



# The Work Couch

NAVIGATING TODAY'S TRICKY PEOPLE CHALLENGES TO  
CREATE TOMORROW'S SUSTAINABLE WORKPLACES

## Season 2

### Episode 2 – Trans inclusion at work: How to be a good ally, with Emma Cusdin

**Ellie:** Hi and welcome to the Work Couch podcast, your fortnightly deep dive into all things employment. Brought to you by the award-winning employment team at law firm RPC, we discuss the whole spectrum of employment law with the emphasis firmly on people. My name is Ellie Gelder. I'm a senior editor in the employment equality and engagement team here at RPC and I'll be your host as we explore the constantly evolving and consistently challenging world of employment law and all the curveballs that it brings to businesses today. We hope by the end of the podcast, you'll feel better prepared to respond to these people challenges in a practical, commercial and inclusive way. And to make sure you don't miss any of our fortnightly episodes, please do hit the like and follow button and share with a colleague. Today, I am delighted to be joined by Emma Cusdin - speaker, facilitator and champion for trans and non-binary rights. With over 30 years' experience in HR in the financial services sector, Emma is an award-winning role model in the business world for LGBT plus people. And she is a passionate advocate for trans inclusive workplaces. Emma is an openly trans woman and a director of [Global Butterflies](#), a fantastic organisation which helps businesses become more trans and non-binary inclusive. Emma, welcome to the Work Couch. Thank you so much for joining us today.

**Emma:** Thank you so much, Ellie. Great to be here.

**Ellie:** Thank you, Emma. So, before we kick off, and I know because you've given RPC a fantastic webinar on trans inclusion before, I know you're a real fan of data as we are on the Work Couch. So, I thought to put the topic into context and really bring home why we're talking about it. Just wanted to highlight some stats for us all to digest. So, in 2023, a [report by Just Like Us and Deloitte](#) found that three in 10 of people surveyed revealed that they weren't open about their transgender status at work. It also found that four in five of non-binary transgender and bi or pansexual respondents experienced bullying at school. And then [research carried out by the TUC in April 2019](#) on sexual harassment of LGBT plus people in the workplace that found that trans women were more likely than other women to experience sexual assault and rape at work. With around a third of trans women who responded, they reported being sexually assaulted and 22% experiencing serious sexual assault or rape.

**Ellie:** These are absolutely heart-breaking statistics, Emma, and they offer an insight into just some of the challenges that trans people face. We'll look at those lived experiences in a moment. First of all, though, we know many people sort of grapple with the terminology in this space, and you speak really articulately about this - the sort of different ways in which we as a society talk about a person's gender.

**Emma:** Yes, absolutely. Thank you so much for kicking off with all the stats and data. I love data. Who doesn't? But I think your question is a really great question when we talk about terminology and gender, a lot of people get very frozen by terminology. There's a lot of it when it comes to the trans and non-binary terminology, it's an evolving place where especially younger people are finding amazing terms that describe who they are. And I do this for a living, and I can't keep up. So absolutely, let's step back and let's think about how we talk about gender in society and let's think about us. So, all of you who are listening, we're really complicated people as human beings. There's many things that make us. You know, your DNA is unique to you. There is nobody like you on this planet. We don't clone human beings, thankfully. But if we step back and make this really simplistic, you know, I love to think about it through a number of different lenses. So, the first lens is who we love, who we're attracted towards you know, sexual orientation, romantic attraction. And we know that could be a range, whether you're straight, lesbian, gay, pansexual, asexual, there's a whole range of sexual orientations that people love other people. And that's great. The next one is all about biology, which is about sex and typically sex assigned at birth or sex observed at birth. So, when you were born, the doctor looked at what's between your legs and assigned you a sex at birth. Typically, that's on your birth certificate. But we're

far more complicated and far more interesting than just what's between our legs or what isn't. Gender, gender identity, I think for me is really interesting. That's where we're seeing the explosion of language. And the way I describe this is when you look at your reflection in the mirror, how do you feel about the gender of your reflection? You may never have thought about it. You may never have even asked yourself that question. But for me, aged seven, knowing I was different, aged 12, really understanding that I identified as binary female and seeing a male reflection coming back at me was not how I saw myself. It didn't feel like home. Going through puberty, seeing that reflection, going the wrong direction was really distressing and really uncomfortable. And it's just that inner sense of what feels like home. And it can move, it can be fixed. As we go through this journey of life, it can also change. And then finally, gender expression.

