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CORPORATE EQUALITY INDEX: A BENCHMARKING TOOL FOR LGBTQ WORKPLACE EQUALITY

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to present the Human Rights Campaign Foundation's Corporate Equality Index (CEI) as a benchmarking tool, for LGBTQ+ equality in the workplace. The analysis of the Index follows the four pillars, on which the rating system of the CEI is based: non-discrimination policies, equal benefits for the LGBTQ+ employees, organizational LGBTQ+ competency and public commitment. The evolution of the criteria during the years, the methodology, the rating system and the recent criteria of the CEI are presented, delving deeper into the analysis of its findings. These findings offer a list of "best practices", which could be used from organizations to foster LGBTQ+ inclusion in their workplaces, gaining a major advantage, towards their competitors. In order to highlight the benefits of implementing LGBTQ+ inclusive practices and policies in the workplace, a top-rated company in the CEI, for consecutive years since its launch, is presented. Concluding, the CEI could be used as a self-assessment tool for employers interested in fostering LGBTQ+ equality and inclusion. It could be a useful tool, providing LGBTQ+ inclusive "best practices". However, diversity and inclusion (D&I) issues in the workplace, should be conceptually expanding, because D&I are practically company-wide issues. It is also pointed out, that the CEI or other similar indexes are not a panacea for LGBTQ+ equality. The "voices" of the employees, working on awarded LGBTQ+ inclusive employers do matter and they should be taken seriously into account.

Keywords: Corporate Equality Index, CEI, LGBTQ+, diversity, inclusion, equality in the workplace, gay rights

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Introduction

Considering that most people spend the larger part of their lives working, an equal working environment should be granted for every employee. Saying “equal”, a focus on diversity and inclusion (D&I) in the workplace is implied, because both D&I practices set the basis for an inclusive work environment, for every single employee.

Begging with diversity, it has to do with visible & invisible characteristics (Moore, 1999; Morley, Moore, Heraty, Linehan, & MacCurtain, 2004), e.g. skin color is a visible characteristic of diversity; is subjective (Bechtoldt, De Dreu, & Nijstad, 2007), (people characterize others as similar or dissimilar), selective (some characteristics are stronger indicators of diversity in comparison to others), context dependant (individuals can characterized as different, only comparing to others) and relative (ambiguous) (Moore, 1999). Diversity is concerning the similarities and differences in such characteristics as age, gender, ethnic heritage, physical abilities and disabilities, race and sexual orientation among employees in the organizations (Griffin & Moorhead, 2006). Adding something to this definition, “gender identity” is another strong aspect of diversity, which should not be ignored.

Inclusion concerns how well organizations and their members fully connect with, engage and utilize people across all types of differences (Ferdman, 2013; O’Donovan, 2017). Individuals wish to be allowed to be themselves (O’Donovan, 2018) in every aspect or sector of their life, including the professional one. That’s why a diverse and inclusive workplace for every single employee does matter, in order for them to unleash their full potential. Due to Gasorek (2000), inclusion concerns the degree to which: employees and their ideas are valued, build successful partnerships in and across other departments, feel they fully belong to or attracted by the organization (candidates / future employees), feel committed to each other and to organization’s goals, are employed in a flexible and diverse workplace.

But why do organizations focus nowadays, so much on D&I or why D&I appear to be increasing in organizations? The benefits D&I have to offer to the workplace give the answer to this question. Cost savings (reducing turnover and absenteeism), winning the war talent (diverse and inclusive workplace attract talents), improvement of innovation and creativity, increased flexibility, more effective leadership, business growth (e.g. market expansion), increased employee commitment, confidence, morale and job

satisfaction are among the most important advantages D&I can offer to organizations (O'Donovan, 2017).

However, D&I are not a panacea for the businesses. While implementing D&I policies and practices organizations must beware of some challenges: increased costs (diversity programs aim to change the corporate culture take longer or sometimes fail), lack of senior management support (something totally necessary for the successful implementation of D&I practices and any other practice related to changes in the organizational culture), change and complexity, tension, group agendas (some groups believe that diversity is important only for their group not for the organization as a whole), reverse discrimination, tokenism (in order to fulfil quota numbers, less qualified employees are hired) (O'Donovan, 2017).

This paper focuses on D&I in organizations, regarding the LGBTQ employees. For more than 30 years now, the literature examines LGBT issues in the workplace, but the study of LGBT sexualities and genders is not very extensive (Eddy & Rumens, 2017). The research for LGBT workplace issues appears to be low compared to other marginalized groups (Ragins, 2004). Maher et al. (2009) defined three different phases, related to literature on LGBT issues in the workplace: early work (1800s-1972) with a focus on homosexuality as a disease; 2nd phase (1972-1990) pointing out negative attitudes towards homosexuality (e.g., homophobia, violence and discrimination against LGBTs); 3rd phase (post-1990) related to changing institutions to foster a positive workplace atmosphere. The recent trend is to examine how organizations could create work environments, that are LGBTQ inclusive (Everly & Schwarz, 2015; Köllen, 2013), turning the emphasis form anti-discrimination to the LGBTQ diversity in the workplace.

Regarding the discrimination towards LGBTQ people and their rights, although there have been significant steps forward (e.g. same-sex marriage, which is currently legal in 22 countries), the International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex Association (ILGA) reports that discrimination against LGBT individuals is still widespread. In the latest world survey of sexual orientation laws (ILGA, 2016), the ILGA highlights that homosexuality remains illegal in 73 criminalizing states, and of these, 13 states retain and in some cases apply the death penalty (Eddy & Rumens, 2017). In the US, LGBTQ workers did not have any form of employment protection in 28 states, which means any LGBTQ worker could be fired on the basis of sexual orientation (Eddy & Rumens,

2017). Across Europe, where LGBTQ individuals enjoy better employment protection, 1 out of 5 LGBTQ employees report that they experience discrimination during job interviews and at work (Catalyst, 2015).

Even if legislation is not always equally supportive for LGBTQ employees, an increasing number of employers have taken on the responsibility to provide equality provisions and benefits for their LGBT employees. They tend to surpass the legislation, implementing D&I practices, aiming to a fully diverse and inclusive workplace for their LGBTQ existent and future employees, enhancing their employer brand and their attractiveness as LGBTQ friendly organizations. Organizational research on LGBTQ workplace issues focuses exactly on how organizations confront the challenge of creating LGBTQ diverse workforces (Colgan, Wright, Creegan, & McKearney, 2009; Köllen, 2013). The implementation of D&I policies helps organizations improve, amongst other things, organizational productivity, increase corporate profits and earnings, enhance organizational problem-solving capabilities, and expand their market share (Garnero, Kampelmann & Rycx, 2014; Richard, 2000).

The aim of this paper is to present a benchmarking tool for workplace LGBTQ equality, the Human Rights Campaign Foundation's "Corparate Equality Index", which helps organizations create a working environment with no discrimination towards LGBTQ individuals. The CEI rates the workplaces on LGBTQ equality and supports companies to manage diversity, helping employees to flourish and at the same time helping companies make a difference towards their competitors. The CEI assess the corporate policies and practices of the American businesses, towards LGBTQ employees, consumers, suppliers and the community, awarding the top rated employers for their efforts to promote LGBTQ equality in the workplace and the society ("Best Places to Work for LGBTQ Equality").

