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Opinion :: Guest Opinions

My career stopped because of employment discrimination

by Nancy Nangeroni
Chair, MTPC
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Nancy Nangeroni, Chair of the MTPC.
(Source: Marilyn Humphries)

I have to admit, I'm a little bit uncomfortable talking about employment discrimination in my life, because so many people have had it so much worse than I. My parents came from poor families but worked hard and put me through MIT, where I graduated in 1976 with a degree in electrical engineering. After graduating, I enjoyed 15 years of engineering success, the last five as a manager, while keeping my gender issues separate and private. My successes included a patented design that gave Bose a significant advantage over competitors; the first successful electronic telephone ringer transducer; and a PC plug-in card that became a telephony industry standard for 10 years. As you probably know, 10 years is a long time in the PC industry.

Then, in 1993, I transitioned to living as a woman. I set out to do so in the best way possible. I believed in my heart that I would continue to succeed in my career. I even dared to hope that I might be able to set a positive example for others. I committed myself to staying positive, accommodating, and productive, and to upholding the very highest standards of integrity.

But my status on the job was immediately reduced. I was moved from a spacious office with a panoramic view of the Charles River to a smaller interior office. My management role evaporated, and the camaraderie that I had enjoyed so much with my co-workers all but disappeared.

So I thought, well, I can understand why someone might feel uncomfortable working with a woman they'd previously known as a guy. Maybe it'd be easier for other people if they'd only known me as Nancy.

So I began interviewing for other jobs. At the first six interviews, when they asked me for references, I mentioned that my references might refer to me as John, since that's how they had known me. I received no call-backs from any of these interviews. Next interview, when it came to references, I made no mention of any changes. I got that job, and went to work for Bell Labs in Lawrence. I found myself being invited to high-level strategic meetings with the division director and department heads. We were discussing the next generation of transmission system, design and deployment. They gave me an award for solving a design problem

that had been holding up development. Then the director found out that I had been born male. I was never invited to another management-level meeting. Instead I was relegated to the lowest levels of design.

That's how it went for the next 10 years. I continued to do excellent work. For one company I designed two-thirds of the hardware for the first successful Internet-based telephone system. That company, NBX, was sold for \$600 million. But despite my continued technical success, I was never again considered for any kind of management role. My career turned demoralizing. I was socially snubbed, hidden away like some kind of embarrassment. It's hard to maintain enthusiasm for a job in that kind of work environment.

My career is behind me now. In 2004, while I was between jobs, I suffered a spine injury in an automobile accident, and I can no longer do that kind of work. It's too late for me, but it's not too late for others, for the younger transgender folks coming through school and beyond. They need protection against discrimination.

Fortunately, I am still able to help out, a little, with the struggle to protect the right of individuals to freely self-identify and express their gender. Such gender identity and expression does no real harm anyone else. There is no good reason to deny anyone this freedom. It is, in my view, a vital and necessary step towards full equality among, and freedom for, all people.

The opposition to the Transgender Equal Rights bill is using the same kind of arguments that were used against civil rights protections for African-Americans, against women's rights, and against gay and lesbian rights. Their objections are all about the discomfort and fear that they feel towards us. But these are the very things that build the foundation for prejudice and discrimination. Their lies and distortions exaggerate fears and stoke the fires of hostility and intolerance. The blatant cruelty of some of their arguments -- not to mention the hateful online posts that always follow articles sympathetic to transgender equal rights -- only further proves the need for these protections.

So to our elected officials, I beg of you: pass this bill now! And to everyone else, please make your voices heard in support of the immediate passage of the Transgender Equal Rights bill.

Nancy Nangeroni is Chair of the Massachusetts Transgender Political Coalition (MTPC).
