



pronouns in adland

ALL IN

 **Outvertising**



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pronouns in adland



Thank you for being part of UK adland's efforts - led by Outvertising - to be completely LGBTQIA+ inclusive, and in this particular case to be the most welcoming business sector in terms of the use of pronouns in the workplace. This document is designed to help an organisation create a safer and more welcoming environment where people can readily share their chosen pronouns. It must be part of a larger consultation, education and training programme. Care must be taken not to isolate or discomfort any individuals, whether or not they choose to state and show their pronouns. Stating pronouns is a personal choice. This resource can help to inform that choice.

Here we have tried to capture best practice at the time of writing but are aware that detailed thoughts and opinions on our subject matter may differ. We welcome comments and suggestions for improvement.

This document was written by Mark Runacus MBE, Non Executive Chair of Outvertising. Thanks to all those mentioned and to everyone who contributed, supported and provided encouragement along the way.

You are most welcome to use part or all of this content for your own internal purposes, but please acknowledge #AllIn and Outvertising.



“I am proud to support this initiative and encourage everyone who wishes to share their pronouns to do so with pride.”

Julian Douglas, CEO VCCP

“We believe that an inclusive working environment is the right thing to do. We think it delivers better work.”

**Jenny Biggam, Founder,
and Liam Mullins,
Managing Partner,
the7stars**



“I want absolutely everyone at dentsu to feel welcomed and celebrated. I encourage my colleagues to share their pronouns.”

**Anne Stagg,
CEO dentsu CXM UK**

“Respecting and acknowledging pronouns is a vital step demonstrating allyship toward our own colleagues and those of our clients.”

**Daryl Lee,
CEO McCann Worldgroup**





All In is the industry's initiative to improve inclusion and representation within UK advertising, created by the Advertising Association, the IPA, and ISBA. First launched in 2021, the All In Census is UK advertising's only industry-wide survey of its kind. Almost 19,000 advertising and marketing professionals took part in the second All In Census in March 2023, providing new insights on the representation and experience of UK advertising's workforce, plus data to benchmark progress from.

The All In Census data provides the most detailed understanding yet of the industry's workforce and helps shape the All In Action Plan, currently eight actions which companies across the industry are encouraged to implement to achieve greater inclusivity.

<https://advertisingallin.co.uk/>

utvertising

Outvertising is adland's volunteer-run non profit advocacy group for the LGBTQIA+ community. It's purpose is to make UK advertising completely LGBTQIA+ inclusive.

Internally by supporting the LGBTQIA+ community and its allies working in the industry through education and training including active ally training, role model training, and mentoring.

And externally by encouraging and assisting brands and their agency partners to create more authentic LGBTQIA+ inclusive advertising and content through case studies, insight and guidance.

www.outvertising.org



why?

Sharing pronouns in the workplace really makes our trans and non-binary colleagues feel seen, heard, and celebrated. It sends a hugely powerful welcoming signal to everyone else, whether they're LGBTQIA+ or not. It shows you care. Your organisation is human. You're progressive. In turn that will have a positive impact on your recruitment and retention.

And we use pronouns every day, all the time. If you haven't stopped to consider them, in English grammar they are the words we use to refer to someone or something when we don't need to use their name, often because the person has been mentioned earlier.

how



The most common pronoun examples for the third person are he, she, and they. You may have noticed that some people are stating their pronouns in their email footers, on LinkedIn, and elsewhere. Meetings and presentations may begin with people introducing themselves and stating their pronouns. And in those situations you will also have noticed that different pronouns are becoming common, like “They” for example, which is a gender-neutral pronoun being used as a singular pronoun.

In a survey in 2022, research company YouGov found that 38% of people in the UK have come across people saying or displaying their pronouns. Young people are more likely to have experienced this, with 77% of those aged 18-24 experiencing someone showing or stating their pronouns. In the same survey 10% of people felt that everyone should generally show their pronouns, while the largest percentage - 48% - felt that only those that wish to should display their pronouns. In the 18-24 age group, 62% agree with that sentiment.

