

The HR guide to

GENDER PRONOUNS



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Why this guide

As a platform that empowers HR to align employers and employees, we've been attuned to shifts in [gender non-binary acceptance](#) across all kinds of industries around the world. While these shifts are long overdue and very welcome, creating a truly accepting work environment where individuals from all backgrounds and identities can thrive can be challenging.

One potential challenge for HR is implementing and correct usage of non-binary pronouns in every aspect of the workplace. For some people who are less familiar with non-binary gender identity, accepting and adopting pronouns beyond the traditional he/she may be challenging—including for HR leaders.

This guide explains gender non-binary pronouns so that your organization can become more empathetic and promote initiatives supporting gender non-binary employees.



Quick pronoun Q&A

1. What are pronouns, and why do they matter?

In English, gender pronouns are third-person gender identifiers.

Traditionally, gender pronouns were separated into masculine (he/him/his) and feminine (she/her/hers). This gender binary-only recognizes men and women at the exclusion of non-binary individuals.

For people who identify outside of the gender binary, gender-neutral pronouns empower them to use pronouns that fit with their identities. These are not about ‘choosing’—they’re about identifying.

2. What are non-binary genders?

Non-binary means that an individual identifies as a gender that is neither male nor female.

It is currently estimated that up to [40% of trans people](#) identify as non-binary. When we look at the general population, about 3% of people between the ages of 18 and 35 [identify as gender-neutral](#).

As the world becomes more open about gender identity, fostering inclusion in the workplace is becoming increasingly important.

3. Is there non-binary inclusion in most workplaces?

While acceptance of trans individuals is improving, non-binary individuals face particular challenges in the workplace. An estimated [15% of non-binary adults in the US are unemployed](#), three times the national average.

What's happening is that many highly qualified individuals are being disqualified from the workplace because of their gender—this is not only harmful to non-binary individuals who disproportionately experience unemployment, poverty, and homelessness, it also harms society as a whole.

A part of the problem is a lack of inclusion of non-binary pronouns in organizational materials and processes. But HR leaders can move the dial on and propel a genuine shift in culture.

To learn more about how your organization can promote DE&I for non-binary employees, please [download](#) our HR Guide to Non-Binary Inclusion.

Misgendering IS discrimination

For organizations that take diversity, equity, and inclusion seriously, having set processes and policies in place to accommodate non-binary employees is critical. The foundation and framework for this is correct pronoun usage.

Incorrectly addressing an individual by a binary pronoun is hurtful and avoidable. But there is some resistance to getting it right. According to one Pew survey, [47% of Americans](#) stated that they are uncomfortable using gender-neutral pronouns.

This isn't an option anymore.

Non-binary individuals have a right to be referred to by their correct pronouns, especially in the workplace. This is not about legal compliance. It's about fostering an environment where every individual employee is encouraged and empowered to bring their most authentic selves to work every day without fear of judgment or reprisal.

Beyond discomfort and unintentional misgendering, deliberate misgendering is a form of harassment and discrimination. This doesn't just affect organizational culture and reputation. It has a profound effect on non-binary individuals—even [contributing to self-harm or suicidality](#).

For transgender, non-binary and gender-nonconforming people, the battle for correct gender pronoun usage is ongoing—which is why getting it right in the workplace is crucial. And it's up to HR to make it happen.

Including pronouns in your DE&I policies should focus on the following areas:

- Sensitizing and normalizing pronoun usage in the workplace
- Training colleagues, managers, and executives on non-binary pronouns
- Developing protocol to handle misgendering and protect non-binary employees



Four crucial steps for including pronouns in your DE&I policies

Step one: Learn

Ignorance and insensitivity are one of the main barriers to the inclusion of non-binary individuals in the workplace. Colleagues may not appreciate the importance of using correct pronouns or may simply be uncomfortable. Even HR leaders may not be familiar with the range of non-binary pronouns.

Many people understand that male and female refer to a gender binary and that non-binary individuals do not identify with these traditional terms. Many may also appreciate that non-binary individuals are not correctly described by terms like he/him or she/her. Since English doesn't have a third option, a popular solution is using they as a gender-neutral, or epicene, singular pronoun.