Literature Review

Human Rights Campaign

The Human Rights Campaign Fund was founded in 1980, by Steve Endean, as one of the first gay and lesbian political committee in the US. 15 years after, in 1995, under Executive Director Elizabeth Birch, the organization expanded its reach far beyond political work and renamed to "Human Rights Campaign" (HRC) (Human Rights Campaing, n.d.)

Nowadays, the HRC is the largest civil rights organization in the US, working to achieve lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer (LGBTQ) equality (Human Rights Campaing, n.d.). It envisions a world without discrimination against LGBTQ people, a world where these people can be fully open, honest and safe, not only at home, but also in every community and workplace. By inspiring and engaging individuals, HRC aims to promote fundamental fairness and equality for all LGBTQ Americans (Human Rights Campaign n.d.). It currently represents a force of more than 3 million members and supporters in America and almost 30.000 followers on LinkedIn, a platform which is nowadays used a lot to address, promote, support LGBTQ equality in the workplace.

Corporate Equality Index 2018

The Corporate Equality Index (CEI) is the Human Rights Campaign Foundation's tool, to rate the corporate policies and practices of the American businesses, towards LGBTQ employees, consumers, suppliers and the community (Corporate Equality Index 2018, 2017). In other words CEI rates the workplaces on LGBTQ equality. It has been published annually since 2002 and it was originally modeled after the Gay and Lesbian Values Index, a rating system designed by Grant Lukenbill (Raeburn, 2004). In the 1st CEI, 13 businesses were awarded with a 100 percent rating, while in the latest edition (16th) of the CEI a record number of 609 businesses earned a top score of 100 percent. This fact depicts the keen interest of the American corporations in LGBTQ equality issues in the workplace. For the purposes of this thesis, the 16th edition of CEI (the latest one published) is used.

In the 2018 CEI report, having 609 major businesses of nearly every industry achieving a score of 100 percent and the distinction of "Best Places to Work for LGBTQ Equality", clearly shows that the vast majority of businesses in the US are substantially investing in LGBTQ totally inclusive work environments. They create and implement

non-discrimination policies, which allow their employees bring their real selves at work, every day. Furthermore, they practically take care of their transgender employees, ensuring equal protections under their non-discrimination policies, gender transition guidelines, and access to inclusive health care. This kind of culture transforms the top-scoring businesses to top-performing organizations and step by step LGBTQ diverse and inclusive workplaces are becoming the norm in the US (Corporate Equality Index 2018, 2017).

The CEI 2018 contains 65 new businesses that opted into the survey. It includes Fortune magazine's 500 largest publicly traded businesses, American Lawyer magazine's top 200 revenue-grossing law firms (AmLaw 200) and many others public and private mid- and large-sized businesses. The Fortune 1000 list of the largest publicly traded companies was invited to take part in the survey for 7th year in a row. All these businesses take concrete steps to ensure greater equity for LGBTQ employees and their families, with non-discrimination policies, benefits and practices (Corporate Equality Index 2018, 2017).

Regarding the equality in the Fortune ranked firms: 230 out of 500 Fortune ranked companies achieves 100% rating. 91% of the Fortune 500 include "sexual orientation" in their nondiscrimination policies and 83% include "gender identity." Over half of Fortune 500 companies offer transgender-inclusive health care benefits (Corporate Equality Index 2018, 2017).

Table 1: Top 20 Fortune Ranked Companies

14 of the Top 20 Fortune-Ranked Companies Received 100% Ratings

	Fortune1000	2018 CEI Score
Wal-Mart Stores Inc.	1	*
Exxon Mobil Corp.	2	95
Apple Inc.	3	100
Berkshire Hathaway Inc.	4	20
McKesson Corp.	5	100
UnitedHealth Group Inc.	6	95
CVS Health Corp.	7	100
General Motors Co.	8	100
Ford Motor Co.	9	100
AT&T Inc.	10	100
General Electric Co.	11	100
AmerisourceBergen Corp.	12	100
Verizon Communications Inc.	13	100
Chevron Corp.	14	100
Costco Wholesale Corp.	15	70
Federal National Mortgage Association (Fannie Mae)	16	100
Kroger Co., The	17	95
Amazon.com Inc.	18	100
Walgreen Co.	19	100
HP Inc.	20	100

* During the CEI survey cycle, two Equal Employment Opportunity Commission determinations were made public in the cases of Jessica Robison (**EEOC Charge Number 511-2015-01402**) and Charlene Bost (**EEOC Charge Number 430-2014-01900**). These determinations pointed to significant enforcement gaps in Wal-Mart's non-discrimination policy, specifically with regards to sex and gender identity. Pending remedial steps by the company, the CEI rating is suspended.

Source: (Corporate Equality Index 2018, 2017)

Similar Indexes do also exist in Europe, because diversity and inclusion issues in the workplace are topics of great interest for companies worldwide. One of the most well-known European LGBTQ Indexes is the Stonewall's "Workplace Equality Index", which includes UK businesses and the "Global Workplace Equality Index", where multinational organizations participate.

Stonewall Workplace Equality Index

Stonewall was founded as an LGBT rights charity in 1989, by a small group of people who were fighting against Section 28 of the Local Government Act. Section 28 was an offensive piece of legislation designed to prevent the 'promotion' of homosexuality at school, stigmatizing LGBT people and galvanizing the LGBT community in general. Stonewall put the LGBT equality issues in the political foreground, gaining support and recognition from the political parties. Nowadays, it is based in London and has offices in England, Scotland and Wales, being the largest LGBT rights organization not only in the UK, but also in the whole Europe. Stonewall's funds are raised through donations, sponsoring, or fundraising events, because it doesn't receive government funding. It is a member of the Equality and Diversity Forum, a network of organizations aiming to progress on age, disability, gender, race, religion and belief and sexual orientation issues (Stonewall, n.d.).

Stonewall's key priorities are the empowerment of individuals, the transformation of institutions, the change in hearts and minds and of course the change in the legislation system. More specifically they support LGBT people to have a substantial impact and make the difference at work, home and in the community. They transform organizations, creating an inclusive and accepting culture, helping them practically understand the benefits, which bring the LGBT people in the workplace. Furthermore, in order for the LGBT people to fully participate in the society, they help LGBT role models and allies to be visible and "present" in the public life. Last but not least, one of their major goals is lobby government to change laws, which are unequal for LGBT people (Stonewall, n.d.).

