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**Addressing LGBTQ+ Workplace Challenges
in Tourism within Asia**

An IGLTA Foundation Leadership Think Tank Report

Presented by:

simpleview 

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

FOCUS

To address the particular challenges faced by LGBTQ+ workers within the Asian tourism sector, the IGLTA Foundation hosted a Think Tank in October 2024 during the Global Convention of the International LGBTQ+ Travel Association (IGLTA) in Osaka, Japan. This was the organization's first convention in Asia. The lively discussion brought together LGBTQ+ and allied business and thought leaders from across Asia to share their insights and expertise on the obstacles faced by LGBTQ+ workers.

Topics included:

- **How different cultural perceptions and societal norms impact the experiences of LGBTQ+ employees**
- **How current legal protections (or lack thereof) at the national and local level affect the rights of LGBTQ+ employees**
- **How tourism companies can create supportive environments for their LGBTQ+ employees**

The discussion yielded valuable insights into the current state of LGBTQ+ inclusion across the Asian workforce, while also highlighting the complexities and challenges ahead on the path to greater inclusivity, and generating a wide range of practical ideas about how best to get there.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

1

Many LGBTQ+ employees in Asia are still reluctant to come out in the workplace, especially when they can see no benefit in doing so.

2

Implementing LGBTQ+ inclusive policies is vital, but proving commitment to them through consistent top-down actions and reinforcement is just as important.

3

Many forward-looking Asian companies are not waiting for federal legal mandates to offer equal benefits to their LGBTQ+ employees.

4

Intersectionality can be a powerful tool to promote empathy and understanding within a company around LGBTQ+ inclusivity.

5

The time to recognize and nurture the next generation of Asia's proud LGBTQ+ business leaders is now.

Armed with a clearer picture of the status quo and fresh ideas for facing the challenges ahead, we can pave the way for a more equitable and welcoming industry that will benefit employees and travelers alike, ultimately enhancing the overall experience within the Asian tourism sector.

Introduction

While the path to LGBTQ+ equality and inclusion is never simple anywhere across the globe, in Asia it is made all the more complex by the continent's sheer size and diversity. Home to roughly 60% of the world's population, Asia is comprised of some 50 countries with vastly differing attitudes towards LGBTQ+ people. While these varying societal norms can affect the experiences of LGBTQ+ travelers to Asia, in general they far more deeply affect LGBTQ+ Asians themselves, many of whom work within the tourism industry.

As Asian companies strive to implement more inclusive policies for their LGBTQ+ workers, they can learn from the network of businesses in Asia and around the world who have already progressed along this road. Participants of the Think Tank stressed that visibility, education, intersectionality, and empowerment are crucial tools for any tourism company striving for LGBTQ+ inclusivity.

IGLTA's mission is to enable authentic travel that enriches lives and connects the LGBTQ+ community and tourism industry. The IGLTA Foundation, its philanthropic arm, focuses on advancing LGBTQ+ inclusivity in tourism through education, research, and leadership programs. Together, they foster diversity, equality, and safety in travel, supporting LGBTQ+ communities and businesses worldwide.

The Think Tank was held under the Chatham House Rule, so this report serves as a summary and analysis of the discussion, with unattributed quotations.

The IGLTA Foundation is grateful to everyone who participated in the Think Tank. We also want to thank Simpleview for their unwavering support, the Osaka Convention & Tourism Bureau for hosting this international gathering, along with our host hotel the Swissôtel Nankai Osaka.



Cultural Attitudes and Challenges in the Asian Workforce

At the outset of the Think Tank, the moderators stressed that Asia is comprised of many countries with different cultures, different languages, different norms, and different religions. "Asia is very diverse, so we can't say everything is the same across Asia," one of the moderators said.

Generally speaking, however, the moderator pointed out that Asian cultures tend to be more collective and less individualistic, meaning that people often communicate with each other more indirectly, especially about sensitive social topics like LGBTQ+ issues. "We are subtle in terms of expressing the issues, because we believe in living together in harmony," the moderator said. "So it's very hard to use an individualistic approach to encourage people to come out and talk about the issues."

The moderators asked the participants to share their perceptions of the cultural attitudes and challenges facing LGBTQ+ people within the Asian tourism workforce, based upon their experiences and observations in their home countries.

“International firms are much more accepting of LGBTQ+ inclusion versus local and regional companies,” one participant shared.

