



**Unions as Institutional Entrepreneurs: The Contribution of Unions to the Diffusion and Adaptation of LGBT Diversity Initiatives**

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# Unions as Institutional Entrepreneurs: The Contribution of Unions to the Diffusion and Adaptation of LGBT Diversity Initiatives

## Introduction

Over the last few decades, both management practices and research have increasingly started recognizing the inclusion of LGBT [1] workers as a key issue (Colgan, Creegan, McKearney, & Wright, 2007; Köllen, 2016b; Ng & Rumens, 2017). Management and organizational research has extensively explored the impact on wellbeing and performance of inclusive organizational policies and practices targeting LGBT employees (Webster, Adams, Maranto, Sawyer, & Thoroughgood, 2018), as well as on organizational performance (e.g. Pichler, Blazovich, Cook, Huston, & Strawser, 2018). This research has shown that inclusive practices deployed by companies can indeed improve the working lives of LGBT employees, thus providing the companies with an ‘ethical argument’ for their implementation. Furthermore, the research has additionally shown that these practices can have a positive impact on the performance not only of those individuals, but on that of the organization as a whole, thus providing companies with a ‘business case’ for the implementation of inclusive practices.

Instead of focusing on their impact, another stream of research has looked more closely at the processes and the favourable organizational and institutional conditions through which companies arrive at the implementation of LGBT-inclusive practices (e.g. Briscoe & Safford, 2008; Chuang, Church, & Hu, 2018; Creed, Scully, & Austin, 2002; Raeburn, 2004). Current research has, however, predominantly been conducted within the US context (and, to a lesser extent, in the context of the UK), so that its conclusions can hardly be generalized when considering other countries, in which employment relations are regulated in different ways (e.g. Countouris, 2007). Most studies either rely on social movement theories (in order to explain the active role that LGBT associations and campaigns are playing in pushing companies towards the adoption of inclusive practices) or on institutional theories (for explaining the binding effects that certain coercive, normative, and mimetic

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3 pressures have in fostering the implementation of those practices) (e.g. Chuang, Church, & Ophir,  
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5 2011).

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8 However, very few papers have, until now, focused on the role of unions in promoting and securing  
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10 LGBT rights at work. Those predominantly British studies focus largely on aspects of LGBT  
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12 inclusion within the unions themselves, e.g. on the creation of ‘safe spaces’ for gay and lesbian union  
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14 members within the unions (Bairstow, 2007), on how those members can make their voices heard  
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16 (Colgan & Ledwith, 2002), and on how to assure them that the unions do, indeed, represent their  
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18 lesbian and gay membership (Colgan, 1999). A study from Colgan & McKearney (2012) analyses  
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20 the relationship between LGBT union networks and LGBT company employee networks. However,  
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22 with the exception of this study, no research has been done into the way in which the unions contribute  
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24 to the shaping of organizational practices of LGBT inclusion in external workplaces, beyond the  
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26 unions. In order to better understand this interrelation, our article takes precisely this focus.  
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31 Since it is based on empirical data from Italy, this paper complements the existing literature on the  
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33 adoption of LGBT-friendly practices in business organizations, and also extends the small corpus of  
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35 studies which have explored the role that unions can play in pushing companies towards the  
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37 implementation of those practices. Unions in Italy still play a highly active and very relevant role in  
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39 the regulation of employment relations in the corporate sector, and this context contrasts with the  
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41 typical Anglo-American contexts considered by most literature on LGBT-friendly practice  
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43 implementation. Furthermore, this paper makes a unique contribution to our understanding of the  
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45 implementation processes of LGBT-friendly practices by exploring unions as institutional  
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47 entrepreneurs. By framing the unions in this way, we can understand them as actors that, working in  
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49 an environment characterized by a heterosexist conception of sexual and affective relations, can  
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51 disengage themselves from such a context, and envision and champion new practices, in order to  
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53 create a more inclusive workplace. Through a qualitative research process, we show how unions do,  
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55 indeed, act as institutional entrepreneurs, and what specific results they have achieved, in terms of  
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57 pushing companies towards the implementation of LGBT-friendly practices.  
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### **Heteronormativity and institutional entrepreneurship**

Heteronormativity refers to the set of institutionalized symbols, norms, and discursive and material practices that create and reproduce the belief that people fall into two distinct and complementary genders (male and female), which align with heterosexuality and predetermined roles in society (Schilt & Westbrook, 2009). Individuals and relations falling outside this “sex/gender system” (Rubin, 1998) are perceived as “pathological, deviant, invisible, unintelligible, or written out of existence” (Yep (Yep, 2002, p. 167). Since sexuality is an ubiquitous phenomenon in all spheres of life (Jackson, 2006, p. 106), heteronormativity permeates transversally all social orders: family, religion, market, organizations, education, and mass media tend to replicate a binary and heteronormative conception of sexuality (Yep, 2002). Heteronormativity implies several forms of marginalization and discrimination for homosexual and bisexual employees in the workplace. Common examples include benefits granted by the company to married employees, such as insurance policies, or other partner benefits, which discriminate against same-sex couples (Raeburn, 2004), but also informal discourses, such as homophobic jokes (Willis, 2012), and symbols, like family portraits or wedding rings.