The gender neutral pronouns like “They and Their” have been used in the singular form in English since at least the 14th century. And although we may not realise it we already use them in everyday conversation. For example, you might say “Someone’s left their rucksack here.”

Using gender-neutral pronouns, which means referring to someone without implying or defining their gender, is very important for some of our colleagues, for a variety of reasons. And when that is the case, it’s important we get it right, just like we’d want to get it right when we use their name. It’s a very personal thing and conforming with requested usage shows respect.

implied gender

Some pronouns imply a gender. As a result people make assumptions when they use those pronouns and when they hear them being used. Those assumptions may be wrong, and the act of making that assumption sends out a potentially harmful message to everyone else.

Those assumptions are particularly unwelcome for some of our colleagues. For example, someone who is questioning their gender. There are others too.

In every case it could be seen as harmful, offensive, or harassing to guess at people's pronouns and refer to them using those pronouns before establishing how a person wants to be known.

Refrain from making assumptions about someone's gender based on the way they dress, it may not reflect their gender identity or the appearance usually associated with their gender identity.

We all have our own style, and it isn't always about how we represent our gender.



Here is more information about some of the commonly-used terms people may use to describe themselves:

fluid

Gender fluidity refers to change over time in a person's gender expression or gender identity or both.

non-conforming

Gender non-conforming people do not follow other people's' ideas or stereotypes about how they should look or act.

non-binary

A person who does not identify exclusively as a man or a woman. Someone who is non-binary might feel like a mix of genders, or like they have no gender at all.





trans

Transgender and Trans are broad terms that can be used to describe people whose gender identity is different from the gender they were assigned at birth.

intersex

Having characteristics and/or physiology that doesn't fit into a male/female binary.

asexual

Although it's not a gender identity or characteristic, asexual people can experience little, no, or varying sexual or romantic attraction towards other people. Sometimes also referred to as ace.

multiple pronouns

We've talked about the danger and potential for distress in assuming people's pronouns. We've talked about gender neutral pronouns. We should also talk about changing pronouns and multiple pronouns.

It's quite common for people to begin to challenge assumptions about their identity including their gender and sexual orientation. You'll often hear it referred to as a journey of self exploration and understanding. As a result, their pronouns may not stay the same. We'll talk later about how to check on someone's pronouns in a caring and welcoming way.

So some people choose multiple pronouns: for example he/they and she/they. That usually means they are comfortable for you to use either and both. If you're not sure, do ask them. Don't forget there may be a number of reasons why people have multiple pronouns, for example, some people aren't open about their identity in certain environments, at work or at home. Some people are trying a different pronoun and are beginning to understand how it feels for them and others.



no pronouns

Another way in which people express their individual gender identity is by not using pronouns at all, and instead using their name. For example, instead of using a pronoun for Riley you could simply say “That’s Riley’s suitcase. Riley asked that we take it with us.”

gender ≠ sexual orientation

We've referred a few times to gender identity and sexual orientation. It's probably worth pausing to discuss them and ensure we have a broad understanding.

Gender identity is your internal sense of being a woman, a man, or something else entirely. It's about who you feel you are, and it may or may not correspond to what you were assigned at birth.

Gender expression is how you choose to reflect your gender identity in your physical appearance.

Sexual orientation is about who you're attracted to romantically and/or sexually. This can be men, women, both, or neither.

Here's an analogy that some people find helpful: imagine gender identity is your internal compass pointing to who you are. Sexual or romantic orientation is about whom you're drawn to using that compass.



international

If you are part of an international organisation or you regularly do business with people from other countries it is important to consider the international context of pronoun use. And also to acknowledge that in this document we are predominantly talking about the use of the English language. Nevertheless Anglocentric culture continues to dominate, certainly in a business context.

Cultural norms: sharing pronouns isn't as common in all cultures. It's important to research pronoun norms in the other countries your business operates in. In some cultures, it might be seen as unnecessary or intrusive.