Another participant said that despite working for a global company with very inclusive policies that protect its LGBTQ+ workers, many young employees in the company’s travel department in Japan are still not open about their sexualities within the workplace. “They say, ‘I am comfortable being in the closet,’” the participant said. “I don’t have to come out because I won’t get any benefit.”

Such reluctance makes clarity and consistency all the more critical when companies talk about their inclusivity policies, another participant stressed. “It’s really important that management says from the get-go, ‘This is how it should be, and we’re all sticking to it,’” the participant said. “This way, everybody feels, ‘Yes, this is right to support.’ And the queer community themselves know that there is a benefit to expressing themselves.”

Challenges can be more acute in rural areas, another participant noted. “A small hotel may be a family business, so coming out is not a personal issue, it’s a family issue,” the participant pointed out, highlighting that **educating non-LGBTQ+ people is vital in supporting local LGBTQ+ workers in rural areas.**



In countries where acceptance is minimal and the LGBTQ+ community is still largely underground, challenges for workers are especially pronounced. “How are we going to create awareness where the mindset already says, ‘There are no gays here?’” one participant openly pondered.

Even when LGBTQ+ people are acknowledged and respected within a country, corporate leadership may still deny that inclusion is something they need to consider. “Many of the corporate people say, ‘Oh, we don’t have those people in my company, so we don’t have to do anything,’” one participant shared.

Another participant offered that even when a company is striving for LGBTQ+ equity and its team members are receiving inclusivity and allyship training, issues can still arise if local vendors do not receive the same training. “One trans colleague came to me in tears because she said, ‘Every day I get called “Sir” by security staff, and this makes me incredibly uncomfortable,’” the participant said.



Legal protections for LGBTQ+ employees

Laws protecting the rights of LGBTQ+ people vary quite dramatically across Asia, which of course directly affects the status, productivity, and happiness of a company's LGBTQ+ employees. One of the moderators asked, "What are the current legal protections for LGBTQ+

employees in your country at the moment? And how can we advocate for better legal support for LGBTQ+ employees?"

A participant shared that progress has been made in Hong Kong toward protecting the relationships of LGBTQ+ citizens, but the legal patchwork there is still navigated on a case-by-case basis. "You can have a visa, you can have same-sex social benefits and many, many things," said the participant. "But these are all ad hoc and piecemeal rather than one legislation that recognizes that an LGBTQ+ relationship is a real relationship. This is a fundamental right in my mind, that we should view all humans with respect."