Disciplined on its mission, Stonewall publishes annually its Workplace Equality Index, a ranking of the top 100 employers for LBGT employees. The index was first launched in 2005 and till today is the UK's leading benchmarking tool for LGBT inclusion in the workplace. In order for the companies to enter the index, need to cover with evidence

10 different areas of practice, from policy to community engagement. At the same time, Stonewall collects feedback from employees through a survey, covering key indicators of workplace culture. Submissions are assessed by the Stonewall experts and then ranked. The 100 organizations with the highest ranking are defined as "Top 100 Employers for LGBT people", as "Diversity Champions" (Stonewall, 2018). What is really valuable for the organizations is the in-depth consultative feedback they receive, to plan their year ahead and further develop inclusive workplaces across UK. Furthermore, it is remarkable that the participation is free and is a unique opportunity for the companies to improve their performance, towards other organizations of even competitors. In the Workplace Equality Index 2018 were participated 430 organizations across a range of sectors (Workplace Equality Index, 2018).

Additional to the Workplace Equality Index, Stonewall developed the "Global Workplace Equality Index". Multinational organizations have the chance to participate completely free, assessing their progress on LGBT inclusion across all operational countries. In other words, they can evaluate their efforts towards LGBT employees not only in the UK, but also worldwide (Stonewall, 2018).

Each organization should support with evidence its performance against a set of best practice criteria, which are split across nine different areas of employment policy and practice, examining both global working structures and the local activity:

- Section 1: Employee policy
- Section 2: Training
- Section 3: Staff engagement
- Section 4: Leadership
- Section 5: Monitoring
- Section 6: Procurement
- Section 7: Community engagement and understanding local context
- Section 8: Global mobility
- Section 9: Additional in-country activity

(Stonewall, 2018).

High-performing organizations win the title of "Top Global Employers" and receive in-depth tailored feedback from Stonwall's experts (Stonewall, 2018).

In order for the best practice criteria to be completely clear, it is important to have a look in the findings or better in the statistics of the survey:

- 96% of entrants have one or more global senior champions for LGBT equality
- 88% of entrants have a global team or position working on LGBT diversity and inclusion
- 88% of entrants have a global LGBT network group for LGBT staff
- 84% of entrants have consulted in-country human rights organisations to understand the local context for LGBT people
- 84% of entrants promote themselves as being LGBT-inclusive on their global websites or social media platforms
- 68% of entrants have a global allies program
- 56% of entrants have senior leaders who advocated externally for legal equality for LGBT people in partnership with local LGBT groups
- 48% of entrants have policies that protect LGBT staff from discrimination across global operations
- 32% of entrants offer LGBT-inclusive training in all operational countries. A further 40% offered such training in some operational countries
- 16% of entrants have a transitioning at work policy covering more than half of their countries of operation and including information for the transitioning individual, their manager and colleagues
- 16% of entrants have partnered with local LGBT groups in more than half of their operational countries

(Top 100 Employers 2018, 2018)

The data depict that the organizations do take the needs and interests of their LGBTQ diverse workforce seriously (Eddy & Rumens, 2017). As it is mentioned in the 2017 Stonewall's Top Employers report "We work with over 700 employers who recognize that creating an inclusive workplace is not only the right thing to do, but is also crucial to their success" (Stonewall, 2017, p. 3).

The Human Rights Campaign Foundation's CEI and the Stonewall's Workplace Equality Index are the most famous Indexes in the US and in Europe respectively. It is obvious that Stonewall's Index assesses similar criteria with HRC's Index, like the non-discrimination policies, employee benefits, community engagement and public commitment, organizational efficiency etc. These are actually the four pillars, on which

the CEI rating is based. For the purpose of this thesis the CEI have been chosen, because its methodology and rating criteria are more clear and detailed, all companies (and not only the awarded ones) are presenting, so there is a high level of transparency, (this matches to the US business mentality), in the US D&I issues in the workplace have a long history and many trends arise from there, having an influence on the businesses worldwide.

The evolution of the CEI criteria

The HRC Foundation maintains a rigorous, fair, attainable and transparent rating system. It continually examines the rating criteria and when needed changes or adapts them. Changes to the CEI criteria are necessary because:

- The landscape of legal protections for LGBTQ employees and their families changes, both federally and from state to state
- Best practices need to be implemented, which meet the needs of LGBTQ employees and ensure that LGBTQ people are treated fairly in every workplace and organizational environment

(Corporate Equality Index 2018, 2017)

Table 2: History of the CEI criteria changes and adaptations

History of CEI Criteria Changes	2002	2004	2009	2014
	The first CEI rated employers strictly on seven criteria that remain the basis for today's scoring system. The original criteria were guided in part by the Equality Principles, 10 touch points for businesses demonstrating their commitment to equal treatment of employees, consumers and investors, irrespective of their sexual orientation and gender identity or expression.	The HRC Foundation released the second version of the criteria, with greater weight given to comprehensive domestic partner benefits and to transgender-inclusive health care coverage options. **These criteria went into effect in 2006 and remained in effect through 2010** (for the CEI 2011 report).	The HRC Foundation announced the third version of the criteria, with comprehensive requirements for partner benefits, transgender-inclusive benefits, organizational competency on LGBTQ issues and employers' public commitment to equality for the broader LGBTQ community. **These criteria went into effect in 2011** (for the CEI 2012 report).	The HRC Foundation announced new criteria requirements in place for the 2017 CEI. All of the changes stem from one guiding principle: that discrimination has no place in a top-rated CEI business. For a 100 percent in the 2017 Corporate Equality Index report, businesses must: • Have sexual orientation and gender identity non-discrimination protections explicitly included in all of its operations, both within the U.S. and global operations. • Require U.S. contractors to abide by companies' existing inclusive non-discrimination policy. • Implement internal requirements prohibiting U.S. company/ law firm philanthropic giving to nonreligious organizations that have a written policy of discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation and gender identity.

Source: Corporate Equality Index 2018, 2017

Following the history of criteria changes and while CEI 2019 is in progress, an overview of the criteria changes in the following edition of CEI (2019) is presented.

Domestic Partner Benefits: The parity principle

Marriage equality is undoubtedly a monumental step towards full equality, but LGBTQ individuals remain at risk for discrimination in many other sectors of their life. A lot of discrimination exists against LGBTQ individuals in employment, housing, and access to public places, federal funding, credit, education, jury services etc. Until LGBTQ Americans have full equality through the Equality Act, the CEI will continuously try to fill the gap of federal and state law, better serving the U.S. human resources (Corporate Equality Index 2018, 2017).

CEI 2019: In the name of parity and partnership, employers must offer both same- and opposite-sex partner benefits, in order to achieve a top score. The CEI looks beyond the law to actual best practices for LGBTQ employees and their families (Corporate Equality Index 2018, 2017).

Transgender - Inclusive Benefits: Removal of all Exclusions and Affirming Comprehensive Coverage

CEI 2018: HRC's legal analysis on transgender health care coverage require that any procedure offered to a cisgender individual must also be offered to a transgender or transitioning individual, without exclusion (Corporate Equality Index 2018, 2017).

CEI 2019: Any blanket exclusion for transition-related care must be eliminated (i.e. conform to the law) and explicit affirmation of coverage is required to retain a high score (Corporate Equality Index 2018, 2017).

Supplier Diversity: Aligning LGBTQ with Other Diverse Business Segments

CEI 2018: Employers will continue earning credits for having an LGBTQ supplier diversity program (public engagement) (Corporate Equality Index 2018, 2017).