Language barriers: not all languages have established gender-neutral pronouns, whilst others don't have any gender specific pronouns and only use neutral ones.

Many East Asian languages, like Mandarin Chinese, Japanese, and Korean, don't have grammatical gender in pronouns. They might have separate words for things like "man" and "woman," but pronouns themselves are gender-neutral. Languages like Finnish and Hungarian have a separate pronoun for "it" but use a single pronoun for "he" and "she." Tagalog (spoken in the Philippines) and Indonesian, uses gender-neutral pronouns.





It is recommended that you review how other commonly-used business languages are evolving and adapting in this context. For example, some Spanish speakers are choosing to use “Elle” and “Le” as a gender neutral pronoun, and are replacing the gendered suffixes for adjectives “o” and “a” with “e”, so “hermose” instead of hermoso or hermosa (handsome or beautiful).

And even in a UK workplace you are likely to come across colleagues from a wide variety of cultural backgrounds with an equally wide variety of names and naming structures, so don’t make pronoun assumptions based on your own lived experience.

correct use

When you share your pronouns, it can show a form of allyship, proving your workplace is welcoming and inclusive.

Inclusivity: when allies display pronouns, it sends a message that your workplace is committed to fostering a culture of inclusion for everyone, regardless of gender identity.

Respect: it shows that the workplace values respect for all employees and their identities.

Psychological safety: by creating an environment where pronoun sharing is normal, transgender and non-binary employees feel safer expressing themselves as they wish.

Future proofing: the use of pronouns in the work environment is becoming increasingly common. Industry estimates suggest up to 20% of some social media profiles globally now show their pronouns where it is available.

We know that people seek workplaces that are safe and welcoming, and organisations that ignore this issue may risk alienating potential new talent and losing their existing talent.

ask



If you're not sure what a colleague's pronouns are, you can ask.

The ask:

- **Simple and direct:** "Hi [colleague's name], what pronouns do you use?" This is a straightforward approach that gets right to the point.
- **Introduce yourself:** "Hi [colleague's name], I'm [your name]. My pronouns are she/her. What pronouns do you prefer?" This is a friendly way to introduce yourself while also prompting them to share theirs.
- **Normalise It:** "Hey [colleague's Name], I'm updating my contact info and adding pronouns. What pronouns would you like me to use for you?" This approach positions pronoun sharing as a common practice.

And of course look out for pronoun indication in email signatures, which isn't always used by trans or non-binary people but can be a clear way to indicate preference.

You can also use gender neutral pronouns to refer to someone you've not had contact with yet, or simply refer to them by their name. It may feel simpler to refer to everyone with gender neutral pronouns (e.g. they/them), but you could offend or misgender someone by doing so. Use a colleague's desired pronouns or form of address once you're aware of them.

tips

Confidence: even if you feel a little nervous, project confidence when asking. And if that isn't your style, try embracing the awkwardness. Most will see it as human and endearing. If unsure, think about how you would feel if you were asked that type of question, and try not to make assumptions or generalisations.

The moment matters: try to ask in a private setting during a lull in conversation. Avoid asking in front of a large group.

Listen actively: pay attention to their response and use their pronouns consistently from then on.



allies

Normalisation and visibility: when you as an ally display your pronouns, it makes it more commonplace for everyone. This can help transgender and non-binary colleagues feel more comfortable sharing their pronouns as well. It creates a culture of open communication and respect for gender identity.

Reduced misgendering: by showing your pronouns, you set an example for others to do the same. This can significantly reduce the chance of someone accidentally misgendering a transgender or non-binary colleague. Misgendering can be hurtful, so this simple act can create a more inclusive environment.

Openness and support: including your pronouns can demonstrate that you're an open-minded and supportive colleague. It shows transgender and non-binary folks that you respect their identity and are willing to create a space where everyone feels comfortable being themselves.

Remember: even if not everyone participates, your act of allyship paves the way for a more respectful and inclusive work environment for everyone.

getting it wrong

If you make a mistake when referring to a colleague, apologise, correct yourself and move on. Avoid apologising too much, as this can draw further attention to your mistake and make your colleague uncomfortable.

