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Donna Renn began her career in the military — and in the closet. But today, the 50-year-old IT business analyst for TD is the poster girl for coming out in the workplace.

During the five years she served in the Canadian Forces, Renn was terrified someone would find out she was a lesbian. When left the military, she was more forthcoming at work, talking openly about her social life and placing a photo of her partner on her desk.

But two years ago Renn went big, posing for a national advertising campaign for TD that showed her walking hand-in-hand at the Scarborough Bluffs with her wife, Nancy.

“What made me feel particularly proud was that we were the first female couple and the first authentic couple,” Renn said of the campaign. “And I was the first TD employee.”

An Angus Reid poll released to the *Toronto Star* shows that 72 per cent of the 983 Canadian lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgendered employees polled feel attitudes in the workplace have improved in the last five years.

That’s thanks to creative projects, like the TD ads, and other means of social and financial support.

Last December [Telus](#) employees made a video for the It Gets Better project in response to a spate of suicides by LGBT youth.

In June 2008, TD began to pay for all costs related to sex-reassignment surgery not covered by the province for trans employees.

“What I’m seeing is a lot more conversations about this in companies,” said Anne-Marie Vanier, a Royal Bank of Canada executive who came out to coworker as a lesbian last year and is now the executive co-sponsor of RBC’s employee resource group, Pride.

Two years ago, RBC began celebrating [National Coming Out Day](#), where CEO Gordon Nixon hosted an event featuring two RBC employees telling their stories about coming out. This year, a Q and A with Vanier about coming out was published on the company’s intranet, seen by the company’s 74,000 employees worldwide.

In the past five years, several companies have also created employee groups devoted to promoting positive LGBT workplaces.

When it started in 2009, Telus’ group, Spectrum had six members. It now has 265. In June, McCarthy Tétrault became the first Canadian law firm to launch a national Pride network to promote professional development and mentoring of LGBT personnel.

For Vanier, being honest about her personal life at work meant more genuine relationships with coworkers, attending a greater number of work social events and feeling like a huge weight was lifted off her shoulders.

“The amount of internal energy that it takes to constantly be thinking about ‘What did I say last time, how do I position this, what pronoun did I use?’ It’s very exhausting,” Vanier said.

Ensuring employees don’t hide who they are was a central goal for IBM Canada, said Esther Dryburgh, a partner in the financial services sector and part of the company’s LGBT diversity group.

About eight years ago, IBM Canada hosted a breakfast for its top 40 executives and about 80 LGBT employees to discuss their experiences at IBM. Some employees admitted they were not comfortable telling their managers where they were that morning, Dryburgh said. It was a, something she called a “watershed moment.”



Anne-Marie Vanier is an executive at RBC and a major proponent of LGBT acceptance in the workplace. She is the Executive Co-Sponsor of the PRIDE Employee Resource Group at RBC and is happy that she is making a difference.

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"That really struck the executives. So we really tried to use the personal stories, so it wasn't just about doing what's right, it's about creating an environment that encourages folks to be themselves."

Since that time, IBM has strengthened its LGBT employee resources, including asking employees to self-identify as LGBT if they feel comfortable, then sponsoring them for leadership training or special initiatives.

Last month, IBM sent 50 employees to Out and Equal, a conference held this year in Dallas that offered courses about creating LGBT inclusive workplaces.

Brent Chamberlain, executive director at Pride at Work Canada, an advocacy group based in Toronto, said creating that type of environment is not only the right thing for companies to do, but it's good for the business as a whole.

"You're able to attract and retain the best possible talent from as wide of a talent pool as possible," he said.

"We feel it's good for Telus, for retention and recruitment purposes, and attracting people who feel comfortable bringing their authentic selves to work," said Liz McLachlan, part of the company's national LGBT group Spectrum. "And it's good for existing team members, when people are able to be open at work and not have to hide anything."

Findings of Canadian LGBT poll

An August, 2011 Angus Reid study polled 983 gay, lesbian, bisexual and trans Canadians who are employed to find out whether workplaces across the country have become more tolerant. It found that workplaces have in many ways come a long way:

93 per cent described their employer's overall attitude towards LGBT people in the workplace as tolerant

72 per cent say attitudes in the workplace towards LGBT people have improved over the last five years.

But the report also demonstrated more work needs to be done.

34 per cent of gays and 40 per cent of lesbians said they have experienced discrimination during their professional lives.

28 per cent of respondents who have not come out at their workplace say they fear negative consequences.

Two per cent of respondents who are out at work say that their colleagues had a negative attitude.