CEI 2019: Employers with a supplier diversity program must include LGBTQ suppliers to maintain high score. Employers, who implement a supplier diversity program, without ensuring LGBTQ diversity, loose points (Corporate Equality Index 2018, 2017).

Rating System & Methodology

The HRC Foundation's CEI rating system is designed for mid- to large-sized businesses, with 500 full time employees and above. The CEI's framework is based on parity rather than prescription. It promotes the adoption of LGBTQ-specific practices and language within existing business contexts. Through the CEI, businesses can compare their level of LGBTQ workplace inclusion, with the level of their competitors (Corporate Equality Index 2018, 2017).

The CEI Rating system is based in four pillars:

- Non-discrimination policies across business entities
- Equitable benefits for LGBTQ workers and their families
- Internal education and accountability metrics to promote LGBTQ inclusion competency
- Public commitment to LGBTQ equality

An additional, supporting pillar (5) is that the businesses must not have any kind of involvement with anti-LGBT organizations or activity. (Corporate Equality Index 2018, 2017)

What Businesses are rated

The largest and most successful U.S. employers are invited to participate in the CEI. More specifically are invited:

- Fortune magazine's 1,000 largest publicly traded businesses (2016 Fortune 1000)
- American Lawyer magazine's top 200 revenue grossing law firms (2016 AmLaw 200).
- Any private-sector, for-profit employer with 500 or more full-time U.S. employees can request to participate (Corporate Equality Index 2018, 2017)

How the survey data is collected

The web-based CEI survey is sent every year to previous and prospective participants. HRC provides consultation, advisory, assistance during the process and reviews the submitted material. Invitations for the CEI 2018 survey were emailed and mailed in May 2017 and the deadline for the responses was in August 2017. In addition to the

self-reporting provided through the CEI survey, HRC investigates and cross-checks the policies and practices of the businesses, any connections with organizations with anti-LGBTQ activity and possible efforts that undermine LGBTQ equality. If a business has any kind of involvement with anti-LGBTQ organization or activity, the HRC Foundation contacts the business and provides an opportunity to respond and ensure, that no such action would occur in the future and to mitigate the harm done. If a business will not do so, it is penalized 25 points (Corporate Equality Index 2018, 2017).

Official and unofficial ratings

The HRC Foundation may rate businesses that have not submitted a survey this year, if the business had submitted one in previous years and the information is still accurate, or if the HRC Foundation has collected sufficient information to form an individual rating. 2205 organizations received an official invitation to take part in the survey. The CEI 2018 officially rated: 344 Fortune 500 businesses, 104 Fortune 1000 businesses, 160 law firms, 339 additional major businesses. In total, 947 businesses are officially rated, in the 16th edition of the CEI. Additionally, 137 Fortune 500 businesses have rated unofficially, bringing the total to 1,084 rated businesses (Corporate Equality Index 2018, 2017).

How ratings are used

The CEI results are available online for everyone, but more specifically aimed at LGBTQ and allied consumers, employers, shareholders and employees.

- "HRC Foundation Employer Search" is a free online database of thousands of private and public sector U.S. employers
- "Workplace Equality 2018" is a consumer-oriented guide based on the CEI ratings. The guide is distributed in the beginning of the winter holiday and shopping season, online via apps, to thousand LGBTQ consumers. According to Witeck Communications, the buying power of the US LGBTQ adult population for 2016 was estimated at $971 billion. It is quite obvious, why it is important of the businesses not only to participate in the survey, but also to gain a high position on the list. The CEI results can influence the behavior of thousands LGBTQ consumers and allies.
- If a business collects the highest score of 100 points, it is named a "*Best Place to Work for LGBTQ Equality*". High rated businesses can use the relevant logo in

their Talent Acquisition & Employer Branding efforts, as well as in their internal HR Marketing activities, which aim to enhance the image of the employer, as an LGBTQ diverse and inclusive workplace.

(Corporate Equality Index 2018, 2017)

CEI criteria 2018

The CEI rating criteria have four key pillars:

- Non-discrimination policies across business entities
- Equitable benefits for LGBTQ workers and their families
- Internal education and accountability metrics to promote LGBTQ inclusion competency
- Public commitment to LGBTQ equality

(Corporate Equality Index 2018, 2017)

Table 3: Overview of the CEI 2018 Rating Criteria

Criteria		**Points**
Equal Employment Opportunity policies		
1a.	Prohibits Discrimination Based on Sexual Orientation for All Operations	15
1b.	Prohibits Discrimination Based on Gender Identity or Expression for All Operations	15
1c.	Has Contractor/Vendor Non-Discrimination Standards that Include Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity	5
Employment Benefits		
2a.	Offers Equivalent Spousal and Partner Medical Benefits	10
2b.	Parity Across Spousal and Partner "Soft" Benefits (half credit for parity across some, but not all benefits)	10
2c.	Offers Transgender-Inclusive Health Insurance Coverage	10
Organizational LGBTQ competency		
3a.	Firm-wide Organizational Competency Programs	10
3b.	Has Employer-Supported Employee Resource Group OR Firm-Wide Diversity Council Would Support ERG if Employees Express Interest (half credit)	10

Public commitment		
4.	Positively Engages the External LGBTQ Community (partial credit of 10 points given for less than 3 efforts) Have internal guidelines that prohibit philanthropic giving to non-religious organizations with an explicit policy of discrimination against LGBTQ people (5 points)	15
Anti-LGBT activity		
5.	Employers will have 25 points deducted from their score for a large-scale official or public anti-LGBTQ blemish on their recent records	

Source: (Corporate Equality Index 2018, 2017)

Criterion 1. Equal employment opportunity policy

Employers should prohibit discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity in all operations, as well as in their contractor/vendor standards (Corporate Equality Index 2018, 2017).

Criterion 2. Employment benefits

Employers should provide equivalent spousal and partner (medical) benefits, as well as "soft" benefits – includes parity between employer-sponsored benefits for opposite-sex spouses and same-sex partners or spouses (e.g. bereavement leave, relocation/travel assistance, cash balance, retiree health care benefits etc.). They must ensure equal health coverage for transgender individuals, without exclusions, including services related to gender transition (e.g. sex affirmation/ reassignment) (Corporate Equality Index 2018, 2017).

Criterion 3. Organizational LGBTQ competency

Organizations must ensure a commitment to diversity and cultural competency, implementing at least 3 of the following elements:

- New hire training mentions that non-discrimination policy includes sexual orientation and gender identity
- Supervisors training that includes sexual orientation and gender identity as discrete topics

- Integration of sexual orientation and gender identity in professional development, or other leadership training
- Senior management/executive performance measures include LGBTQ diversity metrics
- Gender transition guidelines with supportive restroom/ facilities, dress code etc.
- Anonymous employee engagement or climate surveys conducted on an annual or biennial basis allow employees the option to identify as LGBTQ
- Data collection forms that include employee race, ethnicity, gender, military and disability status, include optional questions on sexual orientation and gender identity

(Corporate Equality Index 2018, 2017)

Furthermore, the existence of an employee group or diversity council is required, in order for the organizational LGBTQ competency to be complete (Corporate Equality Index 2018, 2017).

