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## Why it still matters that Apple CEO Tim Cook announced he's gay

By Thomas Lee

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Apple CEO Tim Cook's decision to tell the world he is gay feels a lot like his company's much-anticipated product launches: The public already knows the news before the event, but the event is momentous nonetheless.

As Cook noted in an essay for [Bloomberg Businessweek](#), he has been quite open about his sexuality with many people. But there's a difference between friends and colleagues knowing you're gay and telling the planet.

Just a few years ago, states were writing into constitutions that marriage was strictly between a man and a woman. Now the CEO of the world's most valuable company can proclaim that he considers "being gay among the greatest gifts God has given me."

"The world has advanced to the point that (sexuality) is a total non-issue," said Gerald Storch, a former CEO of Toys R Us. "Ten years ago, CEOs might have kept it closer to the vest because of consumer backlash."

Storch makes an interesting point. While Cook's decision is certainly brave, it perhaps speaks more about us than it does about the Apple CEO.

Remember, for all the personal attachment we have to the company's products, Apple is still a publicly traded company that must answer to shareholders. Sales and profits rule on Wall Street, not a leader's sexual orientation.

"Apple is a business, not a social group," said Billie Blair, a management consultant who advises several boards of directors. The only way a board would care about a CEO's sexual orientation if it somehow drove away customers and sales and profits fell, she said.

"Then the board would be forced to look at the issue," Blair said. "It's not about the sexuality of the CEO but rather what the CEO's sexuality does to the business."

In Cook's case, absolutely nothing. Apple's products will continue to fly off the shelf for the foreseeable future. Consumers don't care about Cook's sexuality as much as they care about the battery life and design aesthetics of the iPhone 6 and Apple Watch.

And Cook was confident enough about that to write the essay.

“Apple makes products that are so beloved that even the one person who says that Cook’s sexuality is a bad thing probably still has an iPhone in his pocket,” said Wendy Patrick, a professor of business ethics at San Diego State University.

But we also must not overestimate Cook’s potential impact on the business world beyond Apple. That Cook could comfortably and confidently disclose his sexuality has a great deal to do with his unique circumstances at Apple.

First of all, Apple, as a child of Silicon Valley, already enjoys a reputation for being progressive. Could Cook come out in more conservative industries like energy or finance? It would be hard to picture a CEO of ExxonMobil or Goldman Sachs penning any kind of personal essay in a national magazine.

Cook is also a longtime employee of Apple and a close confidant to the late Steve Jobs. He worked for years to earn the respect of the company and investors. As a new hire, would Cook feel the same freedom?

Because of these distinct factors, Cook was able to control when and how he would come out. John Browne did not enjoy that luxury.

Several months ago I spoke to Browne about [“The Glass Closet,”](#) a memoir of sorts recounting his resignation as CEO from BP in 2007 after British tabloids disclosed his relationship with a younger man.

“Those were the most nightmarish few months of my life,” Browne wrote.

Because of Browne’s fear of disclosing his sexuality, he turned to an escort service because he felt that was the only way he could discreetly meet men. And Browne was right to be cautious: The backlash against him was severe.

Today, Browne regrets not coming out sooner. It takes an enormous amount of energy to hide your sexuality, energy best spent focusing on your job and career, he said.

“You just need to get people to be themselves in the workplace,” Browne told me. “When you can’t portray who you are as a whole person, it’s tough to be a good member of the team.”

Acceptance of the LGBT community has come a long way since 2007. Thirty two states offer legal same-sex marriage; courts have overturned gay marriage bans in another five states. The U.S. Supreme Court also gutted a key provision of the federal Defense of Marriage Act, which denied federal benefits to same sex couples.

“We are already moving in the right direction,” said Selisse Berry, founder and CEO of the advocacy group Out & Equal. “Hopefully, (Cook’s announcement) will be a tipping point” for corporate America.

Even so, whether today’s executives and employees choose to come out will still largely depend on a person’s individual circumstances and a company’s particular culture.

But, as Cook hopes, his decision could make the road a little less treacherous for gays and lesbians in the workplace.

“If hearing that the CEO of Apple is gay can help someone struggling to come to terms with who he or she is, or bring comfort to anyone who feels alone, or inspire people to insist on their equality, then it’s worth the trade-off with my own privacy,” Cook wrote.

<http://www.sfgate.com/nation/article/Why-it-still-matters-that-Apple-CEO-Tim-Cook-5859605.php>