

**FINDING
EMPLOYMENT:
BARRIERS AND
CHALLENGES FOR
NEWCOMERS
AND RACIALIZED
INDIVIDUALS**

INTRODUCTION

Racialized Canadians and newcomers continue to face systemic barriers caused by racism and discrimination when job searching or trying to advance their career (Gagnon & Ng, 2020). At ACCES Employment, we assist over 40,000 clients each year, 80% of whom are new to Canada, and learning to navigate the complexities of looking for work that is commensurate with their experience and opportunities that reflect their career aspirations in an unfamiliar country and culture. An important element of this work is going beyond the needs of the individual to examine and address the systemic barriers faced by many racialized and newcomer job seekers and employees through the employment process. In the wake of major social and political changes over the past decades, leading companies are taking steps to increase equity, diversity and inclusion, yet progress in most sectors remains tepid (Pedulla, 2020). This represents a significant lost opportunity for employers, and a continuation of the status quo that has put many at a disadvantage. ACCES Employment's Diversity in Canadian Workplaces Initiative, funded by Canadian Heritage, is designed with the goal of shifting that status quo. By working directly with employers, particularly small and medium-sized companies in various industries who do not have the budget or size to implement internal EDI solutions, this initiative aims to address systemic barriers that exist in recruitment, retention, and career development. This is done by providing customized workshops and tools to enable more organizations to begin bridging employment gaps to create more equitable opportunities.

An essential element of this work involves listening to racialized and newcomer Canadians who have first-hand experience facing systemic barriers to employment and advancement in their organizations. ACCES Employment reached out to approximately 4,000 program alumni with an EDI survey about their thoughts, experiences and recommendations, particularly around employment issues pertaining to racial and gender discrimination. We received 143 responses, the majority of which were from individuals who identify as Black or Asian (including South Asian, Southeast Asian and East Asian). The analysis of the data sheds light on many of the challenges racialized and newcomer employees face while navigating employment. Through these quantified points based on lived experience, we can begin to formulate broad solutions and suggestions to target specific systemic barriers and increase the positive experiences of inclusivity in the workplace.

RECRUITMENT

Research indicates that one of the challenges for racialized newcomers is being hired into their first role. A 12-year trends analysis (2006-2017) highlights that while the unemployment rate for people born in Canada was 5%, people who immigrated to Canada within the last five years faced significantly higher rates of unemployment, and those from African countries had the highest rate of unemployment at 11.2% (Gagnon & Ng, 2020). It is encouraging to know that from the racialized ACCES alumni respondents 68% reported they were working in their chosen fields, and only 30% felt they were underemployed or underutilized. This illustrates the important role programs directed to support newcomers play in their journey. In a roundtable discussion with some of our most engaged alumni, Kam, who came to Canada from Dubai, attributes his success to a combination of attitude and assistance: "It's a journey. You need to have the right perspective and places like ACCES to provide guidance and an opportunity to talk to people who have gone through these experiences. It's up to us to make the best of what's put in front of us and continue with the positive mind frame you come here with."

It is important to note that systemic barriers are not experienced equally across all racialized communities. When the percentage of people working in their fields is analyzed further, we discover that 74% of Asian respondents have had success in finding work in their field, versus 43% of Black respondents.

Newcomer Challenges

The most noted challenge respondents faced when trying to find employment was not having enough Canadian job experience, which was cited by 58% of survey respondents. This focus on the lack of Canadian experience by organizations is another systemic factor that contributes to the majority of program alumni feeling that being a newcomer makes it difficult to secure employment. Sixty-two percent of Asian respondents and 33% of Black respondents highlighted this challenge. Further, once employed, 37% of respondents felt being a newcomer made it difficult to increase their income levels. These findings are supported by a 2021 study done in collaboration with Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada, which found significant gaps in employment and earning rates between new Canadians and their Canadian-born counterparts have persisted over the last twenty years (Crossman & Picot, 2021). Over 50% of new Canadians experienced job status decline: working in a junior level position after their arrival in Canada, when they had previously worked in a management level role.