Criterion 4. Public commitment

Organizations must demonstrate LGBTQ-specific efforts that extends across the firm, including at least three of the following: recruiting, supplier diversity, marketing or advertising, philanthropy or public support for LGBTQ equality under the law and have internal guidelines that prohibit philanthropic giving to non-religious organizations with an explicit policy of discrimination against LGBTQ people (Corporate Equality Index 2018, 2017).

Criterion 5

If it is found, that if a business is involved in any kind of anti-LGBTQ activity or organization, it will lose 25 points. The firm is obliged to prove, that no such action would occur again and to mitigate the harm done (Corporate Equality Index 2018, 2017).

Findings

Table 4: Findings of the CEI 2018

Criteria		**Findings**
Equal Employment Opportunity policies		
1a.	Businesses That Prohibit Discrimination Based on Sexual Orientation in U.S. and Global Operations	**95%** of CEI-rated employers provide employment protections on the basis of sexual orientation in the U.S. and globally.
1b.	Businesses That Prohibit Discrimination Based on Gender Identity in U.S. and Global Operations	**93%** of CEI-rated employers provide employment protections on the basis of gender identity in the U.S. and globally. This criterion has seen the most rapid growth of any other element of the CEI.
1c.	Businesses That Prohibit Discrimination Based on Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity in their Contractor/Vendor standards	**94%** of CEI-rated employers require that their suppliers abide by a non-discrimination policy that is inclusive of sexual orientation and gender identity
Employment Benefits		
2a.	Offers Equivalent Spousal and Partner Medical Benefits	**82%** of CEI-rated businesses offer domestic partner benefits and of those, **89%** extend these benefits to all partners, irrespective of the gender of the partner.
2b.	Parity Across Spousal and Partner "Soft" Benefits (half credit for parity across some, but not all benefits)	
2c.	Businesses That Offer at Least One Transgender-Inclusive Health Care Plan	**79%** of CEI-rated employers afford transgender-inclusive health care coverage options through at least one firm-wide plan. This coverage includes: short-term leave, counseling by a mental health professional, hormone therapy, medical visits to monitor hormone therapy and surgical procedures
Organizational LGBTQ competency		
3a.	Competency Training, Metrics, Resources or Accountability Measures	**83%** of CEI-rated employers offer a robust set of practices to support

		organizational LGBTQ diversity competency
3b.	LGBTQ/Allies Employee Groups and Diversity Councils	**89%** of CEI-rated employers have an employee resource group or diversity council that includes LGBTQ and allied employees and programming
Public commitment		
4.	Businesses That Positively Engage the External LGBTQ Community	**72%** of CEI-rated businesses met the standard of demonstrating at least three efforts of public commitment to the LGBTQ community – marketing, advertising and recruitment efforts, philanthropic contributions to LGBTQ organizations, LGBTQ diverse supplier initiatives and public policy weigh-in – AND have inclusive philanthropic giving guidelines.
Anti-LGBT activity		
5.	Employers will have 25 points deducted from their score for a large-scale official or public anti-LGBTQ blemish on their recent records	

Non-discrimination policies

One of the most fundamental steps for a firm to become more inclusive of LGBTQ employees is the implementation of an equal opportunity/non-discrimination policy, which covers sexual orientation and gender identity as protected characteristics. As a result, many employers in their effort to create and implement fully inclusive policies and practices in their workplaces, practically cover the gaps, the legislation often creates (Corporate Equality Index 2018, 2017).

Furthermore, 59% of CEI-rated employers operate outside US and 98% of them have fully inclusive, globally applicable non-discrimination policies and codes of conduct. This means, that businesses implement their LGBTQ inclusive policies, even in

countries, where the legislation is almost nonexistent, with regard to LGBTQ protection policies (Corporate Equality Index 2018, 2017).

However, despite the anti-discrimination organizational policies, LGBTQ workers still experience mistreatment and harassment, e.g. bullying or micro-aggressions (Galupo & Resnick, 2016; Pizer, Sears, Mallory, & Hunter, 2011). Many LGBTQ workers put up with gay jokes for fear of losing connections or relationships with their coworkers (Catalyst, 2015; Fidas & Cooper, 2015). Meyer (2003) mentions that stigma, prejudice, and discrimination can create a hostile and stressful social environment that causes mental health problems. It is obvious that even though the CEI top rated companies try to create ideal conditions of equality in the workplace, the corporate initiative itself is not enough.

Equal Benefits

If businesses want to attract and retain talent, they should have a competitive benefits' policy, fully including LGBTQ employees and their families**.** LGBTQ-inclusive benefits is an overall low-cost, high-return proposition for businesses. The HRC Foundation does not penalize an employer if a particular benefit is not offered, but holds employers accountable to provide equal benefits to LGBTQ employees and their families. In other words, all of the benefits extended to employees with a partner or spouse of an opposite sex must be extended to same-sex partners and spouses, as well. While there is no legal obligation to provide domestic partner benefits, businesses try to cover employees and their families as a function of their own needs in serving a diverse workforce (Corporate Equality Index 2018, 2017).

Regarding the benefits for transgender employees, in order for a business to have top rating of 100%, needs to address the problem of transgender exclusion in coverage and fully affirm health care coverage for medically necessary transition-related care and other routine and chronic conditions (Corporate Equality Index 2018, 2017).

Organizational LGBTQ competency

After consolidating diverse and inclusive policies and guidelines, businesses need to implement additional programs and educational schemes to enhance a culture of inclusiveness without discrimination (Corporate Equality Index 2018, 2017).

Gender Transition Guidelines

Having understandable and accessible guidelines set the basis for a respectful and successful workplace transition. A number of 459 employers submitted gender transition guidelines, the vast majority of which were adopted from the HRC Foundation's template guidelines (Corporate Equality Index 2018, 2017).

Diversity Training and Educational Programs

88% of businesses offer inclusive diversity training. Diversity training, educational programs, managerial and leadership training are essential to employee onboarding (Corporate Equality Index 2018, 2017).

The primary role of diversity training is to:

- Promote workplace harmony
- Assist individuals in learning about the values of others
- Improve cross-cultural communication
- Develop leadership skills
- Aid in employee retention

(Lockwood, 2005)

There are two primary diversity training: awareness based training and skills based training (Carnevale & Stone, 1994). The aim of awareness based training is to heighten awareness of diversity, by providing employees and managers with information about diversity, strengthening the sensitivity to diversity, uncovering assumptions and biases, assessing current attitudes and values, correcting stereotypes and myths, fostering group and individual sharing (O'Donovan, 2018). Skills based training is primarily focused on behavior, providing tools to promote effective interaction in a diverse organization (Carnevale & Stone, 1994). Furthermore, a training program focused on both similarities and differences among individuals, can be more useful with regard to enabling individuals to leverage similarities and differences to enhance creativity (Holladay & Quiñones, 2008). Focusing not just on differences, but also on similarities assists in increasing understanding and group harmony, enhancing the employees' perceptions of a shared sense of purpose (O'Donovan, 2018). Last but not least, the support and investment of top leadership and top management in diversity policies in

general and in the diveristy training in particular is crucial to its success (Nancherla, 2008).