The concept of institutions is taken to mean different things in different contexts and disciplines. Sociologists and organizational scholars look at institutions as both socially constructed systems of norms that produce patterns of behaviour, and as symbolic systems, by which individuals and organizations ascribe order and meaning to their own experiences (Friedland & Alford, 1991; Jepperson, 1991). Both the material and symbolic resilience of institutions lead individuals and organizations to take them for granted, as if no alternative were available (Scott, 2013; Zucker, 1987). However, institutions are subject to change processes that can be both incremental and discontinuous (Scott, 2013, p. 48). The actors involved in the ‘institutional work’ - i.e. the creation, maintenance and disruption of institutions - (Lawrence, Suddaby, & Leca, 2011), have been initially defined by DiMaggio (1988) as ‘institutional entrepreneurs’; that is, as actors with sufficient resources, who have an interest in the realization of new institutional arrangements.

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3 Although the characteristics of a given field might prompt institutional change to a great extent,  
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5 “all actors embedded in the same field are not equally likely to act as institutional entrepreneurs”  
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7 (Battilana, Leca, & Boxenbaum, 2009, p. 75). Thus, various studies have dealt with the interrelated  
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9 attributes that characterize institutional entrepreneurs and permit them to embark on institutional  
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11 change (Hardy & Maguire, 2008, p. 206), namely their *properties*, their *position*, and their  
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13 *intervention strategies*.  
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17 A first set of studies has explored the *properties* of institutional entrepreneurs that “distinguish  
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19 institutional entrepreneurs from others in the field, and allow them to envision and promote  
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21 alternative arrangements” (Hardy & Maguire, 2008, p. 200). For example, some studies, applying the  
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23 perspective of critical realism, have shown the importance of institutional entrepreneurs’ reflexivity,  
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25 which allows them to disembed from the current institutional order and conceive new institutional  
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27 solutions (e.g. Leca & Naccache, 2006; Mutch, 2007).  
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31 A second set of studies has focused on the social *position* of institutional entrepreneurs in a specific  
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33 field (Battilana et al., 2009; Hardy & Maguire, 2008, 2017). According to Bourdieu’s (1990)  
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35 conceptualization, “fields are structured systems of social positions within which struggles take place  
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37 between individuals over resources, stakes, and access” (Battilana, 2006, p. 659). Social positions  
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39 influence institutional entrepreneurs’ perceptions of the field itself, and its institutional  
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41 contradictions, as well as their access to different available resources. An example from this second  
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43 stream of studies is the paper by Maguire et al. (2004), in which the authors show how institutional  
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45 entrepreneurs made use of their subject position to legitimate themselves with different stakeholders  
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47 in the emerging organizational field of HIV/AIDS treatments advocacy in Canada.  
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51 Lastly, a third set of studies has explored the *intervention strategies* deployed by institutional  
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53 entrepreneurs, i.e. the set of strategies, skills and abilities adopted to achieve institutional change.  
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55 Hardy and Maguire (2008) divide the literature in this stream into three main sub-areas by which  
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57 entrepreneurs deploy their strategies. The first sub-area concerns the whole set of *resources* –  
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59 material, financial and organizational, cultural, discursive, political and historical [2] – that  
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3 institutional entrepreneurs mobilize, in order to gather the support of others, through reward and  
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5 punishment mechanisms. The second sub-area involves the construction of *rationales* or reasons that  
6  
7 underpin the institutional change at stake. This area is strategically relevant in involving and  
8  
9 mobilizing people around the project of change. For that reason, social movement theory has largely  
10  
11 been adopted when accounting for the ways in which institutional entrepreneurs create coherent  
12  
13 interpretative structures referred to as “collective action frames” (Hardy & Maguire, 2008, p. 208).  
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15 Such framing activity implies the use of discourse and rhetorical strategies that draw on established  
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17 institutional logics to present the new institutional arrangement as necessary (Battilana et al., 2009;  
18  
19 Seo & Creed, 2002; Thornton, Ocasio, & Lounsbury, 2012). This makes the new institutional  
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21 arrangement more comprehensible and meaningful, and provides compelling reasons for supporting  
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23 it (Hardy & Maguire, 2008). The last sub-area concerns institutional entrepreneurs’ *relations*; that is,  
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25 the setup of collaborative networks (e.g., partnerships and coalitions) committed to the instatement  
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27 of new institutions (Hardy & Maguire, 2008, 2017).  
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33 By framing the activities of trade union departments involved in dismantling heteronormativity in  
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35 Italian organizations as institutional entrepreneurship, we try, in this paper, to address two research  
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37 questions related to the adoption of LGBT-inclusive practices: (i) what properties, social position,  
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39 and intervention strategies characterize the unions as institutional entrepreneurs? And (ii) what are  
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41 the outcomes, risks and opportunities associated with the unions’ entrepreneurial striving?  
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### 47 **Research context: Diversity and trade unions in Italy**