Try practicing referring to your colleague by their correct pronouns. Try this beyond your office space, perhaps by yourself or with other colleagues. For example: 'This is my colleague Lana, they booked the meeting room earlier.'

Additional tips

Be open to learning: if your colleague offers a brief explanation of their pronouns or gender identity, listen openly and respectfully.

Normalise pronouns: if you see others struggling with pronouns, you can offer a gentle reminder or clarification in a private way.

Repeatedly using an incorrect pronoun, however, can potentially create a hostile environment.

We recommend being clear to colleagues on how this relates to your discrimination, bullying and harassment policies.



everyday

For pronoun sharing to make a difference it is important that their correct use becomes matter of fact. In summary they should be shared in any situation where names are also used. The most common usage at the moment is on email footers, along with an educational explanation often provided by a link to another independent resource like <https://pronouns.org/>.

The employer should provide easy-to-use templates and technical resources to support this. It is important that those who do not choose to show their pronouns are not highlighted.

Workplace sharing should always be optional.

here are some other situations when you can share pronouns



Introductions: when introducing yourself or someone else, including pronouns normalises the practice and sets the tone for respectful communication.

Meetings and presentations: when referring to colleagues in meetings or presentations, using their chosen pronouns ensures clear communication and avoids misgendering anyone. It is important that leaders and allies step up here.

Online profiles: employers can also encourage colleagues to share pronouns in work-related online profiles.

Small talk and casual conversations: using pronouns in casual conversation demonstrates respect and avoids assumptions about someone's gender identity.

Events: speakers should share their pronouns as part of a more inclusive introduction. Pronouns can also be used on name badges.

case studies

Sharing pronouns in our adland workplaces will help make them the most welcoming environments.

Some organisations have kindly agreed to share their experiences so we can learn from each other.

From these early cases we can see some common factors which lead to successful and effective outcomes:

1. The implementation is led by the CEO who is an active ally
2. There is no big launch, more of a gradual introduction with ongoing activity to support it.
3. That ongoing support includes formal and informal education, training and events, including LGBTQIA+ celebrations like Pride and various days of awareness.
4. Pronoun sharing is embedded into day to day activities and recruitment and retention processes.

VCCP

VCCP is a global integrated creative, media & production agency.

The process of introducing pronouns into the workplace at VCCP began in 2021 during the COVID lockdown. Like many organisations VCCP found innovative ways to bring colleagues together online.

VCCP's DE&I Collective launched a weekly email series called Friday Film Features, designed to educate colleagues on DE&I topics through film and TV recommendations.

During LGBTQ+ History Month in February 2021, the DE&I Collective included a section on pronouns in the Friday Film Feature as a way of educating colleagues and opening up the conversation about pronouns.

As a result there wasn't a single focus or a big launch. Instead, VCCP created an inclusive environment where colleagues were encouraged gradually to share their pronouns if they felt comfortable to - whether as a member of the LGBTQIA+ community or an ally.



VCCCP

Employees were supported with education and information, including reminders during LGBTQIA+ History Month and Pride.

The gradual introduction saw pronouns become part of VCCCP's recruitment process, creating a space for new employees to disclose their preferred pronouns during the recruitment process to avoid being mis-gendered from day one.

Pronouns also feature in the agency's Manual Of Me, a tool which helps build strong communication between managers and employees from day one around ways of working and how they can get the best out of each other.





Julian Douglas, CEO

“At VCCP we are focused on creating a workplace where everyone feels a true sense of belonging and the ‘Pronouns in Adland’ initiative can help us take a step closer toward this goal. For many, using and respecting pronouns is a simple yet powerful way to self-identify, show allyship and create a culture of inclusivity. I am proud to support this initiative and encourage everyone who wishes to share their pronouns to do so with pride.”



dentsu

Dentsu is a global marketing and advertising agency. Dentsu UK took the decision to introduce pronouns into all their UK agencies which include media, creative, and CRM businesses.