Counting LBGTQ Employees: Optional Self- Identification Questions

49% of businesses offer question options to their employees to voluntarily disclose their sexual orientation and gender identity in the workplace, though anonymous surveys or confidential HR records. The firms use them to track the progress of their LGBTQ inclusion efforts. Moreover, anonymous workplace climate surveys can be valuable source of information for the engagement measures and their reach across the workforce (Corporate Equality Index 2018, 2017).

Although there are even more LGBTQ individuals and role models who are out in the workplace, the number of "out" senior LGBTQ leaders is quite small (Eddy & Rumens, 2017). Coming out and sharing personal and sensitive information could be risky, but it can lead to greater trust in a leader. As a result, LGBTQ leaders can develop trust with their followers by taking steps to disclose their sexual orientation, rather than waiting for their followers to discover this themselves or through other sources (Bowring, 2009). Apart from the self-identification questions an organization could offer in order to help LGBTQ employees to disclose their sexual orientation, the personal attitude towards this issues plays a crucial role on how a LGBTQ employee is perceived from others is the workplace.

Senior Leadership Metrics of Inclusion

44% of businesses allow senior leaders to submit LGBTQ-focused diversity efforts, as part of their annual review of contributions to organizational diversity and inclusion goals. By holding their senior leaders accountable, businesses are substantially raising awareness around diversity and inclusion in the organization (Corporate Equality Index 2018, 2017).

However, most employees do need some direction to what the diverse and inclusive policies mean in their workplaces (Corporate Equality Index 2018, 2017). Many organizations for instance, ask from their managers to deliver diversity strategies, but they do not receiving the necessary training or support to do so (Monks, 2007). As a

result managers may be more reactive, concentrating on minimal compliance, rather than being proactive, concentrating on possible positive outcomes (O'Donovan, 2018). One method by which management commitment can be secured is to involve managers in the diversity management planning process, giving them ownership of diversity goals (Carnevale & Stone, 1994), even if many executives may be unsure of why they should learn how to manage diversity (Thomas, 1990). This may be as a result of an issue defined as Diversity Blindness (Moore, 1999), which does not consider diversity an issue that must be addressed, resulting in diversity being underestimated or even ignored.

LGBTQ/Allies Employee Groups and Diversity Councils

The role of employee resource groups is crucial for an employer, on its efforts to be fully inclusive. LGBTQ employee groups foster the visibility of diverse workforce in the business. Through these groups LGBTQ employees can be "out" and "bold", making their presence felt in the workplace, acting like change agents for the whole business. In order for the employees to really experience inclusion, they have to be networked, involved, and be a part of the decision-making process (Barak, 2016). Furthermore, the employee resource groups give to LGBTQ employees and allies the chance to form their own networks, helping business pursue their corporate goals. At the same time these businesses have a competitive advantage towards their competitors, because they attract and retain diverse talents, due to the inclusive culture they maintain (Corporate Equality Index 2018, 2017).

Of those CEI-rated companies with an officially recognized LGBTQ employee group, 97% reported being expressly for LGBTQ and allied employees. ERGs have embraced allies as members of the full LGBTQ community, as allies bring their own unique voice to workplace equality (Corporate Equality Index 2018, 2017). Evidence claim that as the number of allies grows, the support for LGBTQ rights also increases (Lewis & Gossett, 2008; Lewis, 2011). LGBTQ groups in the business world, as well as in the real world, need their supporters and the role of straight supporters (heteronormativity) could be very helpful. Being obvious that LGBTQ employee groups have straight allies and supporters, helps LGBTQ employees feel included, bringing their real selves at work.

Furthermore, 97% of employee groups rated in the CEI are sponsored by an executive champion. The majority of executive champions identify as allies and 38% of them are openly LGBTQ. This percentage depicts that a lot of work should be done, regarding the coming out of employees, especially of the executive ones in the workplace (Corporate Equality Index 2018, 2017).

Public Commitment

Promoting business growth through visibility

Public commitment of the CEI businesses has been measured through individual engagements, like marketing, advertising and recruitment efforts, philanthropic contributions, LGBTQ supplier diversity and public policy weigh-in (Corporate Equality Index 2018, 2017).

Many CEI rated employers attend professional events like the annual "Out & Equal Workplace Summit", "Lavender Law" conference and "Reaching Out" MBA career expo etc. aiming to attract diverse talent, because they know that diversity will offer them the innovation they need, in order to pursue the corporate goals (Corporate Equality Index 2018, 2017).

Supporting though philanthropy

Financial support or donations of products or services can enhance a business's profile in the LGBTQ community. These efforts are usually part of the strategic corporate goals and depict the culture, mission and vision of the firm (Corporate Equality Index 2018, 2017).

Corporate Giving Guidelines

A top-rated business must prohibit philanthropic help to non-religious organizations that have a written policy of discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation and gender identity or have a policy permitting its own chapters, affiliates, etc. to discriminate (Corporate Equality Index 2018, 2017).

Supplier Chain Management

Supplier diversity programs ensure that the supply chain process includes opportunities for minority-owned businesses e.g. women-owned, veteran-owned and, more recently, LGBTQ-owned businesses. Supplier diversity initiatives are a win-win relationship for both the LGBTQ-owned businesses and the businesses that contract them. The benefits for these businesses are multiple, including a supply chain that better reflects the diverse communities, where they operate, and in turn ensuring innovation and growth (Corporate Equality Index 2018, 2017).

Business for Equality in Public Policy

During the state legislative sessions in 2017, over 130 anti-LGBTQ bills proliferated across the states. In turn, businesses spoke out and rebuked attempts to undermine LGBTQ civil rights at record rates (Corporate Equality Index 2018, 2017).

HRC's Business Coalition for the Equality Act is a group of over 100 leading U.S. employers that support the Equality Act, a federal legislation that would provide the same basic protections to LGBTQ people as are provided to other protected groups under federal law (Corporate Equality Index 2018, 2017).

A best employer to work for LGBTQ equality

In the 2018 CEI report, 609 major businesses of every industry achieved a score of 100 percent and the distinction of "Best Places to Work for LGBTQ Equality". Following the presentation and analysis of the findings of the CEI, a best employer to work for LGBTQ equality, is presented, trying to delve deeper into the policies and practices it implements for its LGBTQ employees and the society in general. The Coca-Cola Co. is a global player, a leading employer in the food and beverage industry worldwide, having a score of 100 percent on the CEI every year since its launch in 2006. The Coca-Cola Company has a long history, regarding the protection of employees from discrimination based on sexual orientation, gender identity and expression. This commitment manifests itself in its brands' advertisements, as well as 1in its daily operations (Staff, 2018).