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49 Although a relatively new concept within Italy, more and more Italian companies and organizations  
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51 have, within the last decade or so, started to follow some sort of diversity management approach. The  
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53 main drivers for this trend have been the increased labour-market participation of women, an  
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55 increased influx of immigrants onto the Italian labour market, and EU legislation on anti-  
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57 discrimination in the workplace (de Vita, 2010). In Italy, the societal discourse on workforce diversity  
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59 is very much focused on (cis-)gender issues. Compared to other dimensions of workforce diversity,  
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3 (as in many other national contexts), the organizations' commitment to sexual orientation-related  
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5 issues of workforce diversity is comparatively low, and issues related to the gender identity of  
6  
7 employees are almost totally overlooked (Murgia & Poggio, 2014; Ravazzani, 2016). Ravazzani  
8  
9 (2016) shows that the diversity initiatives of Italian companies "principally aim to address social  
10  
11 expectations and mainly focus on the traditional, legally protected attributes of gender, parenthood  
12  
13 and disability, reflecting their centrality in the social agenda and legislative make-up of Italy" (p. 10).  
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15 The strong influence of the Catholic Church on the public debate in Italy might be one reason for the  
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17 fact that overcoming heteronormative structures in organizational settings is only seen as being of  
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19 secondary importance (Gamberini, 2013; Zanola, 2014). In response to pressure from various  
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21 European institutions, Italy recognized same-sex civil unions in 2016. This has provided some of the  
22  
23 benefits, rights, and obligations of marriage to same-sex couples, but it does leave open the possibility  
24  
25 that some employers might treat same-sex and opposite-sex partnerships unequally (ILGA, 2016).  
26  
27 Compared, however, to other countries in Western Europe, the level of acceptance towards  
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29 homosexuality is still comparatively low (European\_Union, 2015). The LGBT Diversity Index, a  
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31 benchmark tool issued by the employer's association Parks, shows that the number of participating  
32  
33 companies, (and, within that, companies who have explicitly integrated LGBT issues into their overall  
34  
35 diversity approaches), rose from 19 to 42 between 2013 and 2016 (Parks, 2018). However, these  
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37 numbers still illustrate the marginal position of issues related to the sexual orientation (and gender  
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39 identity) of employees in Italian diversity practice.  
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47 In terms of the Italian unions, there are two 'players' that deal with LGBT-related work issues:  
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49 CGIL Nuovi Diritti ('CGIL New Rights') and UIL Coordinamento Diritti ('UIL Rights  
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51 Coordination'). Both departments emerged as autonomous initiatives from union representatives.  
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53 CGIL Nuovi Diritti was founded in the early 1990s, as a department of the Confederazione Generale  
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55 Italiana del Lavoro ('Italian General Confederation of Labour', CGIL), the oldest and largest Italian  
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57 trade union confederation. The stimulus for its foundation was the publication of a report on the  
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59 discrimination of gay and lesbian employees from CGIL's Milan office. The UIL Coordinamento  
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3 Diritti department was founded in 2013, within the third largest Italian trade union confederation,  
4 the Unione Italiana del Lavoro ('Italian Labour Union', UIL). Its function was, and is, to provide the  
5 union's equal opportunities office with a specific focus on discrimination related to sexual orientation  
6 (CGIL, 2018; UIL, 2018). The UIL Coordinamento Diritti department was established after the  
7 current national officer (who at that time was a union representative for his company) reported the  
8 distribution of homophobic flyers by some UIL representatives in north eastern Italy.  
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17 CGIL was historically linked to the Communist Party, while UIL was linked with more centrist,  
18 social democratic positions. Italy's second biggest trade union association, the Confederazione  
19 Italiana Sindacati Lavoratori ('Italian Confederation of Workers' Trade Unions', CISL), was closely  
20 linked to the Christian democratic party. CISL remains more oriented towards the principles of  
21 Catholic social teaching, which means that the association continues to tend rather to oppose than  
22 support LGBT inclusive policies (Holzhacker, 2012).  
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31 However, since the 1990s, relations between political parties and unions have weakened  
32 (Pulignano, Carrieri, & Baccaro, 2018). The Italian bargaining system is substantially voluntarist,  
33 with very few direct state interventions. There is no legal definition of how collective agreements  
34 should be reached and implemented. However, collective agreements are important guidelines for  
35 employers defining working conditions, and for jurisdiction in labour disputes. Besides nationwide,  
36 cross-sectoral negotiations, there are two levels of negotiating such agreements: on the sectoral level  
37 of national industries, and on the company or plant level (Colombo & Regalia, 2016). The  
38 implementation of the LGBT-related diversity practices analysed in this article belongs to the latter  
39 level. In terms of union density, the Italian situation (34.4%) represents a sort of European average.  
40 The density is higher than, for example, in France (8%), Poland (12.2%), Germany (17%), the UK  
41 (23.7%) and Ireland (27.2%), but it is much lower than, for example, in Denmark (67.2%) or Sweden  
42 (66.8%) (OECD, 2018). Bargaining, however, is often quite hard:  
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58 [...] the lack of a stable framework of rules of the interest representation, as well as the strong engagement  
59 in a "pluralistic-competitive" (rather "conflictual") industrial relations model reduced the scope for both  
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3 employers and trade unions in Italy to affirm their common points of view and to build up stable institutions,  
4 able to support sustainable cooperation between them. (Pulignano et al., 2018, pp. 665-666)  
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### 10 **Research design and methodology**

