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Gays Band Together in Workplace To Help Careers, Battle Prejudice

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Despite his credentials—an Ivy League degree and a high-ranking job at Price Waterhouse & Co.—Arthur Lazere, who is gay, figured he would have a hard time starting his own accounting practice and competing against straight, button-down professionals. But through his membership in San Francisco's gay chamber of commerce, business has blossomed.

Robert Casaletto, a former Merrill Lynch executive, opened the nation's first gay brokerage five years ago with just 10 clients and nearly \$1 million to manage. Today, thanks to mailing lists of gay organizations and ads in gay newspapers, his Wall Street firm manages \$12 million for hundreds of clients, mostly gays, including an Arizona man who recently inherited \$670,000. "As a gay person, I would very much like to deal with a gay businessman," noted the investor in a letter to Mr. Casaletto.

And Don Clarkson, a Portland, Ore., real estate agent who once watched a colleague throw away a home buyer's registration card because the client was "queer," now runs a thriving referral service for gay home buyers that advertises nationally in the Gayellow Pages.

All across the U.S., gay professionals are coming out of the corporate closet, albeit cautiously, and banding together to further their careers and businesses and to battle discrimination in the workplace. With the nationwide fear of AIDS now making assimilation even more difficult, such support groups provide badly needed business contacts, job referrals and refuge for millions of gay men and women who feel cut off from corporate society.

'Building a Tradition'

In the Silicon Valley of California, for example, High Tech Gays—a group of about 300 computer specialists working for such companies as International Business Machines Corp., American Telephone & Telegraph Co. and Atari Inc.—keeps its members abreast of high-tech innovations—and high-paying jobs through monthly newsletters and pot-luck dinner meetings. In Houston, the Executive and Professional Association offers seminars to gay oil men and other gay executives on such diverse subjects as tax accounting and the status of state sodomy laws. And the New York Bankers Group, started three years ago to combat anti-gay discrimination within the city's major lending institutions, now flourishes as a club for ambitious corporate climbers.

"We are building a tradition of helping our own," says Mr. Lazere, who recently began a program through 50 gay chambers of commerce to advise large industrial companies on more-productive work environments for gay employees.

Adds Rachel Ginsburg of San Francisco's Bay Area Career Women, which offers its 1,000 lesbian members advice in



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such areas as climbing the corporate ladder and securing government contracts for gay, women-owned businesses: "We patronize our sisters."

The rise of networking among gay professionals is partly an outgrowth of the gay civil-rights movement. But unlike other minorities, such as poor blacks and Hispanics whose problems have gained widespread attention and sympathy, gays have continued to evoke ridicule and contempt.

Increased Hostility

Today, with the gay community blamed for spreading acquired immune deficiency syndrome, or AIDS, homosexuals at many companies say they are facing more hostility than ever. Last year, for example, some of the largest companies in Houston joined forces to defeat a gay-rights ordinance that would have outlawed discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation. During the fight, Texas oil tycoon Oscar Wyatt sent a memo to his Coastal Corp. employees expressing grave concern over the effect of the ordinance "on the future public image and economic climate of our community."

Such hostility, psychologists say, has alienated gays in the workplace and has crimped their job performance and careers. Some gay employees, for example, reject promotions, fearing that such a move would increase scrutiny of their private lives.

"They fear that if it's known they're gay, they'll be rejected, punished and possibly fired," says Joan Brozovich, a San Francisco psychologist who runs corporate workshops to help gays cope with conflicts between their careers and personal lives.

Fears of discovery take their toll in other ways. Research indicates that 20% to 30% of gay men and women are either alcoholic or at high risk of alcoholism, about three times the national average. "It's a result of stress created by being stigmatized," says Dana Finnegan, past coordinator of the Association of Lesbian and Gay Alcoholism Professionals, a 400-member support group for gay professionals.

For many gays, the growing network of business contacts and support groups helps them deal with the stress, alienation and discrimination they encounter at work. "Networking helps you just in terms of

your self-esteem—feeling worthwhile as a gay person whether you ever make a dime out of it," says Edward Nicholas, a real estate broker who heads the gay chamber of commerce in New York. Adds Joseph DiSabato, whose New York-based Rivendell Marketing Co. employs a gay accountant, attorney, printer and photographer: "We all share a common oppression and bond."

A 'Dual Existence'

Such sentiments gave rise to the Wall Street Lunch Group, whose motto is "You are not alone on Wall Street." The New York group, made up of about 130 gay brokers, traders and office workers, meets for lunch cruises in the city's harbor and other social and business outings. "Blacks and Jews have been badly abused," says club member Anthony Buccì. "Yet they always had a ghetto to go back to (for) solace and community. We don't. We are isolated from family and friends because we live a dual existence."

Of course, moral support isn't the only benefit that gay professionals seek in networking. Many are also pursuing the profits that are available to individuals who tailor their products and services to the gay market.

Mr. Clarkson, the Oregon real estate agent, has organized a nationwide network of 400 gay real estate agents whose ads read: "They've come out of the closet, so you can get into a home." The agents receive commissions for referring clients to other gay agents, who know better than to raise an eyebrow when two women want a one-bedroom condominium. For Mr. Clarkson, service means ushering gay home buyers to gay neighborhoods, winning them at gay bistros, reassuring them that the gay church is around the corner and leading them to the best gay bowling leagues.

Says John Ognibene, a gay interior decorator who bought a home through a gay agent when he moved to New Orleans: "You want creative financing, good interest rates and someone who will not look down on you or openly discriminate against you because you are gay."

Finding Acceptance

Still, finding acceptance in conventional businesses and markets—and not simply catering to the gay community—appears to be the motive behind much gay networking. High Tech Gays, for example, the California group, was formed partly to educate employers that gays hold important positions in high-technology industries.

"The image of IBM as a place with a vast number of people who dress and think alike is fundamentally false," says Michael Morris, general counsel of IBM's Rolm Corp. subsidiary in Santa Clara, Calif., and a member of High Tech Gays. But while Mr. Morris is openly gay and has persuaded his employer to adopt an official policy of nondiscrimination against gays, most gays in high-technology industries "remain closeted at work," according to a High Tech Gay brochure. "This builds up stresses, which limit our effectiveness socially and professionally."

Taking the offensive, High Tech Gays is now challenging the Defense Department, which has banned the employment of gays as "security risks" on certain classified government jobs involving defense contractors. The government has long argued that gays are more vulnerable to blackmail if their homosexuality is discovered and thus represent a threat to national security.

The group has filed a class-action suit, scheduled for a hearing next month, against the U.S. government that seeks an end to such "anti-gay" policies and practices. "The impact of the government policy is very serious," says Richard Gayer, a High Tech Gays attorney. "Careers are ruined." A Pentagon spokesman declined to comment.

National Survey

Another gay support group, trying to create a more comfortable and stable working environment for gay engineers and scientists, has surveyed companies across the country to analyze working conditions for gays.

The survey by the Lesbian and Gay Association of Engineers and Scientists was designed to single out companies for what the group considered anti-gay practices. Eastern Airlines, in 1984, for example, was cited for asking job applicants a question about homosexuality on its medical forms. (The carrier has since eliminated the question.) The survey also found that "California is more hospitable to gays," based on the fact that 20% of the California companies had nondiscrimination clauses for gays in their personnel policies compared with only 7% for non-California companies. Additionally, 40% of California's gays were covered by a sexual orientation ordinance compared with 16% of residents in other states.

The survey, completed two years ago, concluded that nondiscrimination clauses in employment contracts and gay-rights ordinances "were highly associated with positive working environments (and) the personnel policy was strongly beneficial to ward the company in employee good will."