

# ALLEN & OVERY

A&Out  
LGBT+ Matters





At A&O LGBT+ inclusion matters and we are all responsible for making our LGBT+ colleagues feel welcome, valued and confident that they will not be excluded or held back in any way. To better understand the experiences of our LGBT+ colleagues we aim to promote the visibility of our LGBT+ role models across our international network and share our people's stories.

In this publication, three of our current trainees in London interview more senior colleagues, alumni and friends of A&O about their personal stories and how attitudes to LGBT+ inclusion and gender have changed in the legal industry.

The following interviews below cover a range of experiences across the LGBT+ community, from the challenges and progress made, to the importance of open and supportive allies.



# Be as open as you feel comfortable to be

**Anne Fischer, counsel in Dusseldorf, and Ella Richards, a London trainee, talk about the benefits and challenges of being out at work as gay and bi women.**

Anne Fischer chose the moment to come out at work carefully and with some trepidation. Anne was working at another law firm at the time and thought the conversation had gone pretty well, with her lead partner apparently receiving the news very calmly.

“I was relieved because his reaction was so cool,” Anne says with a laugh. “But it later turned out that he hadn’t understood what I was trying to tell him when I said I was going to spend Christmas with my girlfriend’s family.”

It was an early lesson for her, demonstrating that choosing when and how to come out at work, finding the right language to use and deciding who to tell, can be a subtle process.

It’s an issue that is at the heart of the conversation when Anne meets Ella, who is navigating similar concerns about coming out as bi.

Anne had been through her training before discovering her identity. At the beginning she had a boyfriend, so when her life changed fundamentally she wanted to let her boss and closest colleagues know.

“I discovered pretty late that I was gay, about six months before reaching my final qualification,” says Anne.

“By then I had moved from a small city and was living near the centre of Dusseldorf with my girlfriend, so I thought it was better to at least let my lead partner know I was gay.”

From then on, Anne was always open about her sexual orientation, although, she adds, “I didn’t force every situation to talk about it.”

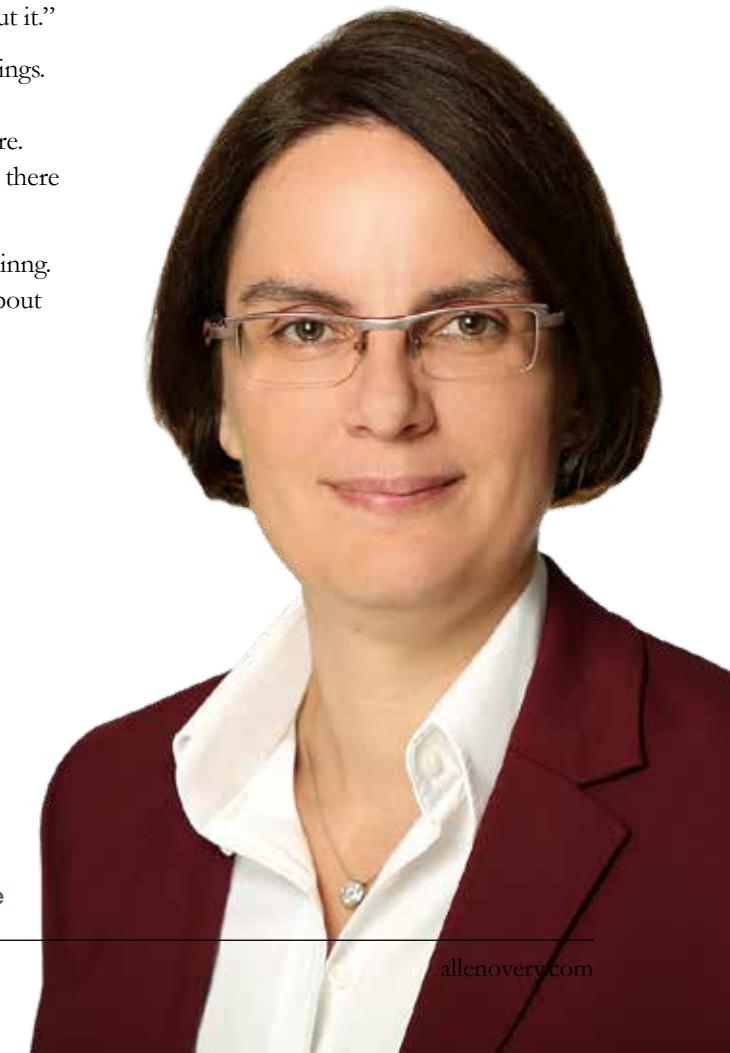
Instead, she chose different approaches in different work settings. She spent a period of time working for a law firm that was culturally very conservative. “I was slightly more hesitant there. I was out, but a bit less so because I didn’t think I would stay there that long, so didn’t see the need to tell everyone.”

