Corporate doors open wide

As large corporations realize the benefits of a diverse workforce, career-minded gays and lesbians are being recruited like never before

By Dan Allen
Innovative methods to reach out to them. A student at New York University's Stern School of Business, Smith attended the Reaching Out MBA conference in Chicago last year, where he met with and was eventually recruited by American Express to be an intern this summer. The annual student-run event brings gay and lesbian corporate job seekers together with recruiters from some of the nation's largest companies, including Home Depot, Target, General Electric, and Toyota.

"Workplace diversity is something that American Express has always stood behind," says Smith. "They see their corporate culture as being a reflection on the diversity of both New York — being a New York-headquartered company — and more importantly, on the nation as a whole."

Linda Hassan, director of diversity recruiting for American Express, says her company understands the role people like Smith can play. "We are a global company, with global customers served by employees of various races, nationalities, and experiences," she says. "To be successful in the marketplace, it's important that our workforce reflects our customer base."

The gay community has a lot to offer the nation's top employers, says Dan Honig, chief operating officer of WorkplaceDiversity.com, a job-search Web site dedicated to helping recruiters broaden the spectrum of their employee bases. "Facts are facts, and with the gay and lesbian community, education levels are simply higher than average," he says. "There are so many wonderful opportunities for companies to have top talent and a diversity of thought that doesn't currently exist in their companies."

Ed Bullock, vice president of diversity for L'Oréal USA, which had a booth at the Reaching Out conference, is counting on it. "Diverse organizations are more innovative and creative, and a key cornerstone of a diverse business is creating a diverse workforce," he says. "Diversity is a key business strategy for L'Oréal, because we believe it has a direct impact on the bottom line."

So moved was Smith by the importance and value of the Reaching Out conference that he's now helping to organize this year's three-day event, which will bring together more than 30 companies and 600 candidates this fall in New York. "As a marketing person, I've always been a firm believer that companies who are trying to sell their services and sell their products need to reach out to an even more diversified nation," says Smith. "You know, the United States isn't the Wonder-bread suburbs of the 1940s and '50s that it once was in popular imagination. More and more, companies are realizing that they need to have a tacit understanding of what's going on in the population as a whole — not only to compete but to be good citizens for their customers."

Allen is a freelance writer based in Los Angeles.

**BY THE NUMBERS**

From a recent national survey of gays and lesbians on workplace issues:

- **54%** said gay-friendly policies are "critical" to their decision about where they decide to work.
- **38%** said gay-friendly policies contributed to their happiness at work.
- **74%** reported being paid at work.
- **39%** reported experiencing some form of antigay discrimination or harassment in the workplace.
- **19%** said there were barriers to getting a promotion because of their sexual orientation.

Source: Lambda Legal/Limeade Financial Advisory Services, LLP.