Coca-Cola's Diversity and inclusion

Respect for human rights is a core component of the business. The latest version of the company's Human Rights Policy was launched on 11 December 2017, based on 12 pillars:

- Respect for Human Rights
- Community and Stakeholder Engagement
- Diversity and Inclusion
- Freedom of Association and Collective Bargaining
- Safe and Healthy Workplace
- Workplace Security
- Forced Labor and Human Trafficking
- Child Labor
- Work Hours, Wages and Benefits
- Land Rights and Water Resources
- Healthy Lifestyles
- Guidance and Reporting for Employees

(The Coca-Cola Company, n.d.)

Company supports, that each employee is responsible to maintain a work environment that reflects respect for human rights, free from discrimination and harassment (The Coca-Cola Company, n.d.).

The Human Rights Policy and Supplier Guiding Principles set a strong basis for managing company's operations not only in the headquarters, but also around the globe. As they characteristically mention in their website, they "embrace the brand promise to promote inclusion, celebrate diversity and champion equality", fostering their future growth and promoting creativity and innovation (The Coca-Cola Company, 2018).

Their diversity and inclusion strategy is being built on four pillars: Workplace, Marketplace, Community and Partners, aiming to attract, develop, engage and retain a global talent mix that will foster high-performance growth culture. In order to pursue this goal, they share diversity and inclusion metrics across the global workforce, highlighting progress. They look at the full spectrum of diversity with an inclusive mindset, including gender, ethnicity, age, ability, sexual orientation, gender identity, military service, nationality and religion (The Coca-Cola Company, 2018)

Some of the diversity and inclusion practices the company implements are mentioned below. They have Diversity Advisory Councils and Business Resource Groups (BRGs) with more than 7,000 members globally. Through the BRGs they shape a fully inclusive culture, advancing diverse talent and serving as a hub for fresh ideas. In 2017, they conducted the first diversity and inclusion system assessment. Nine of our largest bottlers provided information about diversity strategies, programs, initiatives and metrics, sharing best practices and supporting one another in diversity and inclusion efforts (The Coca-Cola Company, 2018). Beginning from 2015 to 2017 they proactively engaged approx. 180 experts, conducting workshops related to diversity an inclusion.

They actively support supplier diversity, by spending approximately $650-700 million with diverse suppliers in 2017, contributing to their commitment to spend $1 billion by 2020. Through their Supplier Training & Empowerment Program (STEP), they help women-owned suppliers stay competitive and grow their businesses. (The Coca-Cola Company, 2018)

They implement diversity education programs, including Diversity Training, a Diversity Speaker Series and a Diversity Library. In 2017, a new parental benefits policy implemented, whereby 6 weeks of paid leave extended not only to all new mothers, but also to fathers. The move was championed by 'Coca-Cola Millennial Voices', a group of young employees, which is responsible to ensure that there is a healthy level of employee retention in millennial consumers and staff members (McSweeney, 2016).

With regard to public commitment, which is the 4th pillars of the CEI rating system, the company demonstrated support for diversity and inclusion in 2017, by signing onto the CEO Action for Diversity Inclusion Pledge and Catalyst CEO Champions for Change Pledge. (The Coca-Cola Company, 2018)

Coca-Cola's LGBT Diversity and Inclusion

But, what are actually the Coca-Cola's milestones, with regard to LGBTQ diversity and inclusion? The following paragraphs present some important corporate policies and practices used by the Coca-Cola Company, in order to foster LGBTQ inclusion.

Non-discrimination policy

First and foremost, the Coca-Cola Company has long protected employees from any kind of discrimination, based on sexual orientation and gender identity, and it has a perfect score on the CEI, every year since its launch in 2006.

Coca Cola was among some of the early leaders, embracing gay rights and being a leading employer on its field has influenced many other business, towards the LGBTQ equality. Other companies followed Coca-Cola's example, in order to remain competitive in their efforts to attract and retain talent. (Kell, 2016). Furthermore, it was a member of HRC's Business Coalition for Equality, formed to support the Equality Act. The Act would establish explicit, permanent protections against discrimination, based on sexual orientation or gender identity in employment, housing, public access, federal funding, education etc (Advocate, 2017).

Equal benefits

The company does implement an equal, non-discriminatory benefits policy, offer equal benefits to all the employees. A milestone for the business was that in 2011, it began offering transgender-inclusive health insurance coverage. In 2015, it began assisting with the costs of taxes imposed on eligible U.S. employees, whose same-sex spouse or partner was enrolled in health benefits and who lived in states, where the same sex marriage is not recognized (Jackson, 2018; Staff, 2018).

Organizational LGBTQ competency

Coca-Cola has been on the forefront of ensuring equality for its LGBTQ employees and stakeholders. Apart from the above mentioned measures (Human Rights Policy, Diversity & Inclusion Strategy, Diversity Advisory Councils, metrics, workshops, education programs, supplier diversity etc.), that promote LGBTQ competency, the company has an active LGBTQA Business Resource Group (BRG) in operation for almost 15 years (Staff, 2018).

Public Commitment

As already mentioned, Coca-Cola was also one of the first companies in the U.S., supporting the Employment Non-Discrimination Act and it stood along 379 businesses in supporting the marriage equality. Moreover, in partnership with local and national LGBTQ organizations, Coca-Cola launched the "Next Generation LGBTQ Leaders' Initiative". It is a program designed to connect, educate and inspire young LGBTQ leaders to advance the community across all sectors (Staff, 2018).

HIV / AIDS policy

In 2008, Coca-Cola launched a Global HIV/AIDS Policy, which outlines the company's principles on confidentiality, non-discrimination, education, testing, treatment and reasonable accommodation. It is guided by international standards including the International Labor Organization's code of practice on HIV/AIDS and the world of work, and the Joint United Nations Program on HIV/AIDS. It is mentioned as a company's LGBTQ milestone, because the HIV is a huge issue for the LGBTQ community itself. It is impressive having a company, trying to create global HIV awareness, among their employees (The Coca-Cola Company, n.d.).

LGBTQ equality, a company-wide issue

Taking into account the above mentioned policies, it is obvious that LGBTQ equality and inclusion is a company-wide issue for the Coca-Cola Company. They celebrate the pride month (June), organizing many events worldwide or participating in the pride parades (The Coca-Cola Co. UK, 2018). They do not hesitate to change their social media presence, supporting the LGBTQ community or to change the packaging of their products, using the rainbow colors, launching relevant LGBTQ videos or whole campaigns. One of the most successful LGBTQ campaigns took place in Brazil last year on the International LGBT Pride Day, where they created a coca cola can, which contained fanta (not cola). Using their most important asset, their product, they tried to "criticize" the anti LGBTQ Brazilian phrase "This coke is a fanta", which actually mean that someone is gay. Because of all these systematic efforts, LGBTQ shoppers are highly aware that this company actively supports their community, loyally spending money to support this or any other business, which they recognize as an LGBTQ ally.

Last but not least, it is impressive that Coca-Cola implements the above mentioned policies for years, not only in the US headquarters, but also in their operations around the globe, something that can be justified, by visiting the websites of the Coca-Cola's bottling companies. There can be found all the policies and practices these stakeholders implement, making the Coca-Cola Company one the most inclusive LGBTQ employers worldwide, ready to influence many other business or even governments, towards the LGBTQ equality. The following table presents the score on the Coca-Cola Company on the CEI. Having a top score of 100 percent, the company is named a Best Employer to work for LGBTQ equality.

