

Young gay execs look to break 'pink ceiling'

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By Ben Klayman and Kim Dixon

CHICAGO, May 7 (Reuters) - Corporate boardrooms are slowly becoming a somewhat friendlier place for gay executives, but as John Browne's sudden exit from the top job at oil major BP Plc <BP.L> showed when his sexuality became public fodder, there are still challenges to overcome.

Browne stepped down last week when a UK court lifted an injunction preventing a newspaper group from publishing details about his private life. He was scheduled to retire in July, but stepped aside to "avoid unnecessary embarrassment and distraction to the company," adding he had always regarded his sexuality as a private matter.

"There still is a pink ceiling for openly gay executives," said Malcolm Lazin, executive director of Equality Forum, a group that promotes civil rights for gays.

"We are clearly going through a transitional moment, as the black civil rights movement and women's civil right movement went through," he added.

Browne felt the need to keep his sexuality private despite his high profile position, something that likely led to his problems.

"By not being out and being open, you do create a certain amount of questioning around you. Often times it creates a bit of mystery around an individual," said Eric Bloem, an official with the Human Rights Campaign, another gay civil rights group.

And Browne is not alone, according to Kirk Snyder, a lecturer at the University of Southern California's business school.

"Talking with executives and people in the position to become CEO, I have found that there are at least five closeted CEOs in the Fortune 500," said Snyder, author of the book, "The G Quotient: Why Gay Executives Are Excelling As Leaders." He declined to name the executives.

"It's a personal issue," he added. "There are a lot of psychological elements and economical elements."

While there are no known gay CEOs among large companies, many corporate observers said the next generation of gay executives are not willing to hide that part of their lives.

OUT IN THE OPEN

"What you are seeing, is the next generation is unwilling to live in the closet," Lazin said. "Those capable young executives will choose only to go to these places where they believe meritocracy prevails."

Throw in nondiscrimination policies and same-sex health care benefits by a growing number of U.S. companies, and the environment is changing.

The U.S. House recently introduced legislation making it illegal to fire someone because of their sexual orientation, something that is legal in 33 states.

On Friday, former Wisconsin Gov. Tommy Thompson apologized for saying at the Republican presidential debate that private employers should be allowed to fire gay employees because of their sexual preference. He later told a morning television show he misinterpreted the question and discrimination was not acceptable.

The American Family Association, which opposes companies giving gays equal employment protection and benefits, cares more where corporate money is spent.

"Our thing is not with the internal hiring practices with corporations," AFA President Donald Wildmon said. "We would have no way of knowing nor would we really care how many gays or homosexuals this company hired. What we care about is

using (company) profits to further the political and social agenda of the movement."

However, companies realize that to attract the best talent, they must provide a welcome atmosphere, executive recruiters said.

"I am not seeing any kind of a shakedown at the top saying, 'We want only straight males or females running our company.' It is unheard of," said Seth Harris, executive vice president with Chicago-based Cook Associates. "It's about the success based on past merits and the ability to get the job done."

Nevertheless, Lazin wonders whether Browne would have resigned if he had had a liaison with a woman.

"I do think there is still a double standard there," he said. "It reflects an inequality and a moment in time when society is becoming comfortable around same-sex relationships but is not quite there yet."

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