

## Social advocacy good biz edge for tech firms

Summary: Taking firm stance on social issues in and beyond the office may help global IT companies recruit top talent and improve business, but observers advise sensitivity to local norms to mitigate backlash.



By Kevin Kwang

IT companies with a global reach should take a firm stance on social issues internally such as those involving gender, age, or sexual preference, as there are competitive advantages for doing so. How this is achieved and communicated, however, is subjective and might lead to companies facing unnecessary backlash from consumers, industry watchers warn.

Google last week launched its "Legalize Love" campaign, which represents its call to eliminate homophobia and decriminalize homosexuality around the world. Company spokesperson Taj Meadows told ZDNet Asia that while its business and employees are located in offices around the world, its policies on non-discrimination are uniform.

"At Google, we encourage people to bring their whole selves to work. In all our 60 offices around the world, we are committed to cultivating a work environment where Googlers can be themselves and thrive," he said. "We also want our employees to have the same inclusive experience outside of the office, as they do at work, and for LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender) communities to be safe and accepted wherever they are."

The first countries targeted under the campaign are reportedly Poland and Singapore.

### Social advocacy brings business benefits

Two other global tech companies told ZDNet Asia that being social advocates bring competitive advantages for the business, too.

Tracey Ho, workforce diversity leader for Asia-Pacific at IBM, said to remain competitive, Big Blue needs employee populations to mirror and understand the various markets it serves. This, in turn, unites different cultures, languages, geographic origins, professions, and perspectives into one globally integrated enterprise, she noted.

For LGBT employees specifically, the company strives to create an atmosphere where they are "valued, empowered to think freely, express themselves and innovate, and be able to fully contribute to the workplace and our clients", Ho added.

IBM thus formed the Employee Alliance for Gay & Lesbian Empowerment (EAGLE) networking group which has the objective of promoting a safe and open working environment for all employees, as well as offer LGBT staff opportunities to network both professionally and socially. It also aims to provide them platforms for career development and mentorship and the chance to develop its overall LGBT strategy, she said.

"From a LGBT market perspective, the discretionary income of this community is growing every year, along with their presence in the workplace and marketplace," Ho said. "IBM's ability to provide thought leadership to our customers in addressing constituency markets, as well as further leverage customer relationships to identify other business opportunities is what makes this business model unique and effective."

Software giant Microsoft, too, said it has been a "pioneer" in workplace diversity and was one of the first companies to offer employee benefits to same-sex domestic partners and include sexual orientation in its corporate non-discrimination policy over 23 years ago.

A company spokesperson said: "We pride ourselves on our products and services, our brand, and our global reach. But unquestionably, our employees are our greatest asset. To be successful, it's critical that we have a workforce that is as diverse as our customers. This means it's important to go beyond simply forbidding discrimination and actively promote diversity, equality, and inclusion in our workplace."

Asked if being vocal social advocates in more conservative countries may cause negative consumer backlash, she said inclusiveness is a fundamental part of Redmond's values and is integral to business success.

"These declarations are motivated by respect for our employees and customers. We do respect the views of those who may not agree with our position and we're not asking anyone to conform to the company perspective," the Microsoft spokesperson stated.

### **Be sensitive to local norms**

Eugene Tan, assistant professor of law at Singapore Management University (SMU), said he would generally recommend companies with a global presence to take a firm stance on social issues such as those involving gender, sexual preferences, age, and nationality within the organization. There has to be a universal set of values for company employees to adhere to, regardless of its business, he added.

This way, the company's values and norms are made public to both internal and external stakeholders with the benefit of reducing workplace discrimination and defining what the company stands for, Tan stated.

However, he pointed out that taking a firm stance has a variety of expressions and not every company will be comfortable going down the same route that Google had chosen.

"Google has chosen to adopt an activist posture and expressing its support for LGBT rights beyond the company. That's Google's prerogative. Other tech companies may not be so comfortable with seeking to be a 'game changer' where societal norms are concerned in foreign jurisdictions," the law professor noted.

The important thing is for the company to conduct itself legally and ethically, particularly with regard to its internal stakeholders, and to apply the standards consistently worldwide, he added.

However, another observer noted there are very few value statements that one can make definitively and apply them universally. According to Ang Peng Hwa, director of Singapore Internet Research Centre at Nanyang Technological University (NTU), companies can expect some kind of conflict when they advocate social policies outside their organizations.

With regard to decriminalizing homosexuality and promoting non-discrimination, Ang said in the realm of values--whether national, religious, or moral--companies such as Google will face conflicts. This is particularly so on the religious front, where many religions frown on homosexuality.

"I know Christianity and Islam--two major religions in our part of the world--do. One cannot argue against religious beliefs. I mean, if you argue against God, you could end up in a very hot place without air-conditioning that no one wants to go," he said, adding that Singapore's worst riots were connected to religion so there is a lot of sensitivity in this arena.

The director also said the Singapore government has publicly stated it will adopt a "we won't prosecute" stance, but this comes with an implicit understanding that the LGBT community maintains a low profile. In practical terms, there is little, if any, discrimination against homosexuals in business here, Ang noted, adding that if there has been, he has not heard it.

He advised companies thinking of taking a social stance on sensitive issues in Singapore or many parts of Asia, to take into consideration the irony of the situation in the United States.

"In the U.S., there are all kinds of public declarations and laws outlawing homosexual discrimination but people are known to have been killed for being gay. In Singapore, and many parts of Asia, the laws and public declarations may be against gays but many gays are able to go about their lives without harassment," he said.