Table 5: The CEI rating of The Coca-Cola Co.

Policies and Benefits of The Coca-Cola Co.		
	Policy description	**Rating**
✅	Non-discrimination policy includes sexual orientation for U.S. and global operations*	+ 15
✅	Non-discrimination policy includes gender identity for U.S. and global operations*	+ 15
✅	Contractor/vendor standards include sexual orientation and gender identity alongside other named categories	+ 5
✅	Company-provided domestic partner health insurance (including parity in spousal and partner COBRA, dental, vision and domestic partners legal dependent coverage)	+ 10
✅	Parity in spousal/partner soft benefits (bereavement leave; supplemental life insurance; relocation assistance; adoption assistance; joint/survivor annuity; pre-retirement survivor annuity; retiree healthcare benefits; employee discounts)	+ 10
✅	Offers equal health coverage for transgender individuals without exclusion for medically necessary care	+ 10
✅	Organizational LGBT cultural competency (diversity trainings, resources or accountability measures)	+ 10
✅	Company-supported LGBT employee resource group or firm-wide diversity council that includes LGBT issues, OR would support a LGBT employee resource group with company resources if employees expressed an interest	+ 10
✅	Engages in appropriate and respectful advertising and marketing or sponsors LGBT community events, organizations, or legislative efforts	+ 15
⛔	Engages in action that would undermine the goal of LGBT equality	0
	Final Rating	100
	*10 reflects partial points for U.S. only. 15 points indicates full credit.	

Source: Human Rights Campaign Buying for Workplace Equality Guide, 2018

Conclusions

By using the CEI as a guide, businesses can ensure that their existing LGBTQ and benefits policies and practices are inclusive for the LGBTQ employees and their families, resulting in greater attraction and retention of a talented, diverse workforce (Corporate Equality Index 2018, 2017). Businesses can also use the CEI as a self-assessment tool, in order to rate their current status towards the LGBTQ inclusion, focusing on particular sectors they may need improvement. Focusing and investing on the 4 pillars of the CEI (non-discrimination policies, equal benefits, organizational LGBTQ competency, public commitment), businesses could set a strong basis to create an LGBTQ inclusive workplace.

The 4 pillars on which the rating system of the CEI is based, reveal the need for conceptually expanding how we frame diversity and inclusion in the businesses (Corporate Equality Index 2018, 2017). Managing diversity is a matter of the organization as a whole, if the organization aims to get substantial results. It is an active phenomenon, which involves coordinating the differences of employees to peruse strategic organizational goals (Friday & Friday, 2003). That's why D&I are considered company-wide issues. Regarding inclusion, organizations should examine inclusion efforts at an overall organizational level, at an individual level, as well as at a team level. Fostering inclusion is an ongoing process and organizations should operate taking for granted that inclusion is not a static concept, with employees either perceiving or not perceiving inclusion, but it is contextually dependant (O'Donovan, 2018). Businesses are advised to monitor inclusion continually, ensuring that employee's perceptions of inclusion remain, even when operating in another context (e.g. on a different team or department) (O'Donovan, 2017).

It becomes obvious, that how employees experience diversity and inclusion in the workplaces, which are claimed to be LGBTQ inclusive (due to indexes like the CEI or Stonewall's), is an issue of utmost importance and academic research is already focusing on this issue (David, 2016; Riach, Rumens, & Tyler, 2014). Although employers are working to overcome the lack on legislation and become more gay-friendly, harassment directed at LGBTQ employees still exists, making the workplaces hostile, evolving forms of discrimination such as microaggressions and ostracism (DeSouza et al., 2017). It is important, therefore, that organizations should uncover the

needs of employees with regard to what will result in feelings of inclusion, and clearly address those needs (Davidson & Ferdman, 2002). One of the methods for doing so is to simply ask their employees (Ferdman, 2003). LGBTQ inclusive initiatives are created and implemented focusing on employees, but sometimes the voice of employees is not heard, in the extent it should be. There is a number of HR tools and methods, which could help organizations address the needs of their workforce on issues regarding the D&I (e.g. diversity training initiatives, performance reviews, employee engagement or wellbeing surveys, coaching/mentoring activities etc.). Many of these methods are used extensively and successfully from top rated organizations in the CEI or similar indexes. The Coca-Cola Company for instance uses all these tools properly, enhancing its image as one of the most inclusive employers worldwide.

The CEI, as well as other related indexes (e.g. Stonewall's Workplace Equality Index), is a key roadmap for businesses to LGBTQ inclusion. However, it cannot serve as a holistic assessment of any employer's unique workplace culture or individual experiences (CEI). These Indexes being often criticized that are created by industry leaders or large-sized businesses based on the best practices they currently use. Smaller organizations that do not have the necessary resources to adopt these practices are indirectly excluded. These best practices can often reflect empty public declarations on corporate websites, but bear little resemblance with the climate and practices of the organizations. So, it is worth repeating again that businesses must interrogate how LGBT workplace diversity and inclusion is understood and experienced by LGBT workers, in their own words (Tayar, 2017). Moreover, taking into account only the fact that a business is rated as a top inclusive employer is not enough and an extensive search on what this business actually does for the LGBTQ inclusion in necessary. This effort is made on this paper, presenting the Coca-Cola Company, a top rated CEI employer for years.

Furthermore, even if the aim of this paper is to present the CEI, as a benchmarking tool for LGBTQ equality in general, it should not be forgotten, that each business should adapt the context to its needs. The legal system in the US is different in comparison to the legal system in Europe, let alone the legislation between European countries or States. In some countries the LGBTQ people are fighting for their basic rights, while some other countries have already been many steps forward, towards the LGBTQ inclusion in the workplace and the society in general. There are many differences in the

cultural context and as a result the business mentality between organizations, willing to use the CEI as a tool, even if these organizations operate globally. All these limitations should be taken into account from businesses, which would like to use the CEI effectively and successfully. Moreover, these limitations could set the basis for the future research, on which the investigation of the feelings and "voices" of the employees, regarding the LGBTQ inclusion in awarded employers, should be of a high priority.

Last but not least, taking for granted that that discrimination and practices against LGBTQ equality still exist not only in the workplace, but also in the social context; not only in developing but also in developed countries, it is obvious that corporate initiative alone is not enough for cracking down the inequality towards LGBTQ individuals. The findings of Indexes focusing on LGBTQ equality in the workplaces can indeed be of value for organizations willing to make a difference, trying to improve the quality of life of so many people. The public commitment of these employers is of utmost importance, because through their active LGBTQ support, as well as through the public actions of their LGBTQ role models (executives) they can influence governments' policies, for a LGBTQ friendly legislation. Besides that, it shouldn't be forgotten that:

"Anyone can succeed when they can bring their whole selves to work. Business is better with 100% of everyone." **(Involve, 2018)**

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