Since joining A&O in 2011, she has been out from the begininng. “I don’t necessarily tell everybody I’m gay, but I openly talk about my wife – whether that’s to a trainee, an intern or somebody more senior.”

*“Your whole life consists of coming out situations. It’s not that you do it once and it’s done, or that you have a strategy for each situation.”*

Anne Fischer

Anne Fischer – Corporate



**Anne's time being less open about her sexual orientation revealed how difficult it can be to find the right words to avoid being open, while also talking comfortably about your life outside work.**

"I experienced for the first time how difficult it is to avoid the subject and to find ways of describing things without being too precise."

It's a thought that chimes with Ella's own experience. "People tend to see it in a very binary way: you're either out or not. But obviously you can be out to some people, like your close colleagues and friends, but not to every one."

Anne agrees and has a basic rule of thumb – be as open as you feel comfortable to be and don't worry too much about the impact on your career.

But she is equally clear that some just won't feel it is right for them. "It's a personal choice and I absolutely respect anyone who says there is no need for them to be out in the workplace."

**Have cultural attitudes changed in Germany since laws on equal marriage came into force in 2018, Ella asks?**

"Equal marriage is a good thing and has helped to change the perception of people who were curious about the subject," says Anne. "But from my perspective, the bigger step was the move to registered partnerships (introduced in Germany in 2001). The press covered a lot of celebrities coming out and entering into partnerships, which influenced public opinion and had an impact on me personally – it made it seem not so different."

Despite being open about her sexual orientation, Anne still notes a conservatism in the legal industry compared with other sectors. When she got married, it led to comments about her 'husband' that she would correct. "I told people, actually my husband is my wife."

Anne has also seen colleagues feel a duty to maintain a confidence when it might have been more helpful not to do so. By contrast, other colleagues took their cues from Anne's own openness.

"Encouraging people to feel comfortable telling others can help (unless, of course, you've told them in confidence). I just find it avoids having to come out again and again!"

She admits, though, that this is inevitable. "Your whole life consists of coming out situations. It's not that you do it once and it's done, or that you have a strategy for each situation." And again there are situations where it just does not feel right, and where she tries to be "more neutral".

**Ella and Anne both agree there is another level of complexity in coming out as bi.**

As Ella puts it: "As a bi woman you're not presenting people with consistency, which some can find confusing. I can understand where they are coming from."

"The thing that makes a big difference between being 'B' rather than 'L' or 'G', is that you don't have an obvious way of coming out. If I talk about my girlfriend, it will be obvious that I am LGBT+, but most people will assume I'm a lesbian," she says.

*"As a bi woman you're not presenting people with consistency, which some can find confusing. I can understand where they are coming from."*

Ella Richards

"When I have a boyfriend people will just assume I'm straight. It's kind of funny, because in order to come out it means being really explicit and then you ask yourself – did I need to do that and is it really work-appropriate?"

"LGBT+ rights have come a long way. People are so much more aware these days of gay men and women," Ella says, "but still a lot of the other elements, such as trans, bi or asexual, are less well understood. That's something I've been trying to navigate at work – how to be out."

Her biggest fear is that it all becomes too difficult so people retreat into a 'don't ask, don't tell' culture. That can easily lead, when in a relationship with a man, to "slipping back into being so much in the closet that you can't easily come back out when you have a relationship with a woman – you're in a situation where you have to explain it all over again.

**Ella notes that another problem is the blurring of lines. "When you are talking about sexuality it can be hard for some people to know what's appropriate to discuss and where the boundaries are. That sometimes makes people reluctant to ask questions."**

But there have been positive experiences for Ella. She recalls once being asked why it was important for her to be out. "I said – 'it matters to me. I don't feel confident if people are assuming something about me that is incorrect, so I just like to get it out there'. My colleague just said: 'Oh – OK' and moved on."