In 2019, Merriam-Webster declared the singular pronoun they the [word of the year](#), and the APA's style guide recommends that they be preferred in professional writing when referring to a person whose gender is unknown. Derivatives of they include them, theirs, their, and themselves or themselves.

But beyond the fairly accepted they, there are many other gender pronouns commonly being used by non-binary individuals—and there are more emerging all the time.

For HR to work on trans competency and non-binary inclusion, the first step is understanding the full range of gender pronouns. This is by no means a comprehensive list of non-binary pronouns, but these are some of the more commonly used ones.

Commonly used non-binary pronouns

He/She	Him/Her	His/Her	His/Hers	Himself/Herself
ze	zim	zir	zis	zieself
sie	sie	hir	hirs	hirsself
ey	em	eir	eirs	eirself
ve	ver	vis	vers	verself
they	their	them	theirs	themself
e	em	eir	eirs	emself

Before HR leaders can successfully implement non-binary inclusion policies, they need to get beyond they. While this is the most recognized and accepted non-binary pronoun, it is certainly not the only one. Creating opportunities for non-binary individuals to self-identify requires being inclusive of all pronouns, from ey to ze.

Step two: Sensitize

Non-binary employees are constantly explaining who they are and what their pronouns are. This is both unfair and unnecessary. With comprehensive sensitivity training, intrusive and uncomfortable questions can be answered before they are asked.

Non-binary pronoun trainings can be set up in any number of ways, for example, small, roundtable discussions, company-wide programs with external facilitators, or as a part of your ongoing DE&I training.

Any training should give employees a chance to practice using pronouns—after all, practice makes progress—and a ‘script’ of how to correctly use non-binary pronouns.

Even with learning and sensitivity training, fellow employees and managers may still have questions. That’s ok! Give your people ample opportunity to ask questions in public and private forums or anonymously via an online platform.

Finally, offer tips on how to ask non-binary individuals questions kindly. When approached with compassion and genuine concern for using the right pronoun, thoughtful questions can show respect for gender identity.

Step three: Normalize

Developing and implementing pronoun-friendly documentation and processes is where HR can really make a push for DE&I. By integrating non-binary pronouns into every aspect of organizational activities, their correct usage will become commonplace, and the chances of misgendering incidents will go down.

On paper:

- Develop inclusive manuals, forms, and documents that use ungendered language and pronouns (like they) or simply use words like “employee” or “team member”. Make it clear that these words include men, women, and gender non-binary individuals, and that non-binary pronouns are used out of respect for all employees regardless of gender identity.
- Develop a diversity, equity, and inclusion statement that emphasizes correct non-binary pronoun use. This should include a statement against deliberate misgendering as a form of discrimination and harassment.
- Get cross-organizational collaboration and buy-in—culture is a waterfall, so get everyone on board. When executives and managers adopt non-binary pronouns and actively participate by stating their own pronouns, this will propel normalization across the company and set a standard for non-binary inclusion.

In-person:

- Encourage everyone to use neutral language and greetings instead of gendered expressions like “guys” or “ladies” during meetings. This is more welcoming to gender non-conforming individuals, both within your organization and externally.
- Keep it casual by asking everyone in the room to introduce themselves and state their pronouns if they choose. From onboarding to conferences, this empowers employees to state their pronouns, and it encourages others to adopt them in a non-threatening way. Plus, when others are participating, this promotes equal treatment of binary gendered and non-binary employees.
- Mistakes happen. Encourage non-binary employees to correct as needed and teach your people to be receptive to these corrections.

Online:

- Compose external communications and recruitment documents without gender. It isn’t enough to write that a position is open to men and women equally. This excludes any candidate that doesn’t identify with the binary and indicates a non-inclusive culture, so be sure to pay extra attention to public-facing publications.
- Allow candidates and employees to state their pronouns. One way to do this is to create gender fields in online platforms, such as email signatures, internal platforms, and job applications. This puts everyone on the same footing instead of singling out non-binary individuals when asking about pronouns. Make sure to include an option for individuals that prefer not to state their pronouns or do not identify with any of the currently used pronouns.