11 Following a multiple case study approach (Yin, 2013), the data analysed in this article has been taken  
12 from a larger research project on LGBT diversity management in Italy. Aiming at understanding the  
13 role of unions in the process of Italian organizations adopting LGBT diversity management practices,  
14 this paper is based on 13 in-depth interviews (see Table I). Our sample comprises 7 trade unionists  
15 concerned with LGBT rights in the workplace, 4 LGBT activists holding significant roles in other  
16 LGBT associations, the head of an Italian manufacturing company, and the industrial relations officer  
17 of an Italian bank. The latter two interviewees were working for companies that were driven by unions  
18 to sign agreements to extend the rights offered to married employees to LGB employees who had  
19 married abroad. The semi-structured interviews focused on (i) the participant's personal and  
20 professional background; (ii) the union, association or company that he or she works for; and (iii) the  
21 way in which he or she relates to companies or unions, and the implementation of LGBT-inclusive  
22 policies. The interviews were conducted either face-to-face or via Skype, recorded and transcribed.  
23 We performed a theoretical, deductive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Guest, MacQueen,  
24 & Namey, 2012) of the data, guided by the analytical dimensions identified by Hardy and Maguire  
25 (2008, 2017) in their literature reviews on institutional entrepreneurs. In order to understand the  
26 unions' role as institutional entrepreneurs, we therefore focused on their: (i) *properties*, meaning the  
27 "special characteristics, qualities and abilities" that "distinguish institutional entrepreneurs from  
28 others in the field, and allow them to envision and promote alternative arrangements" (Hardy &  
29 Maguire, 2008, p. 200); (ii) *social position* (Battilana, et al. 2009; Hardy and Maguire 2008); and (iii)  
30 *intervention strategies*, that can be further classified according to (a) the resources they mobilize; (b)  
31 the rationales they leverage for institutional change; and (c) the relations they rely on to bring about  
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collective action (Hardy & Maguire, 2008). The interviews were conducted in 2016 and 2017, around the time when civil union (but not marriage) for same-sex couples was introduced in Italy.