"That's really positive for me. People asking questions can make everything easier – maybe there was some kind of unspoken tension or confusion but then it's relieved. Sometimes it just helps to burst the bubble."

There can be a temptation, both Anne and Ella agree, for any member of a minority group to be worried about people's opinions – to over-think their reactions and assume the worst. As Ella puts it: "The honest answer is that if you tell a colleague you are bi or gay, most people don't dwell on it afterwards. But we end up spending time thinking about what they are thinking."

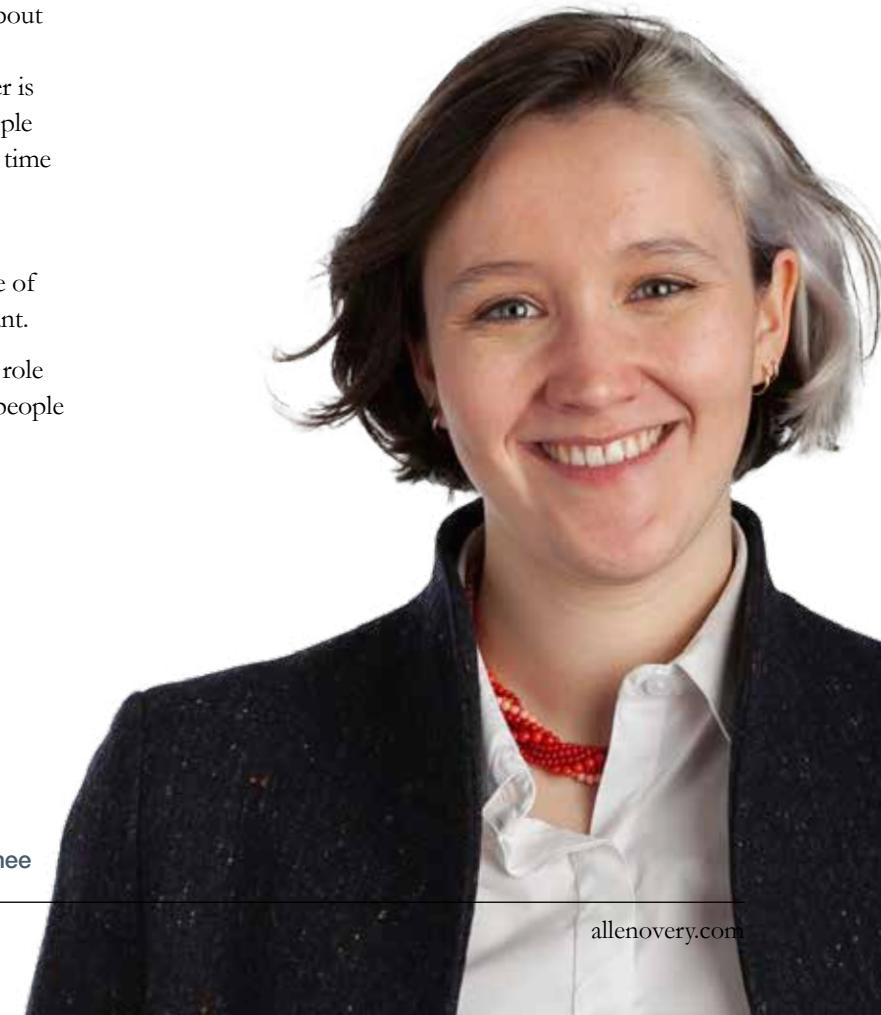
That is why having a strong and visible international network – with allies who understand the importance of supporting and promoting colleagues – is so important.

"It's really exciting for me to talk to a female LGBT+ role model at A&O," says Ella. "Having that network of people you can connect with is a great comfort."

*"It's really exciting for me to talk to a female LGBT+ role model at A&O."*

Ella Richards

Ella Richards – Trainee



# Transition and attitudes to gender



Rachel Reese – Consultant

**Rachel Reese is a consultant providing trans inclusivity training to the legal profession and has worked closely with A&O for several years. Here, she and trainee Alex Woolhouse discuss their stories of transition and reflect on how attitudes to gender have changed.**

While aspects of Rachel's story of transition are painful to recount, she is clear that, where the legal profession is concerned, attitudes to trans people and understanding of gender identity in its widest sense are "immeasurably better" than 20 years ago when she was in the early days of her own personal journey.

"My partner has a theory that if you transition in a major organisation, you will end up in a position one below where you should be," says Rachel.

