

Gender-Neutral Pronouns and A/E/C Success

By Keelin Cox, CPSM, ENV SP



For the first two years of my A/E/C career, I lived and worked in Santiago, Chile. One thing that always stood out to me, especially in the workplace, is that Spanish is a very gendered language. It's difficult to escape gender roles when the language you speak and the words you use carry the expectation of feminine or masculine characteristics.

However, once I moved back to the U.S., I somewhat forgot about the experience until I started learning more about gender identity. My aha moment came when one of my Chilean friends expressed they felt extremely isolated using a language that couldn't recognize their true identity.

That got me thinking two things: 1) Personal pronouns do matter and 2) It must be difficult not to be recognized as your true self in the words and language you speak. This led me (a white, heterosexual, female-identifying woman) to explore their importance to my work and our society.

What's a Personal Pronoun?

You may be seeing she/her, he/him, and they/them on email signatures or LinkedIn profiles, but what are they really?

Simply put, personal pronouns are how we refer to others in a way they identify with. What's key to understand is that, ultimately, they're a sign of respect.

Gender pronouns such as she, her, he, and him all carry expectations about what that person is meant to do or say, along with any cultural gender stereotypes.

The gender-neutral personal pronouns they/them, zie/zir and sie/hir are just as important an affirmation of identity. Frequently used by transgender or queer individuals, they can also be used for anyone who doesn't feel they fit the

gender binary. In other words, you can be a female they/them or a male zie/zir.

Before we dig any deeper, one important thing to note is gender-neutral pronouns aren't new. In fact, the increasing use of gendered pronouns is far more recent. The Oxford English Dictionary traces the singular "they" back to 1375, when it appeared in the medieval romance *William and the Werewolf*. Shakespeare, Dickens, and Agatha Christie have all used gender-neutral pronouns in their writing. The majority of the 566 tribal communities in the U.S. have nonbinary terms, including the most commonly known two-spirit people who are neither male nor female and believed to be gifted healers, shamans, and ceremonial leaders. This is all to say that the singular "they" has been used for centuries, often when gender is unknown, irrelevant, or nonbinary.

Why Do Personal Pronouns Matter?

Studies have shown our language impacts how we think. For those individuals who don't fit into one gender identity, also called the gender binary, the use of gendered pronouns constantly reinforces an identity they don't belong to. It also reinforces cultural gender biases. Studies have also shown that countries with gendered languages, as opposed to natural gender and genderless languages, have significantly less gender equality.

Fortunately, the American Dialect Society and the Merriam-Webster Dictionary amended their definitions so "they" can be used as a singular pronoun. In 2015, Sweden adopted the pronoun "hen" as an official gender-neutral pronoun of choice. Swedish children are now taught using hen so they're able to grow up without feeling the impact of gender biases.



Why I Believe Personal Pronouns Are Essential to Success in A/E/C

A recent study adds to the evidence showing that when we use language that actively includes women and LGBTQIA+ people, it boosts positive feelings toward them and reduces mental biases that favor men. It also promotes an atmosphere of inclusion, which many A/E/C firms are looking to foster.

Adopting gender-neutral pronouns is a low-effort, zero-cost way to reduce the biases that can hold back even the most gifted individuals. In our talent-driven industries, we should make every effort to, at a minimum, let our employees and colleagues feel comfortable expressing their core identities.

This, then, begs the question, how can you act on this information to help create a more inclusive workplace?

- **Review your company's brand voice and style guide.** Is it gender neutral? If it isn't, how can it be modified to be more inclusive?
- **Don't make assumptions.** If you don't know someone's preferred pronouns, use they/them or ask which pronouns they prefer.
- **Find an alternative.** Use a person's role or their name rather than a pronoun.

- **Use gender-neutral pronouns in proposals, company blogs, or press releases.** As marketers, we have an opportunity to make an impact on shifting gender biases.

- **Express your own pronouns.** Whether you fit into the gender binary or not, you have the right to express your core identity in a way that is authentic to you.

- **Explain what personal pronouns are to someone who may not understand.** A compassionate conversation from a friend will go further than an admonition from a stranger.

At the end of the day, personal pronouns come down to one very simple concept, respect. In all relationships, whether personal or professional, mutual respect can go a long way. ■

Telamon Corporation headquarters, Carmel, IN. Axis Architecture + Interiors., ©Susan Fleck Photography, fleckphoto.com.

📖 Story Behind the Picture

Telamon Corporation is one of Indiana's largest minority-owned enterprises providing telecommunications services throughout the world.



What's key to understand is that, ultimately, they're a sign of respect.



KEELIN COX, CPSM, ENV SP, (she/her) is a senior marketing specialist at Stantec in Irvine, CA. Cox is invested in supporting the water sector to build winning proposals, create smart strategies, and help teams serve their communities. She's host of the "AEC Marketeer" podcast. Contact her at keelin.cox@stantec.com.