**Table I:** List of 13 Interviewees

|    | <b>Organization</b> | <b>Type of Organization</b>         | <b>Interviewee's position</b>   | <b>Date (month/year)</b> |
|----|---------------------|-------------------------------------|---|--------------------------|
| 1  | CGIL                | Trade Union                         | Founder CGIL Nuovi Diritti Department                                     | 06/2016                  |
| 2  |                     |                                     | Secretary of FIOM CGIL Varese   | 09/2016                  |
| 3  | UIL                 | Trade Union                         | UIL Coordinamento Diritti Department Founder, National Officer            | 06/2016                  |
| 4  |                     |                                     | UIL Coordinamento Diritti Department, Lombardy Officer                    | 05/2016                  |
| 5  |                     |                                     | UIL Coordinamento Diritti Department, Tuscany Officer                     | 07/2016                  |
| 6  |                     |                                     | UIL Coordinamento Diritti Department, Credit and Insurance Sector Officer | 07/2016                  |
| 7  | Arcigay             | LGBT Association                    | National Secretary  | 04/2016                  |
| 8  |                     |                                     | Officer for the group 'Work, Visibility and Coming Out'                   | 06/2016                  |
| 9  |                     |                                     | President of Arcigay Milan  | 04/2017                  |
| 10 |                     |                                     | Former Coordinator of Milan Pride   | 03/2017                  |
| 11 | Rete Lenford        | Lawyers Association                 | Lenford Studies Centre Officer  | 10/2016                  |
| 12 | Company 1           | International Bank                  | Industrial Relations Officer  | 07/2016                  |
| 13 | Company 2           | International Manufacturing Company | Human Resources Head  | 06/2016                  |

## Findings

The findings show how the two Italian trade union departments, theoretically framed as institutional entrepreneurs, deal with heteronormativity in organizations. Since their striving clashes with elements deeply rooted in the Italian institutional context (the clearest example being the institution of marriage, which was not [and still is not] legally available to same-sex partners at the time the interviews were conducted), their working is a divergent institutional change process (Battilana et al., 2009). Drawing on the above-outlined notion of institutional entrepreneurship, we link their actions with their *properties*, *social position* and *intervention strategies* (Hardy & Maguire, 2017).

### *Trade unions as institutional entrepreneurs*

**Properties.** The main activity of CGIL Nuovi Diritti and UIL Coordinamento Diritti is not only to provide LGBT workers with counselling and support in their individual negotiations with the organizations in cases of discrimination, but also to create awareness about these topics within the union itself. The unions' representatives who dealt with LGBT rights showed particular sensitivity and commitment to LGBT issues. Both offices were founded bottom-up, out of personal initiatives instigated by the founders, in a period when addressing LGBT issues in Italy was far from easy. The founder of CGIL Nuovi Diritti has been in the union since the 1980s, as a representative for the banking sector. The current national officer was an activist prior to assuming her position, but she was already involved with the union to some degree at the time of the department's foundation.

“No one from [the] union's establishment actually asked us to take care of gay, lesbian and trans issues in the organization. [...] We did that of our own accord, day after day, working with determination, ignoring comments and career opportunities within the organization. From time to time, a dilemma looms. We've chosen the way that's far removed from where the power is, but power is necessary to change things” (CGIL Nuovi Diritti Founder).

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3 “Today it may seem normal to have a meeting in the union about this topic, but 40 years ago, 30 years ago,  
4 it was a taboo in every environment. Not only in the union, but also in the workplace, in society at large”  
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6 (CGIL Nuovi Diritti National Officer).  
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8