According to the Ontario Human Rights Code, "Canadian experience" refers to a requirement or preference (intentional or not) that people applying for jobs have experience working in Canada. This may also include social or other "soft" skills and is often one of the major biases of recruitment practices. For example, 87% of all respondents, and 76% of racialized respondents, agree that referrals increase your chances of being hired. Referrals, often a direct result of networking, are a challenge for many newcomers

who do not have a large network. A 2019 Atipica study further illustrates that employee referrals can lead to a perpetuation of homogeneity in workforce composition, thereby reducing the opportunities available to racialized job seekers and newcomers. Despite the hurdles, racialized candidates who intentionally network and seek to be referred can greatly improve hiring outcomes. Ghada, an ACCES alumnus from Lebanon, advises newcomers, "Network! That's the only way you have to meet people, they have to know who you are, and they have to know what you do. You almost have to brag so you are embedded in their memory." According to the Ryerson Career Development and Employment Centre, an estimated 80% of jobs are never advertised, which makes building a network imperative for job seekers.

Interestingly, one problem that our alumni did not often encounter was difficulty with the wording used in job postings. The survey indicated that 70% of respondents did not find terminology to be confusing, which is in contrast to research and discussions with many Canadian employers. For example, the Government of Canada's Panel on Employment Challenges of New Canadians discovered in their 2014 survey findings that language challenges were rated third by organizations who support newcomers and sixth by individuals as a significant barrier to employment. Although not the majority of respondents, those who did cite issues with wording specified they had trouble with, jargon, acronyms, certifications and abbreviations. One alumnus, Nimra, explained, "It took me a while to get used to the language they speak or even short forms, which I was not aware of, that I had to google to understand what they meant—it's hard to adjust to the culture."

When survey respondents were asked what can be done to help eliminate the barriers to employment for new and racialized Canadians, 78% agreed it involved having a diverse hiring panel, and 54% said it was about developing a fair and inclusive hiring process to ensure equal opportunity. Fair and inclusive hiring processes have the potential to help set the standard for greater inclusion practices throughout organizations. A review of select organizations in the corporate sector shows promising results as well. Intel reported their percentage of diverse hires increased from 31.9% to 45.1% in the first two years after requiring all their hiring panels include at least two women and/or racialized people.

Similarly, at Cisco, the odds of being hired increased by 50% for Hispanic women and 70% for Black women after enacting a diverse hiring panel policy (Reynolds Lewis, 2017). During our focus group with newcomer ACCES alumni, it was advised that employers looking to attract diverse talent should include internationally trained individuals on their hiring committees because they are more familiar with the education, experience, and background of job seekers from overseas and have been through the process. In addition, to reduce bias, employers can use tools to anonymize applications, check the language of job ads for inclusivity, and lend greater weight to volunteer and lived experience that is relevant to the position in question. Creating diverse workplaces requires innovative thinking which will benefit both employees and organizations by enhancing employee satisfaction, thereby leading to greater retention.

INCLUSIVE WORK ENVIRONMENT

Once newcomers and racialized Canadians find employment, they can face a whole new set of challenges with respect to racism and discrimination in the workplace. While many organizations continue to ignore the systemic reality of racism, or feel that their EDI efforts have been sufficient, survey respondents paint a different picture, pointing to issues of tokenism and microaggressions: “sometimes I feel inclusion is missing and they only focus on diversity,” explains Deepak, ACCES alumnus. Another respondent, Jemi, adds, “in Canada, we often feel like racism does not exist. Sometimes the small microaggressions that you face turn your attention to it and make you realize it still exists.”

In order to address microaggressions, tokenism and unconscious bias, organizations invest in various forms of training for their employees. Half of survey respondents felt that they received adequate EDI training that covered anti-racism, unconscious bias and inclusive leadership. Some noted receiving additional training in anti-oppression, sexual harassment, cultural sensitivity, accessibility, and unconscious bias. While the progress that has been made in this area in the last decade is encouraging, it is clear there is still work to be done to make comprehensive EDI training and diversity programs available throughout Canada’s workforce.