You know, we all had a choice today how we presented ourselves to the world. Our dress, our mannerisms, our behaviour, our interactions, sometimes very subconsciously, sometimes not. But again, this may be, or maybe not an outward expression of our gender identity. For some people, they don't express how they identify. A lot of us do. But we know this conversation sometimes can be drawn back to biological sex. And I would just say that we're far more interesting and complicated than that. So, I think sometimes we get diverted, just talking about that, but actually when it comes to trans and non-binary, it's gender identity. It's that beautiful rainbow of all those identities that evolve and move, and the language continually builds.

**Ellie:** So don't get bogged down too much then in those terms, as you say, that are continually changing and evolving. I think it would also be useful at this stage to dispel some of the myths around being a transgender person because we know there are a lot of false articles about it. So, I think it'd be brilliant if you could just dispel some of those for us.

**Emma:** Yeah so, we all have our own place on our journey. So, wherever you are, trans and non-binary, you've come to that point based on your own inner sense of your gender identity. So not everybody does the full medical transition. Not everybody goes from male to female, female to male. In fact, all the data that we're seeing, a lot of non-binary identities, those gender identities outside the binary, they're the majority of our community. So not everybody has this. And I think a lot of people have come to this subject understanding or having some appreciation of those that fully medically transition. But actually, that is the tip of the iceberg of this conversation. That is the start point.

So not everybody has that extreme sense of that mismatch between themselves and their biological sex. You know, there's the clinical diagnosis of gender dysphoria, which is your mismatch. And not everybody feels that. Although if you want to go down a medical pathway, whatever that is, you do have to have the diagnosis. So not everybody has medical intervention. Some people may have no medical intervention, some people might have just a little bit, and some people may go to the full pathway. So again, that's one of the myths - not everybody has medical intervention, not everybody has genital surgery, not everybody goes through the whole process. For those seeking the medical pathway, it is probably one of the most highly gate kept pathways of the medical journey. You can't just go to the chemist or pharmacy and buy hormones over the counter. You can't just book yourself in to have genital surgery tomorrow. Even on a private pathway does not work like that. There's a lot of counselling, there's a lot of psychiatry, there's a lot of support for adults over 18 and for those under 18, even more hurdles to get across. But let's move on to what for me is the really, really important thing which is we're far more interesting than just being trans and non-binary. We have multiple elements to us. You know, I love, I'm often talking about intersectionality, that lovely blending of who we are. You know, I have mild dyslexia, so sometimes my spelling is pretty shocking. You know, I have, I'm married to another woman. You know, we're far more interesting than just being trans and non-binary, although I find a lot of power and authenticity in my, and these are my words, my transness, you know, it's who, you know, it's part of me, it's part of my makeup, but it doesn't define me.

**Ellie:** And another aspect, Emma, I wanted to get your view on is how we address people and respecting people's pronouns. And I just wanted to know what your sort of rules are around the use of these, especially at work, and why should we all be considering to state our pronouns?

**Emma:** Absolutely. So, for me, the workplace is a place where we have respect. So again, asking respectfully will never cause offence. "May I ask you your name? May I ask you your pronouns?" absolutely never causes offence. If I've changed my name, please don't use that previous name, often called "dead-naming". Some people don't like that term, but you know, in the community, typically that's what we use because it brings back all those feelings of things we're trying to leave behind. So again, asking never causes offence using somebody's name is absolutely really respectful. Titles, there's normally a system in a workplace that has a title. Lots of organisations are getting rid of titles, which is great. You know, as we're moving to the more sort of informal workplace, but titling should always include a gender-neutral title. If you're using titles, MX pronounced "mix" or "mux". There are other, other titles as well. And this is the secret to trans and non-binary workplace inclusion. It's an "and" it's not an "or". It's about adding things into the workplace. It's not