9 Most of the participants from the unions described themselves during the interviews as being gay  
10 or lesbian, and reported their past and/or present political activism, often in associations dealing with  
11  
12 LGBT issues. This factor also seems to be important when recruiting new officers.  
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15  
16 “Before recruiting the person, you have to try to understand a little bit where he/she comes from. If he/she  
17 comes from associations for instance. For instance, it was very important to me; we’ve got a lot of them  
18 coming from associations [outside of CGIL, primarily from Arcigay]” (UIL Coordinamento Diritti National  
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20  
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22 Officer).  
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27 ***Social Position.*** The social position of the trade unions should provide CGIL Nuovi Diritti and  
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29 UIL Coordinamento Diritti with legitimacy in the eyes of rank and file union members, and of the  
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31 working class in general. At the same time, given the historically conflicting nature of industrial  
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33 relations in Italy, the role of workers’ representatives is prejudicial to their interaction with some  
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35 companies, where “talking of unions is like cursing in Church” (UIL Coordinamento Diritti  
36  
37 Lombardy Officer).  
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41 Union departments dealing with sexual orientation and gender identity can count on the strong  
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43 presence of confederated unions in different territories and economic sectors. Looking at the unions’  
44  
45 archival material summarizing agreements related to LGBT rights, we noticed that the companies  
46  
47 that reached LGBT-related agreements with trade unions belong predominantly to labour-intensive  
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49 sectors, where workers are more readily replaceable than in knowledge-based sectors. We found cases  
50  
51 of companies operating in the logistics sector, in the metal-mechanics sector, a consumer cooperative  
52  
53 in large-scale retail, a company operating in hospital services, and one providing call-centre services.  
54  
55 Therefore, union initiatives seem to be more essential in those sectors where the contractual power  
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57 of workers is lower, due to their higher replaceability. The presence of local offices - with their staff  
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3 members often also being, or having been, members of local LGBT associations - allows LGBT  
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5 workers to get in touch with them easily.  
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10 ***Intervention strategies.*** As outlined above, intervention strategies can be subdivided into three  
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12 areas: resource mobilization, rationales, and relations.  
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15 Concerning the resources available to trade union offices dealing with LGBT issues, the situation  
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17 differs partially between the two unions. CGIL Nuovi Diritti is organized into regional offices, to  
18  
19 which LGBT workers may resort, when feeling themselves discriminated against, but each office  
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21 enjoys a large degree of autonomy, and the amount of material and relational resources varies between  
22  
23 different regions. Even though founded more recently, UIL Coordinamento Diritti has a more  
24  
25 structured organization, with a headquarters, and a network of representatives organized by region  
26  
27 and professional category. In this scenario, the main resources available to unions are relations and  
28  
29 know-how. The strong bond that appears between unions and LGBT activism (and in particular with  
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31 Arcigay, the oldest and largest Italian LGB organization), which is often due to the very background  
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33 of officers working in the LGBT rights departments, provides them with know-how and expertise in  
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35 LGBT issues, both within and outside the workplace. However, our interviewees described the  
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37 mediation style of the unions as cooperative, since they consider legal action against the firm only as  
38  
39 a last resort solution. Indeed, no cases of legal action or prolonged conflict were reported to us.  
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45 The rationales that underpin the promotion of LGBT-inclusive practices by those offices within  
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47 the unions that are concerned with LGBT rights do not leverage on the creation of economic value  
48  
49 for the organizations, but point to the defence and safeguarding of workers' rights.  
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51  
52 The trade union must be sure that labour doesn't violate people's dignity, and humiliates them, right?  
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54 Because... where do the fundamental elements of union culture and background come from? They come  
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56 from a disequilibrium [...] labour and production are important, but not at the expense of everything else;  
57  
58 they can't trample on people's dignity, on people's fundamental rights. (CGIL Nuovi Diritti National  
59  
60 Officer).