"I've definitely seen that but I think it's changing. We are on the threshold of a time when you can be who you want to be and do as well as you want to do."

"More and more people are publicly expressing their gender identity and transitioning. In the firms that have done the right diversity and inclusion work, we're seeing better trans representation as people feel safe to be open."

That is certainly Alex Woolhouse's experience as an A&O trainee – a position she secured presenting as male before deciding she would join the firm as female, knowing that her transition couldn't wait any longer.

It's a world away from the 1980s when Rachel graduated as an aeronautical software engineer and began her career programming software for fighter aircraft. Soon she moved into HR and then went on to law school in the mid-90s. She began looking for training contracts just as she was transitioning.

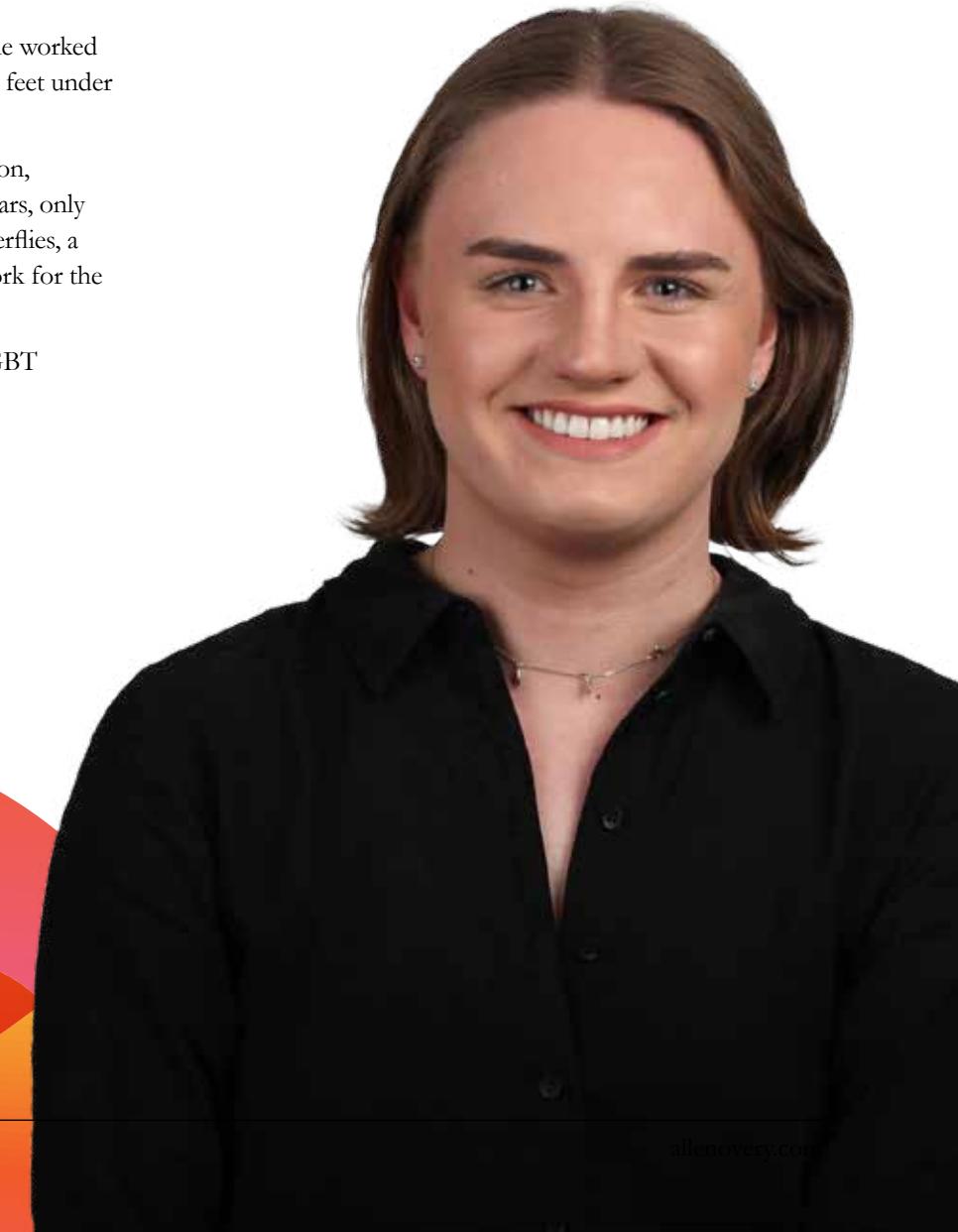
She had been diagnosed through the NHS with gender dysphoria, and the expectation was that you would get employment in your new gender expression, which is how you outwardly express your gender, Rachel explains. “I hadn’t got very far with my transition, but went to interviews in my female expression. It really didn’t go well at all. Electrolysis, bad wigs – I was trying to get my look sorted. And we all know how hard it is to get a training contract.”