taking away something. It's adding something in. So again, thinking about titles. When it comes to pronouns, they're just pronouns. They're not preferred. They're just pronouns. So again, asking people's pronouns, but also if you want to be really respectful, is give yours and we'll come onto that in a moment, but actually just say, you know, "Hello, my name is Emma, my pronouns are she, her and hers. Lovely to meet you. May I ask your name and your pronouns?" We often see trans and non-binary younger people you know, really comfortable with pronouns and giving and sharing pronouns. And we know in our workplaces, we've got multiple generations, some of them more uncomfortable than others. So again, it's about being respectful, asking, and stating pronouns should always be voluntary as an individual. And we see some organisations make them mandatory, which we really don't advise on. The vast majority of organisations make them voluntary. And let me give you my sense of why they're so important. Two main things as a trans and non-binary person, when I see pronouns, I see friend, ally, somebody I can have a conversation with. So, they're a really good form of allyship. And it's a visible, it's not the only sign, but it's also a great sign.

**Ellie:** That's that visible sign of ally ship, isn't it? Hmm.

**Emma:** The other piece is it's a more general point on inclusion. We all bring our bias into our workplaces. We all have our own experiences that's brought us to this point right now. Sometimes we struggle with names or situations we're unfamiliar with. So having pronouns on your signature box can really help, it can guide people, they can give them a sense of who you are, especially when it comes to gender neutral names. And then final thing just on that is remember you're a human being, you're not a robot, we do make mistakes. We might think we're perfect, but if you make a mistake, apologise and move on. Really try and get it right. If you keep on making a mistake, there's a different conversation to have, but ultimately try - and if you make a mistake, apologise and move on.

**Ellie:** That's really helpful. Going back to those stats I mentioned at the beginning, which are just devastating, what do people in the trans and non-binary community face before they even get to the workplace? I mean, what are they carrying with them to work, and how does that affect them at work?

**Emma:** Yeah. And around the world, these things differ. So, whether it's newspaper headlines, whether it's statements made by politicians for good or for negative, whether it's conversion therapy for LGBTQ plus people is still legal here in the United Kingdom. Around the world, many, many countries now are banning conversion therapy, which effectively forces LGBTQ plus people not to be LGBTQ plus. And so, there's been lots of conversation, especially here in the UK, about will the government or won't the government, do it? And then probably two more and probably the one we're all facing at the moment is cost of living crisis. Trans and non-binary people typically are financially less well off than others, you know, it is impacting that community more. There's a lot, there's a lack of financial privilege, you know, how many FTSE 250 CEOs are trans and non-binary? Yeah. Won't take me long to give you that answer, you know, we have some people in, organisations now getting promoted, but equally, you know, in law firms, how many managing partners are trans and non-binary, how many partners are trans and non-binary? So just thinking and reflecting on how people are progressing in our workplaces is really important.

And then the final one, especially for those who are employment law gurus out there, would be about gender critical beliefs, those people who have anti-trans and non-binary beliefs. Now, here in the United Kingdom, people can have whatever beliefs they want to have in our workplaces. There's a few that are deemed by the courts to be unacceptable. I think it's the *Grainger* test for those who are super geeky in this space. But ultimately, people walking through the door can have whatever beliefs that they want to. The challenge within our workplaces is how does that belief translate into behaviour? That is the piece. And every workplace will have behaviours that it deems acceptable or unacceptable.

And therefore, this is the challenge for organisations in this space. However, the fact that people, trans and non-binary people may be reading newspaper headlines, they may be seeing articles. If you're on social media, the vast majority of trans and non-binary people get negativity on social media. I left a number of the platforms because it just wasn't good for my mental health. So again, all these things people bring with them. And then we're talking about their family situation, we're talking about their friends, their partners And so, all these things can feel quite heavy for people. There's times throughout the year when it can be incredibly heavy: Transgender Awareness Week, finishing off by Transgender Day of Remembrance, where we remember all those that are killed around the world. So, all these things can be oppressive and equally, more importantly, impact people's mental health.

