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A Silence Hangs Over Gay CEOs

By **LESLIE KWOH**

For nearly two decades, Ernst & Young executive Beth Brooke navigated the office like it was a minefield, dodging water-cooler chatter for fear that someone might corner her with a personal question.

Her colleagues whispered that she was a "loner," she said, scarred from her divorce or perhaps just reclusive by nature.



Many high-level executives like Ernst & Young global vice chair Beth Brooke are coming out of the closet. In her closing remarks in a 2011 video produced for the "It Gets Better" campaign, Ms. Brooke revealed that she is gay.

But Ms. Brooke was growing tired of hiding, particularly after being tapped to head the company's diversity and inclusion efforts. So last year, while preaching openness in a company-sponsored video for the "It Gets Better" campaign, she rewrote the script.

"I'm gay," she said, looking straight into the camera. "And I've struggled with that for many years."

Like 53-year-old Ms. Brooke, a global vice chair of public policy, some top executives are tiptoeing out of the closet about their sexuality. Many describe their coming-out experiences as unexpectedly painless—and most say they were met with

overwhelming support.

They say their job performance improved because they felt more at ease among colleagues.

"Life really did get better," Ms. Brooke said.

But if it is becoming more acceptable to be gay in corporate life, why do so many senior executives keep their sexuality a secret?

Being gay in the corporate world is still far from being a "nonissue," said Deena Fidas, deputy director of corporate programs at Human Rights Campaign, the largest lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender civil-rights group in the U.S. Companies can still legally fire a worker for being gay in 29 states, for one, and many subtle biases remain in the workplace, according to the group.

There isn't a single openly gay chief executive officer in the Fortune 1000, according to the Human Rights Campaign. (The sole openly gay CEO, former [Urban Outfitters](#) Inc. chief Glen Senk, left the company in January and now leads jewelry retailer David Yurman.)

That is not to say there are no gay CEOs in that group, said Kirk Snyder, a diversity consultant who works with Fortune 500 companies and has written several books on being gay in the workplace. From his research and talks with business contacts, he claims to know of at least 10 closeted CEOs.

"It's the fear factor," he said. "They're afraid consumers will boycott if they know the company is led by a gay CEO."

Former BP PLC chief John Browne, who resigned in 2007 amid revelations he had lied in court about how he met his ex-boyfriend, said he remained closeted during his tenure at the oil giant for fear of damaging professional relationships, particularly in the Middle East, where homosexual acts are punishable by death in some countries. "I thought it would affect everything," he said.



Stephen Voss for The Wall Street Journal

Beth Brooke is an openly gay executive at Ernst & Young.

Ultimately, he might have lost a client or two, he said, but the suffering took a bigger toll. "You hide things. It's a double life," he said.

Also keeping executives from coming out, he said, are "homophobic" corporate cultures and boards. "Corporations are very conservative, and the bigger the business is, the more conservative it is," Mr. Browne added.

Rick Welts was CEO and president of the Phoenix Suns—a National Basketball Association team—when he revealed last year that he was gay, and knows what it is like to hide in a conservative environment.

The most prominent sports executive to come out so far, Mr. Welts, 59, said he stayed closeted to protect his team's image and silently suffered whenever peers cracked jokes about homosexuals.

"The last thing anyone in a position like mine wants to do is negatively impact the company they work every day to promote," said Mr. Welts, now president and chief operating officer of the Golden State Warriors.

That may be why you would hear about people "coming out at their retirement party," said Todd Sears, founder of the Out on

the Street annual LGBT leadership summit for the finance industry. (Or even later: When the first female U.S. astronaut, Sally Ride, died this week, her obituary revealed she had a partner of 27 years.)

The constant anxiety can hamper professional advancement, particularly for managers, said clinical psychologist Ritch Savin-Williams, who heads Cornell University's Sex & Gender Lab. Energy spent agonizing over simple queries like "What are you doing this weekend?" or whether to arrive solo to a company party can detract from work, he said.

Ms. Brooke said these days, high-profile leaders are under increased pressure to be "authentic" with colleagues, which often means showing vulnerability—an especially stressful task for closeted workers.

Mark Stephanz, 50, a vice chairman at Bank of America Merrill Lynch, said he finally decided to admit he was gay in 2007 because he didn't want to burden his three kids with keeping a secret at school, where they interacted with clients' children.

Coming out to the firm where he had worked for decades was a delicate, emotional process, he said, but he was relieved to find "most people still deal with you the same way they always do."

Mr. Browne, 64, said he regrets not coming out earlier. He once believed keeping work and personal affairs separate was better for both worlds, but he now disagrees with that philosophy.

Mr. Stephanz said his biggest challenge has been handling clients, who aren't always as accepting.

He now brings his steady boyfriend to most of his work functions, but occasionally refrains when he senses it might put a client "in an uncomfortable position."

Goldman Sachs Group Inc. CEO [Lloyd Blankfein](#), who describes his bank's gay-friendly policies as crucial for talent retention, said during the Out on the Street conference in May that he has lost at least one client since he publicly voiced support for gay marriage. "It doesn't come without a price, but I could care less," he said.

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