



Cook's declaration part of his 'empathetic' Apple mission

By Marco della Cava and Elizabeth Weise

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(Photo: Hulu.com, Charlierose.com)

SAN FRANCISCO – Apple's Tim Cook is the first publicly gay CEO of a Fortune 500 company. Amid the din of applause, one might also ask: What took so long?

Public confirmations of sexuality have increased in Hollywood, and have started to appear in the sports world, including football player Michael Sam who came out right before this year's NFL draft. But it's rare to see in the traditionally conservative business world, let alone at one of the world's most profitable tech companies.

The ripple effect of Cook's essay in Bloomberg Businessweek magazine Thursday was immediate, generating tweets from the likes of Richard Branson ("Inspirational words") and Microsoft CEO Satya Nadella ("Inspired by @tim_cook").

Before Cook, the most senior gay exec was British Petroleum's John Browne, who resigned in 2007 after his sexuality was revealed by a British tabloid. He has since lobbied for more openness in the workplace, particularly in his June book, *The Glass Closet: Why Coming Out Is Good for Business*.

Many observers hope Cook's statement will have a noticeable impact on office culture.

"This serves as an opening of the door for other CEOs, senior-level managers and executives to say I'm ready to bring my authentic self to the office, (that) it's an asset to be out and proud in the workplace," says Justin Nelson, co-founder and president of the National Gay & Lesbian Chamber of Commerce.

Going one step further is Chad Griffin, president of Humans Right Campaign, which conferred upon Cook his pioneering Fortune 500 status: "Tim Cook's announcement today will save countless lives. ...Millions across the globe will draw inspiration from a different aspect of his life."

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Perhaps. But the workplace remains riddled with if not overt than veiled prejudice, says Suki Sandhu, CEO of OUTstanding, a non-profit network for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender executives.

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"We've taken huge strides in terms of diversity and gay equality, but there is clear evidence that homophobia still persists in the workplace, manifest in the harassment and lower pay for LGBT workers," Sandhu says. "These factors undoubtedly create a perception for many gay people that it is safer to stay in the closet."

It is interesting to note that in the heart of Silicon Valley, Cook's bombshell didn't detonate like it did elsewhere. In fact, longtime Silicon Valley futurist Paul Saffo barely raised an eyebrow.

"I saw an email come through about Tim's essay and I didn't even open it, that's how much this isn't news here," says Saffo. "It was more like, 'Oh, Tim's

official now. Cool.' Perhaps that tells you much of what you need to know about Silicon Valley. It's hard not to have friends across the gay and lesbian community here."

Indeed, it wouldn't have taken much to predict this turn of events: Cook led Apple's contingent at a recent gay pride parade here, and was No. 2 behind entertainer Ellen Degeneres on Out magazine's annual list of powerful LGBT figures. And Cook hardly is alone as a tech force who is gay. Just recently, the White House named Google(x) whiz Megan Smith, formerly CEO of the gay website Planet Out, as the nation's chief technology officer.

But while some may not view Cook's news as news, that doesn't diminish the impact of his announcement on a broader culture that still grapples with racial and gender equality.

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Although the leader of the world's most powerful tech company may be openly gay, homosexuality remains illegal in nearly 80 countries. And while gay marriage advocates have seen their causes adopted in a growing number of states, it's safe to say Silicon Valley is not America at large.

"We still have 29 states where Tim could legally be fired by Apple for being gay," says Todd Sears, a former investment banker and founder of OutLeadership. He says Cook's announcement will spotlight the hypocrisy of companies here and abroad.

"In Singapore, which considers itself in the global business community, it's not only illegal to be gay but its highest court has declined to overturn the law again," he says. "So it raises the question, when Tim Cook goes to Singapore, what are they going to do? Arrest the CEO of the world's most valuable company?"

Cook's proud declaration invoked the inspiration the Alabaman felt from the twin moral towers of Martin Luther King, Jr., and Robert Kennedy, both of whom pursued a life of helping others.

Cook wrote that his desire for privacy had long kept him silent. But his decision to go public ultimately was both bold and daring. At one point, he even linked his sexuality to religion. Wrote Cook: "I'm proud to be gay, and I consider being gay among the greatest gifts God has given me."

Cook's statement comes a week after a speech he gave in Alabama last week, challenging officials on its LGBT stance.

The cut-throat nature of the tech business is at the root of why Apple and its peers tend to care less about what your sexuality is and more about what you can do, says John Roberts, partner at Denver Investments and creator of the Workplace Equality Index.

"It's all about, can you code?," he says. "We don't care what you wear to the office. You can wear flip flops and a thong, but can you code?"



Apple CEO Tim Cook looks at the new iMac (Photo: USA TODAY)

Roberts says companies that adopt inclusive workplace policies "outperform their peers, it's stunning, they do much better than the broad market," he says.

One reason may be that LGBT employees who are embraced by their companies don't have their energy siphoned off by efforts to conceal their true nature, says Sandhu.

"The mental capacity required by LGBT employees to lead a double life in the office reduces their ability to perform, and this can ultimately damage a business's bottom line,"

says Sandhu. "I whole-heartedly welcome Tim's decision, and hope it will inspire (other gay leaders) to embrace who they are and break through the glass closet."



USA TODAY's Jefferson Graham visits a tech co-working space in Venice Beach, California to get reaction from tech workers to the coming out announcement from Apple CEO Tim Cook.

Having a top exec in your company being out indeed "sends a message throughout the whole company that it's a safe place to come out," says Selisse Berry, founder and CEO of non-profit Out & Equal Workplace Advocates.

Her advice for those struggling with how to come out: "A really simple thing is to put your partner's picture on your desk," she says. And when people ask, "answer honestly."

For Silicon Valley denizen Saffo, the importance of Cook's essay lies less in the personal confession and more in what it says about the Apple leader's ability to redefine the maverick company in the post-Steve Jobs era.

"This isn't a spotlight on Tim's sexuality, it's on his empathy," he says. "Since he's taken over (after Job's death in 2011), Tim has gradually pushed a series of progressive policies at Apple that include everything from charitable giving to environmental concerns.

"So this is just a part of that bigger picture. It just means Tim will no longer have to walk a tightrope when it comes to who he is."