**Ellie:** Yeah, absolutely. And I'd like to move on now to the transition journey and how managers and colleagues can best support somebody going through that. And if we can start with hearing about your own experience of coming out as a trans woman to your manager when you worked in the financial services sector, because I think this is a really interesting part of your story, Emma. So, if you could share that with us.

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- Emma:** Of course, so I was, Emma outside of work and, in work, I was still male expressing and the time had now come to speak to my line manager, I really felt it was the next step, but my manager had never said anything about LGBTQ plus, never mentioned anything about trans and non-binary. In fact, never mentioned anything about diversity, equity and inclusion. And so, I didn't know how he would respond. I had worked with him for about seven years, thought he'd be sort of okay, but you never know. And as it was financial services, I took him out to lunch. And I did have a little glass of wine just for a bit of courage. And we had a meal and towards the end, I thought, if I'm not now is the time. So, I told him, and his response will stay with me forever. He said, "Look, Emma, I know nothing about this, but we'll be great. Just tell me what help you need. Tell me what I can do." And because I'm a bit of a planner, I'd got a little document ready for him. So, I gave him the document and just to help him understand this some more. We finished lunch. He said, "Look, let me read the documents. Let me think on it and let's get back together the next day", which is what we did. He said, "Look, I read the document and spoken to my wife and absolutely, you know, we're here ready to help you, whatever you need. Just let me know."
- And so, for me, it was that sort of open minded, non-judgmental approach, which was so key. And actually, he held that throughout my transition journey of helping me, you know, educating his colleagues, his manager, just continually stepping forward and saying, "What do you need? What help do you need? How can I best support you?" was really, really important because I didn't know, you know, yes, I did have a lawyer on standby just in case. But good news is I didn't need to use to use them because they just held that sort of non-judgmental open-minded approach. And that's the best way to do this. And for me, you know, my transition journey was long, but ultimately was incredibly supportive by my workplace. And that's the most important thing for me within the workplace.
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- Ellie:** It's so lovely to hear that story, which I can imagine is not your typical story, but it's really lovely to hear that. I guess neither of you knew exactly how it was going to go or what you needed but having that dialogue and being able to talk to each other about it, I guess was crucial as well - to keep that conversation going.
- So, you mentioned a willingness to be open-minded, to educate yourself. What else should managers be mindful of? So, what are the things to say or to not say, like subjects to avoid, would you say?
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- Emma:** So, the big question here, the big skill for managers is to...ask open questions. Everybody's transition journey is unique to them. We have different start points, we have different situations, we have different ways we want to go about it, we have different timelines. So again, being willing to just step in and ask to be supportive is the second big thing, because this is somebody's journey of life. However personally you might feel about what they're doing, being supportive is really critical. Asking about names, pronouns, asking about people's journey and intentions, and being cool that it might change. We work with so many transitioners in different workplaces.
- You know, some people may give you two years' notice of anything happening. Some people may give you a week's notice. You know, it's about being there for the person, stepping forward and being respectful for them and putting your own judgments to one side. You know, somebody may be still male expressing and they want you to use a female name and pronoun in your confidential meeting with them. A really good way is to do that. And you are validating and saying, "I see you as you". It's really, really powerful. Having conversations about confidentiality is absolutely paramount. Keeping things confidential is really, really important. And having the person's consent, if you're sharing their news with somebody, is really, really important. And most importantly is creating a plan of when things are going to happen. We often talk to human resources professionals, or line managers - you are no longer the expert in the room. The employee is the expert of their journey, but what you are is the expert on how the organisation is going to respond and support.
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- Ellie:** Yeah.
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- Emma:** So forming a plan of when things are going to happen, who's going to do it, what's going to happen, how it's going to happen is really important. Once you've got that plan, keep coming back to it, keep talking to the employee because the plan will change - it always changes because hey this thing like called life happens, you know and normally it's stuff outside of work. So normally it's around, maybe it's a medical appointment that's got pulled forward, maybe it's a partner that was supportive that is no longer supportive Or maybe the person is feeling they want to accelerate the plan or slow it down. So regular dialogue is really, really important. And then the final thing probably to say here is also, you're a human being. So, asking questions is great. If you make a mistake, apologise and move on. And absolutely make sure you get that right with the individual. So as a manager, you are critical to the success of the transition process. We often find if those first conversations are really clunky and awkward, typically, the whole process is really clunky and awkward