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3 Instead of considering LGBT workers to be carriers of ‘specific’ values for the organization,  
4 unions identify LGBT workers as workers, thus carrying the same set of rights that pertain to all  
5 workers. Within this framework, non-discrimination is the goal, and this has to be achieved by formal  
6 agreements, which extend to sexual minorities the same rights already acquired by heterosexual  
7 workers. Yet, union respondents recognize that agreements may be not sufficient *per se*, since they  
8 do not address informal discrimination, and a heterosexist environment may even go so far as to  
9 prevent LGBT workers and employees from asking for a benefit, if the ‘cost’ of coming out is  
10 perceived as being higher than the value of the benefit itself. Thus, cultural change is seen as a  
11 prerequisite to the exploitation of formal rights, and education plays an essential role in this respect.  
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24 When asked about the appropriateness of a business case for diversity in order to promote LGBT-  
25 inclusive practices, all but one of our union respondents agreed on its value for LGBT inclusion,  
26 arguing that a business perspective can complement an equality and justice perspective, in order to  
27 reach a higher degree of inclusion.  
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33 “Everything that is done for achieving this goal [i.e. LGBT inclusion], is something positive anyhow. So  
34 there must not be the prejudice that if someone else does it, maybe someone that we dislike, or we don’t  
35 like very much, then: “No!” That would be a short-sighted view” (CGIL Nuovi Diritti National Officer).  
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40 Rejecting the business case for diversity, one unionist gave a warning of the dangerous  
41 implications inherent in submitting the inclusion of a minority group to profit increase. Referring to  
42 a famous Italian advertising campaign targeting homosexual couples, he ironically commented “non-  
43 discrimination is either at 360° or it’s nothing. It’s like being pregnant: you’re either pregnant or not”.  
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49 The relational dimension of the LGBT rights departments of the unions in some ways reflects the  
50 fragmented reality of the Italian LGBT associative world, as our respondents reported different  
51 collaborations with local actors. Notably, both CGIL Nuovi Diritti and UIL Coordinamento Diritti  
52 have always had a strong relationship with the most important Italian LGBT association, Arcigay. “If  
53 there are episodes of discrimination, we turn either to CGIL or to UIL, which are the two unions we  
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3 collaborate with the most, that in turn have their own departments dedicated to these kinds of  
4 instances; we kind of built them together over time,” Arcigay’s National Secretary told us.  
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10 ***Outcomes, risks and opportunities.*** Since unions are not free from heteronormativity, the first  
11 result achieved by both CGIL and UIL’s offices has been to put LGBT rights on the agenda of the  
12 unions, and to provide union representatives with the competences necessary to deal with LGBT  
13 issues. The main focus of both departments is on counselling LGBT workers who have been  
14 discriminated against. Interventions are, therefore, often limited to mediations with companies to find  
15 *ad hoc* solutions.  
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23 Although CGIL Nuovi Diritti is not directly involved in bargaining collective agreements with  
24 companies, and no agreement has yet been reached at the national level, some results have been  
25 obtained at the company level of negotiations. In the case of an Italian manufacturing company, rights  
26 and benefits for married employees have been extended to LGB employees who have married abroad.  
27 The specific extension of marriage leave to same-sex couples was an autonomous request by union  
28 representatives, without there being any solicitation from either the employees, or the Nuovi Diritti  
29 department. The request was formulated within the equal opportunities commission, and led to the  
30 first agreement on LGBT issues in the metal-mechanics sector in Italy.  
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42 A similar agreement has been reached by Coordinamento Diritti UIL with Italy’s largest banking  
43 group, as well as with a company in the hospital services sector. In the case of the multinational bank,  
44 the extension of marriage leave to same-sex couples originated with the request of a gay employee  
45 who had married his partner abroad. The company initially denied the request. It was seen as being  
46 non-compliant with company policy, since same-sex marriage was (and still is) not recognized under  
47 Italian law. The story made it to the newspapers, prompting the recently-formed Coordinamento  
48 Diritti department to contact banking industry representatives, and to propose a new deal, extending  
49 the provision of the national collective agreement for marriage leave to same-sex couples that had  
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3 married abroad. The agreement was discussed within the welfare committee of the company, a body  
4 composed by representatives of both the company and trade unions.  
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7 The main risks union department officers recognize when dealing with LGBT discrimination are  
8 related to the embeddedness of their role within the wider industrial relations system, often  
9 characterized by conflicting relations between unions and employers. Prejudice against unions and  
10 unionists may prevent them from accessing organizations to tackle heteronormativity. Moreover, the  
11 reliance on *ad hoc* interventions and single agreements at company level is seen as far from sufficient  
12 to dismantle heteronormativity in organizations. At the same time, union departments dealing with  
13 heteronormativity see the opportunity to intervene in economic sectors and organizational realities  
14 where the likelihood of discrimination is higher. Indeed, we documented two cases where union  
15 representatives were able to reach the first agreement on LGBT rights in the manufacturing sector in  
16 Italy, and to accomplish the same in a multinational bank, starting from a single case of discrimination  
17 in a peripheral branch of the company.  
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### 35 **Discussion**

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37 Our study has shown that the role unions take in the process of adaptation and diffusion of LGBT  
38 diversity management in a continental European context can be theoretically framed as institutional  
39 entrepreneurship. As institutional entrepreneurs, these unions contribute towards encouraging  
40 companies to further the inclusion of their LGBT employees, and to address discrimination against  
41 those employees.  
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49 The persons in charge of LGBT issues within the unions are in large part closely related to  
50 associations that are engaged in political activism in the area of LGBT rights. This provides them  
51 with a certain standing and legitimacy within the unions themselves, as well as with the LGBT  
52 workers and employees they represent, and for whom they negotiate. However, this also restricts  
53 them to equality and social justice-related grounds of justification for their claims. As shown by our  
54 findings, as a result of this equality-driven rationale, the outcomes of their activities as institutional  
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3 entrepreneurs are exclusively related to extending those benefits and facilities to homosexual  
4 employees that hitherto were only granted to heterosexual ones (e.g. partner benefits and marriage  
5 leave). These outcomes are the result of collective agreements that activate ‘sanctions’ for  
6 discriminatory behaviour, rather than promoting inclusive behaviour within the organization. It is in  
7 no way obligatory for companies to negotiate these agreements, but once they have signed such  
8 agreements, they become formally binding. However, such outcomes related to partnership status  
9 might increasingly become obsolescent in the broader European context, since more and more  
10 European countries have made the institution of marriage legally available to same sex couples (e.g.  
11 France, Germany, and Spain). This narrows down the legal scope for companies to treat same-sex  
12 and opposite-sex married couples differently. Together with the ongoing development of European  
13 workplace-related anti-discrimination legislation and jurisdiction, this tendency might make the claim  
14 for overcoming formal unequal treatment obsolete in the near future. For the unions this carries the  
15 risk that, in the wake of this positive development, their advocacy for this claim might also become  
16 obsolete, and with it their status as institutional entrepreneurs in the field of LGBT inclusion.  
17 However, legal protection and equalization do not eradicate homophobia and heteronormativity,  
18 though they are undeniably important steps in the right direction. It remains important, therefore, to  
19 preserve all voices that aim towards LGBT inclusion, including those of the unions, especially in  
20 those countries where LGBT rights are still limited, and/or the political trend is a reactionary one.  
21 Such a changing environment is challenging for the unions, but may also open up new opportunities.