So she went to two interviews with big firms in male expression and was offered places with both. But her desire to transition was very strong and it looked unlikely it would be possible in a law firm at that time. Instead, she applied for a post at the University of Law, encouraged that some of the staff there were gay.

She applied in male expression and for a while worked in “double life” giving herself time to get her feet under the table.

“Then I told them that I would like to transition, and they were great. I worked there for 15 years, only leaving three years ago to set up Global Butterflies, a consultancy that provides trans inclusivity work for the legal industry.”

She is also vice-chair of the Law Society’s LGBT Lawyers Division Committee.



Alex Woolhouse – Trainee



### What was that double life like? Alex asks.

Early on in her career as an engineer she was cross-dressing – going into work in male expression, then switching to “Rachel-mode” in the evening. That carried on in the early days at the University of Law. She had an Irish passport in female expression, and a British one in male identity.

Ultimately, there were two main reasons why she felt she had to transition.

“First, it’s very tiring living a double life. I remember going out with colleagues in law firms and other work friends and you’d be the life and soul, working really hard to be one of the guys. And when I got home I’d be exhausted because I’d put on this stellar performance,” she recalls.

Second, her closest friends noticed a deepening dark side. “I never took any enjoyment out of anything and I started to think about suicide. But then I said to myself – if that’s what I was contemplating anyway, I may as well at least transition first.

“Of course, it was fine – I just didn’t know beforehand that it would be.”

For Alex, even at the loneliest times of her own journey, she at least had the internet and social media as a source of information and advice. The trans journalist and blogger Shon Faye is a particular inspiration.

Rachel’s transition took place pre-internet and pre-social media and she didn’t know anyone on the same journey. There was hardly anything on television about the issue apart from the seminal films about Julia Grant, which followed her journey between the late 70s and mid-90s. Joan Bakewell also made a documentary on the trans Bond girl, Caroline Cossey, that opened Rachel’s eyes.

“When I moved to London the only way to do research was by going on the scene. There were one or two big clubs. That’s where I met the full spectrum, although it was a bit binary in those days, mostly transvestites and transsexuals (those were the terms back in the 80s and 90s). We all knew each other and I found great loyalty and comradeship.”

She’s glad that the understanding of gender identity has now opened up. “Binary gender is a bit blunt. People I transitioned with years ago have moved into the non-binary spectrum. Now we understand that gender is a spectrum and can be fluid. That’s a breath of fresh air for our community because it more accurately describes the many different identities and expressions that exist.”

While at the University of Law she took time out privately to undergo surgery, not telling her family until the last minute and recovering alone in her London flat. During that time she rang work to let them know she would be returning as Rachel and got full support.

But on her return there were a few unexpected shocks.

“It was a time when women were pushing hard against the glass ceiling and that was a difficulty I hadn’t expected. I was joining this amazing group of women and they were facing these huge challenges,” she says. “I’d always expected a challenge for being trans, but not for being a woman.”



### **So what advice would Rachel give to colleagues thinking of transitioning at work now?**

“I always tell people, do it if you can. Most of the people I know who have transitioned regret waiting. I regret not doing it earlier.

“And if your employer is not great about it, then go to one that is, because so many are now. We should all be somewhere where we’re appreciated.”

Alex understands that sense of regret – there is one thing she would have changed in her own journey. “I’d have loved to have gone through university as a woman. I transitioned when I was 22 and I wish I’d done it before. I wish I’d known earlier. I still enjoyed university, but something wasn’t quite right.”

She finds it hard to be precise about when she first knew, saying: “It was a thousand different things I couldn’t put my finger on.”

“I knew I couldn’t quite refer to myself as a man. It wasn’t the right word for me. I knew I had to change before starting work and having to wear a suit every day.”