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|               | and doesn't go very well. So, suspend how you feel, be there as a really great manager, leader to support somebody on this journey of life.   |
| <b>Ellie:</b> | I wanted to bring up as well colleagues. Colleagues can find it difficult when somebody with whom they've worked for a long time comes to work one day with a different gender expression. I know you've had experience of this as well. I just wonder what your advice would be in relation to colleagues, both from a manager's point of view, but as a colleague.  |
| <b>Emma:</b>  | <p>Yeah. And I think for me, looking at both of those perspectives is really important. And also, the trans person transitioning perspective. So, for me, let's start there. I worked with many people for many years, and I recognised that they had to go on their own journey as well. And different people go on different paces of their journey. So, a recognition that for some people, it's a really easy step of acceptance and inclusion - for other people, it may be a longer step, is really important for everybody. So, from a manager perspective, being there and supporting your trans and non-binary colleague, your employee is really important to helping people on their journey. Be willing to answer questions from colleagues, be willing to answer questions from the team is really, really important. Even if you don't know the answer, just say, I don't know the answer, I'll get back to you, is a great thing to do. I think for colleagues, it's having the ability to ask questions, it's having the ability to come at this at their own pace, but also from a colleague perspective, be clear on when things are gonna happen. So, we often say, in your plan, having a communication element to it is critical.</p> <p>So, colleagues will know when maybe day one is or whatever day one looks like. Be clear about facilities and changing rooms, be clear about the communication, be clear around having the ability to have the conversation. Those things really, really help people understand that actually this person is going on this amazing journey and how can I be there? We often find managers issues like a Frequently Asked Questions document that goes with the communication. If there's transphobic comments made, the manager should step in respectfully. If those people using somebody's previous name repeatedly, the manager should step in. And, you know, this is about respect.</p>  |
| <b>Ellie:</b> | Absolutely. I think that word respect feeds through all of this, doesn't it? And a lot of the time, what you're saying is just, you know, be a kind human being to other people. And if you can bear that in mind as well, in these conversations that will go a long way as well.  |
| <b>Emma:</b>  | Absolutely.   |
| <b>Ellie:</b> | So, in your experience as an HR specialist, Emma, what are the most common barriers to trans inclusion at work. You sort of alluded to some of them already, but if you can just sort of list the most common barriers that you see.  |
| <b>Emma:</b>  | <p>Yeah. So many. The main common barrier is this fear of getting it wrong, or the fear of stepping into this in the first place. We've seen some organisations almost go through a tick list of diversity, equity, inclusion. So maybe start with gender, do a bit on race and ethnicity, maybe do a little bit on disability, do something on LGBTQ plus and go, "Oh, trans and non-binary. It's a bit difficult. It's a bit contentious. It's a bit hard." And we do nothing. So, underpinning that is a lack of education and knowledge, lots of teams are diverted, dare I say, by some of the big things. So diverted by the media headlines or what they read in the newspaper, diverted by political statements. They think this is sort of contentious. And so, for us, let's step away from that and think about everybody you employ. Everybody who may be in your supply chain, everybody who's a contractor, everybody who's a client thinking about your business. An important thing to talk about is this, the fear of trading off rights, is often we see people hesitant, you know, "If I step into trans and non-binary inclusion, am I stepping away from, gender? is there a trade-off here?" And actually, we are often talking about, stepping forward for all your employees, actually enhances psychological safety. It enhances people being themselves at the work, you started off with some really amazing statistics, and depressing statistics. You know, a lot of people are not out in their workplaces because they don't feel safe. They don't feel as if they're validated.</p> <p>The data we see around generation Z is that they are the most trans and non-binary inclusive generation coming into society. They are the most LGBTQI identifying generations come into society. And even those that don't identify as LGBTQI are really supportive of those that do. So, you know, the world is changing. So, thinking about your business is the most important thing. And then we go all the way through to HR teams, line managers going, "Where do I start? You know, somebody's just transitioned, somebody's just come into my office and my goodness, I haven't got a clue where to start." So again, it's about breathing and just taking a step back and going, actually, this is somebody on their journey of life. How do I help and support them? What do I do?</p> |