Leading the process is Dentsu UK's DEI Director Nicole Basra. She explained that promoting the use of pronouns in their workplace is essential for fostering an inclusive working environment at the company.

Usage of pronouns at dentsu continues to evolve over time with more and more opportunities to spread the message, educate and show the benefits.

Nicole explained: "We are actively promoting usage of pronouns in email signatures, LinkedIn profiles, through communications and while giving out pronoun badges at employee events and roadshows." So far Nicole says she hasn't encountered any active resistance to the policy: "I believe it's a matter of education to illuminate unfamiliarity and potential discomfort. The more we talk about it, provide education, and encourage conversation, the more we will build a culture where the usage of pronouns becomes part of the way we do things."

dentsu

Nika Houkes is a Lead Solutions Architect at Merkle, which is part of the Dentsu Group. Nika identifies as non-binary. They explained why sharing pronouns in the workplace is important to them:

“My pronouns are inherently linked to my identity. Before I came out as non-binary, I had lower self-esteem because I didn’t fully understand who I was and why trying to fit into society’s norm of a ‘woman’ made me uncomfortable.”

“Pronouns are more than a gimmick, to me they’re almost as important as getting someone’s name right. I certainly feel a small ripple of discomfort when someone misgenders me.”

(When someone gets it right) “It signals to me that these people **have** thought about pronouns and that genders aren’t black and white. It shows me that they’re allies, and that I’m in a safe space.”

Anne Stagg, CEO

dentsu CXM UK

“I want everyone at dentsu to feel welcomed and celebrated. I encourage my colleagues to share their pronouns, and it’s just one of the things we do to make ours a completely inclusive workplace.”

dentsu



the7stars

The7stars is the UK's largest independent media agency “delivering forward thinking media buying and planning”.

It took its first step in encouraging the sharing of pronouns in the workplace in June 2021 with the publication of an internal helper guide with tips on using inclusive language, definitions of gender identity, and useful resources for further information. Pronouns on emails footers were introduced at the same time.

This was followed by a Q & A session with Not A Phase, a trans-led grassroots charity, discussing trans equality in the UK and in the workplace.

In 2022 and 2023 the agency also worked with We Create Space and staged internal events which covered intersectionality, and mindful communications. Most recently the agency has encouraged colleagues to include pronouns on Microsoft systems for internal visibility.

the7stars

The7stars Digital Planner Abi Fenn says “As part of our commitment to diversity and inclusion, the7stars has implemented various initiatives to promote the use of correct pronouns and foster an environment of respect and acceptance.”

David Mullins, Office Manager said: "I feel that the7stars really strives to do the right thing championing Inclusivity and diversity amongst other initiatives. All the work and inspirational talks really help to guide us and provide knowledge and understanding which we can then think around and act on. The talks are my favourite. It's great to get a feel and actually hear someone's life experiences, struggles and how they have managed to deal with them."





the7stars

The team at the7stars realise that if they are to achieve their aim of making sharing pronouns the norm, the work continues

Their next steps include developing advanced training modules for everyone in the agency and reviewing and updating all policies to ensure they are completely inclusive and affirming of all identities.

They are also working with external LGBTQIA+ organisations to gather insights and understand what is best practice in this area, and integrating pronoun education into the agency's ongoing professional development programmes and resources.

Jenny Biggam Liam Mullins

Founder, Managing Partner

“At the7stars we are proud of the strides we’ve made towards creating a more inclusive workplace. Encouraging the use of pronouns in signatures and facilitating informative talks are just some of the steps we’ve taken to ensure everyone feels respected and valued. Our commitment to diversity and inclusion is not just a policy, but a core value that shapes our culture and daily practices. We believe that an inclusive working environment is the right thing to do. But more than that, we think it delivers better work for our clients. We believe our campaigns are more inclusive, more creative and more effective because of the culture we foster.”