She had bought three suits ahead of her training contract beginning, but with two weeks to go, and with the help of Rachel and A&O, announced she would be starting as a female.

She took it quite slowly, at first dressing androgynously before beginning to wear dresses and heels and growing her hair. But she never felt a sense of discomfort.

“It was absolutely the right decision and I haven’t regretted it once. I love it. I catch myself in a window and now I look like the person I would have looked up to at 14,” she says. “Every step I’ve taken has made me feel more comfortable and has made sense.”

Indeed, she is adamant that her path has helped her to develop as a person. “The way trans children grow up can feel quite lonely. But in hindsight that’s benefited me. It has made me work harder and be resourceful and quick-witted. Growing up as a trans child has made me the strong woman I am today.”

*“Growing up as a trans child has made me the strong woman I am today.”*

Alex Woolhouse

**The biggest problem Rachel sees in the workplace is visibility. “A lot of people are living privately because they’re worried about the impact on their careers.”**

Rather than focus on the trans issue in isolation, she believes businesses must make sure they have a broad, holistic approach to diversity and inclusion.

So what can colleagues and allies do – especially those afraid to broach the subject for fear of using the wrong language?

“For me, when people mis-gender me, I prefer them to correct themselves and move on,” says Alex.

Rachel agrees and advises colleagues simply to use the person’s name to begin with. “You can have a conversation without using gender – that comes later when you get to know them. But, to begin with, just have a conversation.

“We are a wide spectrum of people, multi-faceted. But organisations and allies need to realise we’re just people at the end of the day,” she says.

“No two journeys are the same. We all have different experiences. Some have great family lives and less than great work lives, and vice versa. But we are all more than just trans.

“I’m learning to fly a plane. I’m having piano lessons and drive a Mini Cooper very badly. Like others I have many other attributes than being trans, and that’s the important thing to remember.”

*“Like others I have many other attributes than being trans, and that’s the important thing to remember.”*

Rachel Reese

# Standing on the shoulders of giants



Steven Woolley & Ashley Ken

*“During times of conflict, or stress and confusion, you learn that people don’t look towards those who shout the loudest but those who look most calm and confident.”*

Steven Woolley

Steven Woolley is an A&O alumnus who joined the legal profession at the age of 38. Here, he talks to new trainee Ashley Ken about how attitudes to gay men have changed in society and in the law.

“Back then, the military was a place where you were taught to control your feelings,” says Steven, as he describes the 20 years he spent in the Royal Navy before training as a lawyer.

“During times of conflict, or stress and confusion, you learn that people don’t look towards those who shout the loudest but those who look most calm and confident,” he says.

It was not an environment to come out in, but other reasons also prevented him from doing so at that time in his life.

“Back then in the 80s and 90s, if it was ever discovered that you were gay in the Armed Services, you’d be swiftly discharged. You were considered to be a security threat, someone who could be blackmailed. But I was also happily married with four kids.

“In those days I was not entirely convinced I was gay so, given everything else, I never really explored any of those feelings. Although they were certainly there.”

**It was only when Steven had left the Navy, his marriage had broken down and he had joined A&O as a trainee in 1996, that he began to explore his identity.**

“When I later came out to my children it was fine. I learned quickly that times were changing and that for the younger generation it’s just not such a big thing. My children don’t feel they even need to explain it to their friends when we meet. It’s just – so what?” he says.

Steven retrained as a lawyer in his late thirties and pays tribute to the recruitment partner who gave him the break at A&O. He stayed with the firm until 2001, before moving to an in-house role.

Meeting Ashley Ken – who joined A&O as a trainee in 2018 – the talk quickly turns to how things have changed and what more can be done to promote equality for people across the LGBT+ community.

As Ashley puts it: “I’ve found that being gay can be an advantage.” He feels that it has helped him find his feet, and his involvement in initiatives such as the annual LGBT Leaders conference for students has allowed him to build a network of contacts in business.

“But it’s a double-edged sword. We live in this cosmopolitan bubble in London and it’s sometimes easy to forget there are still lots of issues to be dealt with.”

Ashley hails from a provincial town in the north of England, where there is absolutely no gay scene – all very different to an environment where “one of the biggest challenges is that people are often so open-minded they say: ‘why do you even have to talk about it anymore?’”

But uncomfortable reminders exist of continuing prejudice, even in London. Recently he was ordered out of a mini cab when his boyfriend kissed him on the cheek to thank him for a lovely evening.