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| <b>Ellie:</b> | And how can we all individually be good allies for the trans and non-binary community? Have you got some sort of real-life examples of allyship that's really made a proper difference?  |
| <b>Emma:</b>  | Yep. Absolutely. So, it can be small things. It can be putting pronouns on your LinkedIn, your social media, putting them on your emails, amazing, amazing things. It can be sharing something you learn from this podcast with your teams. Great ally thing to do. It can be learning more about this subject and sharing with others. If you witness transphobic behaviour, stepping in politely, calmly, calling it out, saying, "Look, I'm not okay with that", especially in our workplaces, there's great things to do. We know our allies do amazing things when we're not in the room. They're having conversations with people going, "I'm okay with Emma, she's great. Can you tell me why you're not?" type conversations. If you have a LGBT network in your organisation, thinking about how you can help and support them. What more can you do to help them, depending on where you are in your organisation. And then it can be the big things also outside. Now we can be allies outside of the workplace, you know, be an ally over the dinner table with your family and your friends. It can be an ally in the bars and the restaurants. You know, you can write to your MP if you want to, you can, you know, you can think about your online experience for shops and saying, actually, "Have you thought about adding in an MX into your titles?" So, thinking about what's next for you, what you feel comfortable with is the most important thing for allies and taking that next step because it's a verb, it's a doing word, it's small steps and often. |
| <b>Ellie:</b> | Absolutely. I think that's really helpful to think about your individual journey of allyship. And can we just finish Emma with your sort of top tips for businesses to foster a genuinely trans inclusive workplace?   |
| <b>Emma:</b>  | So, for me, my top tips is around actually knowing where you stand on this issue as a business is really important. And that comes all the way down from senior leaders all the way through the organisation. So, you know, if I'm not in your business, what am I seeing looking from the outside in? So yes, it's communication. It's being willing to step forward in the way that's authentically your business is really important. But actually, you know, if I'm looking to join you, how inclusive is the hiring process? Can I state my pronouns through the application process is really important. When I'm meeting you, what am I seeing in terms of visible signs? If I'm researching you as an organisation, what have you said about this subject or not? What have you said as a recruiter? Do you have a policy? How active is your internal LGBT network in this space? What do you do if your customers, if you've got customers, how are you advocating for your customers? All these things are really, really important, but at its core for me, it's about organisations being really clear about their own DNA. And there are organisations out there that are very clear that have been authentic and consistent in this space. Lots of organisations get very worried about making statements about this particular subject externally, but also sometimes internally. And for me, it's about knowing where you stand on it and being authentically consistent.   |
| <b>Ellie:</b> | I know it's extremely difficult to summarise, but I think you've done a fantastic job, Emma, of highlighting some of the ingredients that go towards that genuinely trans-inclusive culture. So, thank you, Emma.  |
| <b>Emma:</b>  | You're very welcome. Thank you so much. Just share one thing from the podcast. That's all I say. share one thing that you've learned today.  |

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**Ellie:**

Absolutely, that's everyone's homework from this podcast. We can all do that. Thank you.

As Emma mentioned, trans inclusion extends beyond the internal workplace culture. It's also reflected in your customer base, in how your business's brand is perceived and its wider reputation in the market, not to mention your organisation's ability to attract and retain the best, the most diverse talents.

If you would like to revisit anything we discussed today, you can access transcripts of every episode of the Work Couch podcast by going to our website [www.rpc.co.uk/theworkcouch](http://www.rpc.co.uk/theworkcouch). Or if you have questions for me or Emma, or perhaps you've got ideas of topics you'd like us to cover in a future episode of The Work Couch, please get in touch by emailing us at [theworkcouch@rpc.co.uk](mailto:theworkcouch@rpc.co.uk). We'd really love to hear from you. Thank you all for listening, and we hope you'll join us again in two weeks.



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