McCann Worldgroup

McCann Worldgroup is a global creative solutions company, and part of the Interpublic Group, comprising McCann, MRM, CRAFT, and FutureBrand, and partners with Momentum Worldwide, Weber Shandwick and UM to deliver solutions across the entire marketing spectrum.

Their pronoun inclusion strategy began as a global company initiative about five years ago when colleagues were invited to add pronouns to their email signatures. This was supported by an internal e-mail campaign and best practice was shared via on demand resources. Today, email signature templates include pronouns as the default.

And this was all complemented by ongoing global to local DE&I programming that commemorates cultural observances, such global pride, International Pronouns Day, International Transgender Day of Visibility, and more.

McCann is confident that through this activity their expanded understanding of gender identity has contributed to more nuanced, culturally authentic and representative stories to be told through their creative solutions produced in partnership with their clients. This includes Mastercard's True Name™, Freda's Cycle, UK Black Pride's 16th Century Life Expectancy, and Banco de Bogotá's The Immoral Bank campaigns.



McCann Worldgroup

Singleton Beato, Global EVP Chief Diversity Equity and Inclusion Officer at McCann Worldgroup said:

“Using pronouns is more than just a matter of linguistic accuracy; it's an affirmation of individual identity and a cornerstone of true inclusivity. Recognizing the pronouns of our colleagues actively demonstrates our enduring commitment to our global DE&I mission to create the conditions where all people, from all backgrounds and identities, experience a sense of connection, belonging and shared purpose at work each day.”

Rodney Collins, McCann Worldgroup's EVP Global Head of Human Sciences and chair of UK/Europe TruePride Alliance added:

“Pronouns are a fundamental aspect of how people express their identities, and an important indicator of allyship. Their appropriate use is crucial in fostering a respectful and inclusive community. Everyone can contribute by educating themselves and others, as well as by advocating for practices that usualise sharing and respecting pronouns in all spaces, including digital spaces.”

Daryl Lee

CEO McCann Worldgroup

“At McCann Worldgroup, we believe that using pronouns correctly is a fundamental part of our philosophy of conscious inclusion, defined as the consistent behaviors, practices and deliberate actions that foster an inclusive culture.

Respecting and acknowledging the pronouns is a vital step demonstrating allyship toward our own colleagues and those of our clients. It may seem to be a small action, but it is actually a profound step towards fostering an environment where everyone feels seen, heard, and valued.

Together, we can build workplaces where diversity thrives and every individual is empowered to be their true self.”

MW

FAQs

Is showing pronouns mandatory?

No. No-one should feel compelled, coerced or embarrassed by exception into sharing their pronouns. Remember: many non-binary and trans people may choose not to for fear of outing themselves.

Why do we have a policy of encouraging pronouns?

To promote a work environment where *everyone* feels respected and valued. It encourages the use of correct pronouns and fosters inclusivity for all employees, regardless of gender identity.

FAQs

If I share my pronouns will people think I'm coming out?

No. The vast majority of people who share their pronouns are allies.

Can I change my pronouns in the future?

Yes. It's perfectly normal for your feelings and your identity to change.

Who do I talk to if I have more questions or concerns?

Speak to a member of your HR or DEI team. Take a look at some of the other resources mentioned in this document.

#allin

All In is the industry's initiative to improve inclusion and representation in the UK advertising workforce.

The All In Census has run in 2021 & 2023 with the latter achieving almost 19,000 responses. Led by the Advertising Association, IPA and ISBA, conducted by Kantar, the data informs the ongoing All In Action Plan.

Results from the latest #AllIn survey show that the LGB+ community is most likely to leave their jobs in the next 12 months. The queer community in adland is also more likely to be suffering from work-related stress, which at 21% is the second highest group in the survey. Queer adlanders are also more likely to suffer mental health problems and to self-define as disabled.

Queer people of colour are even more likely to want to leave the industry, reporting a lack of inclusion. Queer people of colour are also more likely to be neurodivergent and to self define as disabled. White LGB+ adlanders are more likely to report stress and anxiety.



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