“Of course we’ve made such great leaps, but there’s still a long way to go. Hopefully one day we will get to that place where no-one bats an eyelid.”

*“Of course we’ve made such great leaps, but there’s still a long way to go. Hopefully one day we will get to that place where no-one bats an eyelid.”*

Ashley Ken

**Since becoming a lawyer, Steven's policy has been to be open right from the start, and he says he has never been aware of a single instance of unpleasantness or prejudice because of his orientation.**

"I want people to know because it gets rid of that potential awkwardness. This is who I am. I'm not proud of being gay any more than I am proud of having brown hair. But I'm certainly not ashamed of it."

Before accepting his current job in a Russian-owned broking business, he made it immediately clear he was gay and was told it was not an issue.

"I don't go around waving a rainbow flag but I go to Moscow a lot and the fact that colleagues know I am gay – and, other than that, no different to them – is good. It's breaking down stereotypes."

Are there times when Ashley has felt uncomfortable at work, Steven asks?

Ashley admits that he struggled slightly at first, anxious not to be seen to be "playing the gay card or trying to tick the diversity box" when applying to law firms. He just wanted to be judged as a good trainee. On starting his first seat he was worried that his trainer might have an issue with how open he was with his identity. However he had no need to be: "Obviously, she was completely fantastic."

Discussing weekend plans has provided an easy way to out himself among colleagues as Ashley talks openly about his boyfriend, but it's harder for people who aren't able to take this approach. "How do you broach the subject with someone you share an office with without literally saying 'by the way I'm gay!?'?"

Both agree that being open allows them to bring so much more to work. "This is a high-pressured job," says Ashley. "You have to be able to apply yourself 100% and provide a professional client service. It makes sense that in order to do that you have to be entirely comfortable with your identity and bring your true self to work."

Steven agrees. "To be a good lawyer you've got to be happy with yourself. It's sad to think of all the talent that was wasted in organisations in the past because people couldn't be themselves."

**Steven and Ashley both acknowledge that gay men in the profession are, perhaps, at an advantage to other members of the LGBT+ community as there are several senior and openly gay men in the A&O partnership who act as role models for younger people starting their careers.**

Both agree they feel a sense of responsibility to be allies, not just to others in the LGBT+ community, but to support more women and people from ethnic minority backgrounds to progress in their careers.

“The challenges you can face as a gay man tend to make you empathise more,” says Ashley. “Those soft skills are so important in our training – like being resilient and able to develop a rapport with people and build a network. What better networks do we have than with people in our own community?”

Both acknowledge that the struggle faced by trans people is more intense. That’s why, as Steven puts it: “As a gay person you’re in a position to be a good ally. I don’t know what it is like to be trans, but the journey for any LGBT+ person makes you more understanding and able to see beyond what’s skin deep.”

“With support from allies, attitudes towards gay men have come on leaps and bounds and we have to look back and make an effort to do the same for others. We have a duty to do that,” says Ashley.

It’s a point that makes Steven feel regret. “I have a slight sense of shame that I wasn’t more outspoken in the past. I hunkered down, for good reasons, but I’m not sure I was as strong as I could have been in pushing the equality agenda,” he says.

“I’m very aware that I am ‘standing on the shoulders of giants’ – people who were much braver than I was and who prepared the way for me and others to be open about who we are.”

**But Steven remembers many positive moments in his journey too.**

“I was born in a Yorkshire fishing village. When I go back there, people don’t care at all that I’m gay. They are much more worried about how much my accent has changed,” he laughs.

So what advice would he give to a young gay lawyer today?

“Don’t be ashamed. Be at ease with yourself. People are much less judgemental than you might expect. Just be good at what you do and people will respect you.”

For Ashley, it is very important not just to be out, but to be proud, and to support others in achieving the same.

Steven agrees: “Being from a different generation when things weren’t pushed so much to the fore, it’s impressive to see younger people achieving so much in their careers and being both out and proud.”

A&O's LGBT+ network, A&Out, is open to all staff and partners at Allen & Overy, as well as to our alumni.

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## GLOBAL PRESENCE

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Allen & Overy is an international legal practice with approximately 5,500 people, including some 550 partners, working in 44 offices worldwide.

Allen & Overy LLP or an affiliated undertaking has an office in each of:

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