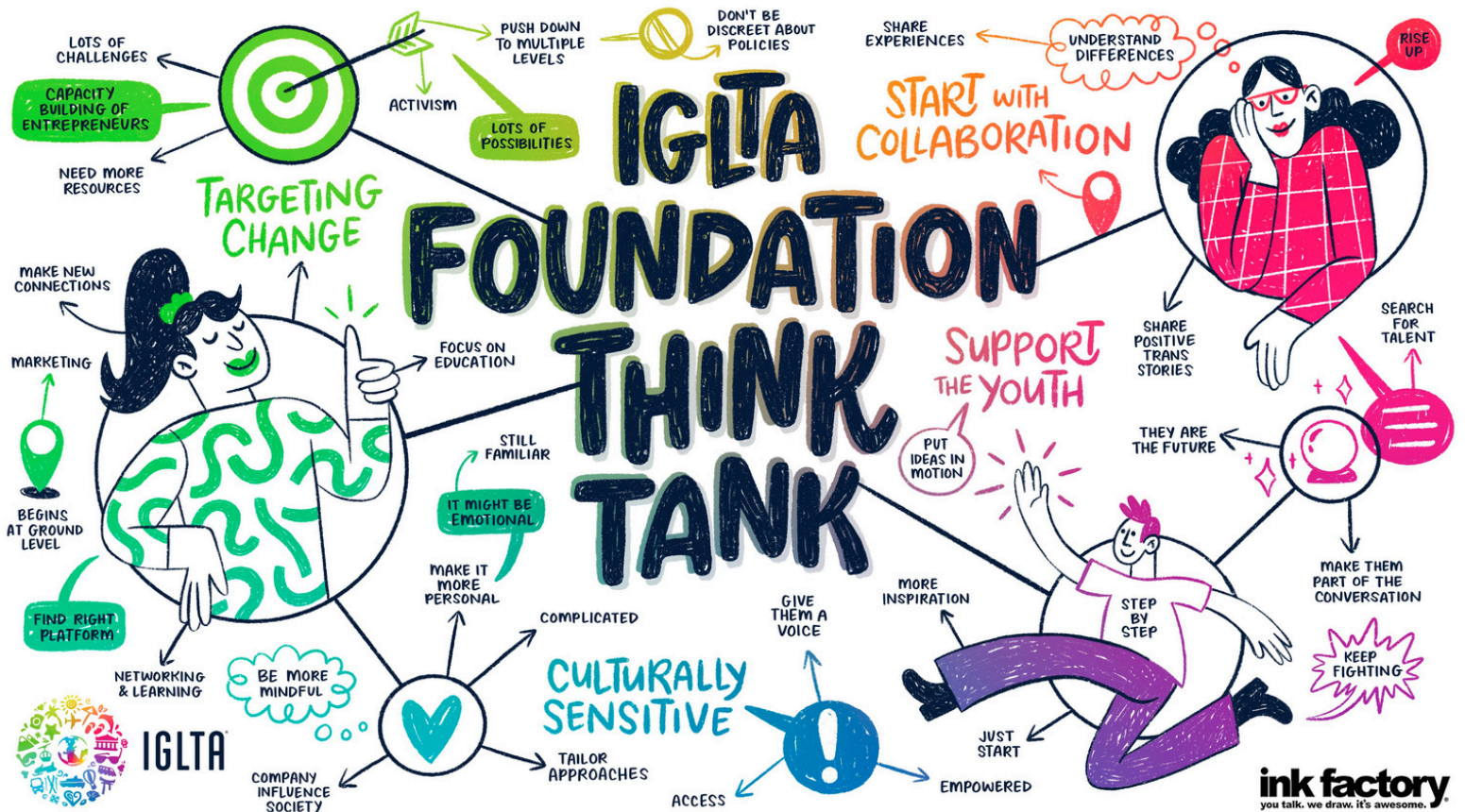
Some companies are not waiting for legal mandates before granting benefits to their LGBTQ+ workers. "We believe there has to be a certain level of protection in the policies of our companies, even just within our organization that might not be available in the national or local laws," one participant said.

Another participant shared that their India-based company began offering same-sex partner insurance and gender-affirming surgery benefits in 2016, a full two years before homosexuality was decriminalized in India. "If there is no acknowledgement and no recognition of relationships, if there is no recognition of what exactly you will get if you come out in the workplace, how will you excite and encourage people to take pride in who they are?" the participant asked.



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Despite the fact that same-sex marriage is not yet a legal right in Japan, one participant noted that some Japanese companies have recently been offering same-sex couples the same benefits that they give to any married couple, such as extra paid vacation time and a small amount of celebration money. “But there's always a discussion of, ‘How do we as a company know if they’re a real couple or if they’re faking it?’ Because it's not a legalized marriage. Also, applying for these benefits is directly connected to coming out.”



According to a participant based in the Philippines, the biggest dilemma in advancing LGBTQ+ legal protections in Asia is how to best bring forward an agenda that is enshrined in local cultural sensitivity. With several Asian nations having already enacted legal protections for their LGBTQ+ citizens, the participant pointed out, other Asian countries can now look to them for inspiration. “You've got Taiwan, you’ve got Thailand, and you’ve got Nepal,” said the participant.

“ Let’s not always look to the West, but let’s build on what is possible to do in Asia within the constraints and challenges of its own culture. ”

Safe Accommodations and Travel Brand Accountability, Private Sector Involvement, Awareness and Advocacy:

The Think Tank's moderators asked the participants to consider how leadership can best foster LGBTQ+ inclusion. "What are the successful strategies and practices that tourism organizations can adopt to create supportive environments?" the moderator inquired.

"The integrated approach is so important," offered one participant. "It's not just, for example, creating a video to speak to the LGBTQ+ market, but also having that diversity represented in all of your videos."

Another participant shared a similar example from their own company. "We have a trans woman on our product team who does trainings, and we feature her in our marketing all the time," the participant said. "Not because she's a trans woman, but because she's damn good at her job." When leaders intentionally showcase the performance-based contributions of transgender and gender-diverse employees, it ensures their value is unquestioned by their peers and the public.,

One participant shared how intersectionality can provide opportunities for inclusivity and fostering better understanding in the workplace. When their company held a Mother's Day event for the employee parents' group, they invited members of the company's LGBTQ+ group to speak. "We invited a lesbian couple into our parents' network to talk about their journey to being parents in Singapore," the participant shared. "There was such outrage by the mothers in the audience when they heard that the birth mother in this couple had to adopt her own child right after giving birth. This revelation deeply resonated with many parents in the audience, as they could empathize with the challenges of the journey to parenthood."

