back up a minute-- is that we were talking about where Suzanne had mentioned that we-- I think on this call-- we have the benefit of working for organizations that were sort of forward thinking and modern in their approach in employment practices. But I have to say, and I've talked about this in the past, when I started out that wasn't really top of mind. What was top of mind, for me, was getting a job. And I didn't look at the employment practice or would they discriminate against me as a gay employee.

I think the ruling also just brings to the forefront, for this generation coming in, how important it was that this be considered one of those main policies. That employers consider that. Discrimination in any form just doesn't belong in the workplace. That you hire folks based on their merits, based on their skills, based on their qualifications, not their personal life. And how much more engagement and productivity you get out of employees knowing that they're in a safe work environment.

That they can bring their whole selves to work. Their true selves to work. And not have to worry about that phone call that's going to come from their partner, or their family, and it has something to do-- or could give them away.

JOHN JONES: Yeah.

ROB TALMAS: I just think it's a huge burden off of employees' shoulders, that they don't have to be afraid in the workplace, for any reason, but specifically, because of this ruling.

SUZANNE MCANDREW: You also could look at this theme of discrimination as just a full banner

over the humanity that we need in the workplace for all people. And then noting that there are groups that are discriminated against. And that's what we need. Legislation like this to ensure, from a diversity side, as Rob pointed out, there is safety, there is fairness, there is the technical aspects of right and wrong.

But what I think is most important as we think about the intersectionality of the LGBT+ community and across women's rights. I've got work to do as a woman, as well. We're not there yet either. In terms of gay rights. In terms of just civil rights in general, Black and African-American rights. I think employers have to really dial up the focus on the inclusionary aspects that fall under that umbrella of discrimination. And they're the hard parts to get to.

They really get you to the grown zone. In discussions, it's about being willing to know me, being willing to see me, being willing to hear me, being willing to appreciate me for me. If an organization's ready to embrace those aspects, then they've got to look at their programs, because it's easy to say you're going to do the right things. But are you doing things to expand lead benefits?

When I had my son, I only had a week that was allowed for my paternity leave. Now that's changed now-- that was 17 years ago when my wife and I had Aidan-- but I think there's some work to do around benefits. There's a work to do around building and growing talent pipeline to really show you're not discriminating. Not just say you're not discriminating. I think there's work to be done on just overhaul of inclusion and diversity as a business imperative, not just an HR volunteer imperative.

ROB TALMAS: And I think, maybe, it's evolved into-- it's just embedded in what we do. Any policy or practice we put out, we look through that lens.

JOHN JONES: That kind of leads me to the next question around employee resource groups, ERGs. How do they evolve and keep up?

SUZANNE MCANDREW: The question is, have they kept up with what people need? Back to that humanitarian way that we have to lead people in organizations. And I would argue that there's work to do there. And I have some thoughts around that, related to the notion of inclusion and purpose. And what do people really need? And what are they struggling with? And do you know what to do there, and how to invest in these groups differently than you ever had before? We can go into that a bit later. But I wonder Rob, is that what you've seen? You've worked in a lot of different organizations over the years. What's been your take?

ROB TALMAS: Well I mean, it's true, I've worked in organizations where ERGs are very important and very well funded. And also in organizations where the concept just isn't there, it's not part of our culture, because we just treat everybody the same. At least, in their opinion. And I've also been part of organizations early on-- I mean back in my day, some ERGs weren't funded the same as others. It depended.

A lot of times, the LGBT ERG wasn't funded as much, because there was a fear of actually going to executives and pushing for that, because of the stigma of being LGBT. Again, hiding in plain sight. I can walk into a meeting, and nobody knows who I am. But if I have to identify myself, that adds a little bit more anxiety to your day.

I do think they need to evolve in the sense that-- well, maybe especially in this environment-- where I think depending where you are in the country, or the world, LGBT employees rely on that ERG for socializing, for getting to understand, and identifying, who else is in the category with them. Their peers in the organization. Again you don't have a sign at your desk, so we don't really know.

So it's a great way to build a peer group and a support group. And a lot of times, the functions and activities that were supported were outlet. We're distanced now, where it's remote workforce. I think the ERGs need to evolve. And how are they going to support their communities in this remote environment? And are there folks who, unfortunately, based on where they are, are now isolated, because they don't have--

SUZANNE MCANDREW: Yeah.

ROB TALMAS: --that resource front and center? You know, we've worked on COVID related support. Helping your family, making sure that your mental wellness, and child care, and other things that I think are more traditional for the majority of the problem related to COVID. But isolation related to the kind of social group that you would have participated in, which again is, I think, an activity and something that the ERGs did support and provided. Maybe it's not front and center, and maybe it needs to be. And that's where, I think, our diversity and inclusion kind of groups need to think about. Like how are those groups being supported in this environment with lack of ERG activity?

SUZANNE MCANDREW: Yeah. And you know, you can start to think of the evolution of the ERG-- again through three lenses, potentially. There's the business focus that is needed from a customer and business growth. We know that. We know what boards are looking for, et cetera. There is the employee focus in the network, in the haven, and the connections that they need. And then right now, there is a resilience need.