Getting your organization accustomed to non-binary pronouns means incorporating ungendered or non-binary language and pronouns into every aspect of work life. This will make it natural for colleagues and managers and create an environment of inclusion, acceptance, and compassion for non-binary employees.

Even if you do not currently employ non-binary individuals, rolling out non-binary pronouns as a company standard is vital. This is your organization's culture, so take DE&I seriously and get your people used to ungendered language. Not for one person, but for all people.



Step four: Listen

You can't assume someone's gender based on their appearance, making it imperative for HR leaders to take action in incorporating gender-neutral pronoun usage into any DE&I initiative. While standardizing all documents and communications to use the singular they is the first step, this is not the only commonly used pronoun.

According to a [2019 Pew survey](#), at least 35% of people aged 18-25 know someone who identifies with non-binary gender pronouns, and 59% agreed that non-binary pronouns should be accommodated in forms and documents. HR can move the dial on DE&I by giving employees opportunities to state their pronouns and by providing a range of options in drop-down fields on online platforms, including the ability to add an alternate option. This will ensure that your people aren't getting left behind or left out.

But once these procedural changes are in place, it's vital to give employees, both non-binary and binary gendered, opportunities to communicate and give feedback about these efforts. It takes ongoing vigilance to keep culture compassionate and non-binary inclusive, so don't stop while you're ahead.

Keep your finger on the pulse by creating ample listening opportunities—for all employees. Here are some forums that can provide a stage for learning how your people feel about non-binary pronoun usage, misgendering in the workplace, and other issues:

- Open door policy for managers and HR
- Anonymous digital surveys and Q&A
- In-person team meetings
- One on one check-ins
- Company-wide ongoing training

Once you've taken the time to listen, take action and address them swiftly if any issues come up.

An important note

It's possible that not all of your people will want to state their pronouns and that's okay. Making gender pronouns a mandatory field or requirement **can be discriminatory** if the individual does not have a pronoun that represents them or if they prefer not to disclose their gender. So, keep stating pronouns optional to ensure that no one feels forced or excluded. This should include email signatures, social media profiles, and in-person meetings.



Conclusion

Non-binary employees don't have the privilege of 'letting it go' when they are misgendered. That kind of attitude has no place in the workplace. It's the responsibility of every organization, with HR at the helm, to create an inclusive and welcoming environment—regardless of how a person identifies.

One of the most important ways to promote DE&I policies that are friendly to all genders is to normalize and implement the usage of non-binary pronouns. While changing manuals, documentation, processes, and office language can seem daunting, using digital tools can help align your people with this purpose and create opportunities for communication and connection.

HR are the leaders of workplace culture, and by taking DE&I seriously, they can make a serious impact not just at the office but in society at large. Your people are more than he's and she's, so be proactive about pronouns.



Meet bob

We know how important it is to make holistic and culturally sensitive decisions about your people, especially in light of today's modern workplace trends. That's why we built bob, a people management platform that fosters an inclusive culture and boosts employee satisfaction with non-binary gender identification capabilities

The main tools that bob uses to address these topics can be found using our Reports, Custom Gender Selection, and Pronoun Preference functionalities.

Use all of this people data to help you plan events, accommodations, and facilities, in addition to determining company policies and training. Put your people's wellbeing first and boost employee satisfaction by being inclusive.

bob creates an inclusive workplace

Custom gender selection

Add custom fields to the gender list, including non-binary identities in profiles. Apply grouping and filters to:

- Personalized onboarding
- Employee Profiles
- Culture Clubs

Pronoun preference

Empower employees by allowing them to choose their preferred pronoun. Options include:

- They/them
- Xe/xem
- Ze/zir
- Add your own manually to meet your team's needs

Reports and insights

Filter by accurate and relevant gender details by analyzing:

- Surveys
- Lifecycle Feedback
- Talent Groups

Now is the time to make smarter decisions when it comes to your people and organization.

To learn more about Hibob and our data-driven tools, get in touch with us at

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