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47 Their specific social *position* within the field of LGBT inclusion provides the unions with a strong  
48 ethical *rationale*, which allows them to primarily mobilize actors, which share this rationale, in a  
49 voluntary way. LGBT inclusion can include much more than formal equalization policies, and it can  
50 address any area of institutionalized heteronormativity, in order to achieve an inclusive and  
51 supportive organizational climate (Köllen, 2012, 2016a). Advocates of the business case for a diverse  
52 workforce and its appropriate management tend to restrict themselves to a lesser degree to certain  
53 diversity management initiatives than the justice-driven unions do. However, no matter whether one  
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3 gives more weight to the business argument, or to the justice argument, it is still the case that the  
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5 desired goal is a greater degree of inclusion for gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender employees. It  
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7 could, therefore, be an opportunity for the unions to extend their formal focus on LGBT inclusion by  
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9 engaging with the informal facets of homophobia, biphobia, and transphobia in the workplace. Of  
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11 course, it may be assumed that, just as within society at large, heteronormativity and cis-normativity  
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13 are also structuring categories within the unions, and amongst their members. Such a shift of focus  
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15 away from formal equality would, therefore, entail considerable internal persuasion. However, this  
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17 could enable unions to maintain their status as institutional entrepreneurs within the field of LGBT  
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19 inclusion, without having to surrender the social justice perspective (cf. Kirton & Greene, 2006),  
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21 albeit it that, today, the business case perspective seems to be the more efficacious one.  
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26 Against this background, the outcome of the work and negotiations undertaken by the unions must  
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28 not be underestimated. Contrary to other institutional entrepreneurs in that field, who may apply a  
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30 business case rationale for their efforts, unions have the possibility to push all companies in the  
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32 direction of inclusion and non-discrimination. They are not dependent on the organizations' 'belief'  
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34 in the business case for LGBT diversity management, and they are, therefore, also able to reach  
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36 companies for which employees do not represent a critical success factor, and where employees may  
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38 not be as highly valued as in other sectors. Whilst business consultants or consulting firms  
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40 specializing in LGBT issues are predominantly approached voluntarily by those organizations, which  
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42 value their LGBT employees, and consider them a source of competitive advantage, unions can also  
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44 approach organizations which think otherwise. That may imply a 'cream-skimming' dynamic  
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46 whereby unions end up dealing with more difficult realities characterized by higher levels of  
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48 heteronormativity. Given this, one might ask the question as to whether unions might be able to  
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50 strengthen their impact as institutional entrepreneurs were they to broaden their perspective on  
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52 employee welfare and social justice, by having an additional business case focus. However, one has  
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54 then to consider that business case considerations might, in fact, potentially work *against* LGBT  
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56 employees in the future (see e.g. Noon, 2007; Rhodes, 2017), showing the economic benefit of  
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3 exclusion and discrimination. Furthermore, it might be that this additional focus could undermine the  
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5 legitimacy of the unions as a voice for justice and equal treatment of all employees and workers in  
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7 this debate. Whatever future developments may occur, this article has shown that, within Europe,  
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9 unions can be regarded as institutional entrepreneurs in the field of LGBT workforce diversity,  
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11 capable of reaching out to certain types of organizations, which would otherwise not have  
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13 implemented LGBT diversity initiatives of any kind.  
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## 20 **Notes**

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23 [1] All companies, unions, and associations whose representatives have been interviewed for this  
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25 article exclusively focus on initiatives targeting lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) employees.  
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27 Although none of them addresses issues related to transgender (T) employees or workers, all of them  
28  
29 utilize the term 'LGBT'. We therefore retain the term 'LGBT' in this paper, but it is important to  
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31 state that we are, in effect, speaking only about LGB (see Köllen, 2016b, for the general debate on  
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33 why it may be questionable to establish one category (through initialism) that comprises both different  
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35 sexual orientations and gender identities).  
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40 [2] As pointed out by Hardy and Maguire (2017), this heterogeneous list refers to material, discursive,  
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42 and organizational resources that can (and in most cases do) overlap. In line with the authors, we refer  
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44 in this article predominantly to material resources, addressing symbolic and organizational resources  
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46 through 'rationales' and 'relations'.  
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