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A moderator agreed that intersectionality is a very important consideration in Asia, where workplace factors like language, religion, class, and minority issues often overlap with LGBTQ+ inclusion.

One participant noted that merely having a staff position dedicated to DEI is not enough. "We involve all the staff in terms of education training and story sharing," the participant said. "It's not just creating a position or any one thing, and then that's it. Inclusion policies really need constant reminders and constant activities."

Another participant pointed out that company leaders have an obligation to ensure that LGBTQ+ employees are part of the conversation about the journey to workplace inclusivity. "If you are part of those leadership spaces, you need to make another seat at the table for the people who are actually part of that community," the participant said, adding that leaders also need to stand up for inclusion even when they meet resistance. "If you are being invited to the leaders' table, it is your job to do more. When companies say, 'We cannot change so much' — what kind of company doesn't change?"



The Future of LGBTQ+ Inclusion in the Asian Tourism Workplace

As the Think Tank drew to a close, the moderators opened the discussion to additional topics that the participants might wish to address, especially surrounding specific ways that LGBTQ+ inclusion in the tourism workforce can be best advanced in Asia.

Visibility is key, urged one participant. "It's really important to speak up and be visible," they said. "I always have my rainbow flag on my desk, and I always have on a rainbow pin and an IGLTA pin every day. Also, one of the first things I do at each new company is to have them become a member of IGLTA."

"We should invest in the education of young queer people," another participant noted. "If we invest in the people who are now taking pride in themselves and who are out and proud and are living their truth authentically, we will not just add to the life of those individuals, but we will also add to the leadership of queer people for tomorrow. This is from where larger change will start."

One participant said that the next Asian generation must be encouraged to strive for success. "What I hear from a lot of young people is that being queer, they can't be ambitious, and they don't have any place being in a big corporation," the participant said. "Also, sometimes in Asian countries, being ambitious is not a good thing, right? If you translate 'ambitious' to Japanese, it sounds like a really bad thing. So from a leadership perspective, we should say more loudly, 'No, you should be ambitious because you are amazing.'"



Another participant stressed that to better foster policy changes, more rigorous data and evidence is still needed. “In the area of tourism, what are the key discriminations faced by LGBTQ+ people as workforce members and as leaders?” the participant asked. “The more data we have, the more evidence-based policy action we can do together.”

Several participants agreed that IGLTA was a key partner in working toward better LGBTQ+ inclusion in the workplace. One participant noted that the Osaka convention itself marked an important step. “With this IGLTA convention in Osaka, our work will change in Asia,” said the participant. “We want to change people’s minds and change the old conditions — not only Japan, but in all the Asian countries whose people have come here, because they will appreciate what they see.”

In their closing remarks, the moderators expressed their appreciation to the participants for all that they had shared. “Thank you so much for contributing to this day,” said one moderator. “This is very meaningful, and it’s been a very rare chance for us to come together to talk about Asian issues around LGBTQ+ inclusion.”

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The IGLTA Foundation would like to thank our esteemed participants for their thoughtful contributions to the Think Tank:

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About the IGLTA Foundation

Founded in 2012, the IGLTA Foundation is the 501(c)3 public charity subsidiary of the International LGBTQ+ Travel Association. The IGLTA Foundation supports initiatives for industry organizations, leaders and communities to advance LGBTQ+ travel around the world. It aims to empower LGBTQ+ welcoming travel businesses globally through leadership, research and education.

The IGLTA Foundation welcomes donations and research collaborations. Comprehensive data is crucial to meaningful progress in the travel industry. We rely on this data to guide our efforts in creating a more inclusive and welcoming world for LGBTQ+ travelers. Your support can make a significant impact by funding initiatives that drive positive change across the global travel landscape. We invite you to join us in this mission.

For further information about the IGLTA
Foundation please visit:
iglta.org/iglta-foundation



About the Author

Dan Allen (any) is a veteran journalist and author covering travel, culture, and entertainment for LGBTQ+ and mainstream outlets across the globe, including NBC Out, Condé Nast Traveller, Attitude, Passport, Westways, Washington/Los Angeles Blade, Fodor's, and many more.

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