And we know from our data at Willis Towers Watson recent surveys-- guess what, 91% of employees have anxiety and worry right now. Right now, they've showed up at your organization online, in front of cameras, with their laptops, with kids running behind them, with pressures from unemployed spouses, essential workers, sick parents. And the resilience element is key. So if you dial that in to your different ERGs, you can start to overhaul and find, not just narrow labels of your ERGs, but horizontal issues that we have to deal with.

JOHN JONES: Really, I think, based on what you both said, there's two big elements here. One, there is the organization has to acknowledge, or understand, the fact that ERGs aren't functioning the way they typically would. And therefore, the stickiness with that population and the support that the ERG could have been providing is not there. And two, because of that, they have to really think differently as it supports the isolation issue, and supports the need for greater resiliency in the individuals.

SUZANNE MCANDREW: I think that's right. I think the challenge then gets back to why Title VII was important. There's so many basics that aren't right. For an employer-- one, does it even have in their HRAS system, does it have the right labeling? For how you identify for your gender. I mean, that's hurtful. You know, we're not in the offices right now, but gender neutral bathrooms.

I mean, there's so many basics that, I think, create an important distraction, but may distract us from, really, what's needed now. I think are really understanding what these groups need, and coming up with the right actions that you can do to cope with the current situation. The current crisis.

ROB TALMAS: Just couldn't agree more, but I think the importance of there being a federal ruling is huge.

SUZANNE MCANDREW: It's huge.

ROB TALMAS: It's just-- it's huge, because states can do what they want, historically. And some of the ERGs are just, I feel like, in some cases, we have to consider that having the ERG, in

some organizations, is checking the box at the board level. Do we have this? Yes. Do we have a good disclosure? Yes. Do we show good faith externally? Yes. But what are we actually doing? What change are we facilitating in the organization by having the ERG? And a lot of times the ERGs aren't strong enough to facilitate that kind of change, or influence that kind of change. So I think we have to be more conscious about how do we support them in the different locations, because not every ERG is a national ERG for every organization.

JOHN JONES: Right. And any ERGs aren't always advocacy groups, either. Many are support groups, or groups in which organizations hope that they'll get better engagement out of their employees, or create a safe environment for them. But it's not necessarily a corporate advocacy group, or that they're looking to change policies. They're looking to change programs.

SUZANNE MCANDREW: One of my challenges with ERGs, just personally, is I've never known where I belong. I have a pretty traditional life, in terms of married with children. But I'm married to a woman, so I guess I should be part of the LGBT+ community. Well, then what? Am I going to connect and relate? Yes, I have issues there. And on the women's networks, I feel pretty passionate about that. And yes, I live in East Harlem, in New York. My neighbors are Black and Brown, and I feel very connected to what the multicultural networks are. And so I guess, where are we going with ERGs? Just to be provocative.

ROB TALMAS: Why do you have to choose?

SUZANNE MCANDREW: Why you have to choose?

ROB TALMAS: Why do you have to choose?

SUZANNE MCANDREW: Aren't these issues everyone's problems? You know, let's just-- I think your CHRO Kim Seymour, Rob, talks about actions and accountability. This is really the moment for us to step forward with something everyone should care about these issues. And I always have believed that the focus of inclusion and diversity is a hard one. Why? Because it is a horizontal. It's embedded. It can't not stand alone. And that's really how the ERGs and diversity functions started.

To me, wow, wouldn't this be the opportunity? Because we are re-imagining the workplace. We are re-imagining so much in terms of our products and services that go to clients. Hey, let's re-imagine inclusion and diversity. I think we've got enough movement, right now, to take the pause and think. So if we were to do that, I'd say organizations need to do five things. Like now. First, if you haven't already done it-- I know our organization has-- have a real-speak conversation with the c-suite. What is going on with racism in your organization? What is going on with these different groups? What is going on with the connection to business? How have you progress against your goals, you know, holistically?

The second thing I would do is-- guess what? Data speaks. Data speaks better than any kind of anecdote that you're going to guess around. We have data. Don't forget to listen to your employees and ask. These groups are formed, why not go talk to them? Stand up a virtual Zoom. Have a focus group. Have a way to hear from people, boy, here we are at this moment, what do you need?

The third would be look at that gap analysis between where the c-suite vision is, and the groups that you talk to, have. And the next one is create that action plan. And the final one is be accountable. So track it, and be accountable. I don't think we can, in one podcast, dream up what's next for LGBT+, or for broader ERGs. But I do think, John and Rob, that there is a broader call to action, here, to do something better.

JOHN JONES: And that, Suzanne, is a perfect point to wrap up. I think those five points are exactly right. Thank you for the insightful discussion. And I, think, if we've learned anything, people are no longer willing to accept the status quo. And organizations need to respond to the needs of their employees in a very different and unique way. So I think your summary was perfect, Suzanne. Rob, thank you so much for being with us today.

ROB TALMAS: John, thank you so much. It was a pleasure being here. It's a real honor to talk to you guys. Thank you.

SUZANNE MCANDREW: Really amazing. I'm inspired by both of you.

[MUSIC PLAYING]

PRESENTER: Thank you for joining us for this Willis Towers Watson podcast, featuring the latest thinking on the intersection of people, capital and risk. For more information, visit the Insights section of willistowerswatson.com.