It is promising that overall 75% of respondents felt comfortable sharing career aspirations with their managers and they felt supported. However, only 52% of racialized respondents felt the same. Asian

respondents felt significantly more comfortable than Black respondents at 76% versus 43%, and of both groups, men felt significantly more comfortable than women. Part of the issue may be a lack of diversity and representation in management. Ghada explains that in the finance industry, it is most diverse in the lower levels, but when you reach upper management, there is not enough diverse representation. She explains, “When you want to make a change, it’s beneficial to have people who represent that change, in order to educate and guide those who haven’t had the same experience.” A 2020 Lean In study illustrates the disparity racialized people, and Black women in particular, face when looking for support from management. Whether it is for support navigating office politics, guidance for career development, or receiving opportunities to showcase their work, Black women receive markedly less support than white women, Asian women, and all men. They are also the least likely to have substantive or informal interactions with senior leadership, and are most likely to experience microaggressions, including having their judgement questioned or being mistaken for someone at a much lower level. In addition, 54% of Black women reported being the only Black person, or one of the only Black people in their workplace, which creates a greater feeling of isolation, scrutiny and guardedness.

This diversity divide is also evident when respondents were asked whether they feel their expertise and knowledge is respected. While it is a good indicator of progress that 74% of racialized respondents felt their expertise was respected, an interesting racial and gender divide is evident when the data is examined more closely. The biggest contrast is among men, where 58% of Asian men agree, versus only

41% of Black men. This highlights the challenges faced by Black employees who, according to a 2020 study conducted by BCG, face a high level of microaggressions and the need to code switch, meaning they change their self-expression or appearance in order to fit in, which impacts their sense of belonging in their organizations.

To improve EDI training, which is meant to enhance company cultures and elicit a greater sense of belonging experienced by racialized and newcomer employees, respondents indicated that they would like to see employers avoid token hiring and institute ongoing, continuous EDI education. They also highlight the need for workshops to be action oriented and targeted at all levels and departments. Lending a greater focus to success stories and commonalities can shift the tone and perspective away from problems to solutions. Organizations should also be aware that there are differences that are not covered by EDI training, such as personalities, that also need to be addressed to foster a more inclusive work environment.

CAREER PROGRESSION

The challenges faced by racialized individuals and newcomers go beyond recruitment and inclusion to career progression within organizations. The barriers to advancement faced by racialized and new Canadians are illustrated with only 15% of our survey respondents reporting that they received a promotion, which is the lowest affirmative response across the board. The glass ceiling phenomenon is encountered by many new and racialized Canadians leading to career stagnation and dissatisfaction. A 2019 analysis

of 659 executives from 69 organizations within the public, private, and non-profit sectors in the Greater Toronto Area, found that only 6% of leadership positions were filled by new Canadians, despite that demographic comprising 50% of the population in that region (TRIEC, 2019).

When it comes to being fairly compensated for their work compared to their peers, only 42% of racialized respondents indicated that they believed they were. When further investigated, there are some notable differences between race and gender, specifically 46% of Asian respondents felt they were compensated fairly, but only 24% of Black respondents felt the same. When gender is factored in, 57% of Asian men felt they were fairly compensated versus only 39% of women. For Black respondents, the divide was even greater with 80% of men and 20% of women feeling their compensation was fair. Statistics Canada's 2016 data illustrates the stark reality of this noted income disparity by our respondents, reporting that racialized women earned 58 cents and racialized men earned 76 cents for every dollar white men earned in 2015 (OCASI, 2019).

When it comes to being assigned stretch projects that give employees visibility, 61% of racialized respondents said they had received such assignments, which was the highest affirmative response across the board. However, the number breaks down to 65% of Asian respondents versus 48% of Black respondents affirming, with a further gender breakdown of 53% male and 45% female among Asian respondents and 60% male and 40% female among Black respondents.

The 'glass ceiling' type barriers experienced by racialized, and particularly Black employees, are numerous. BCG's 2020 study illustrates that Black employees have a lower level of sponsorship, and face biases in the promotion process. One

stark reminder of the effects of these biases is that in 2020 Black leaders held less than 1% of executive roles or board seats at major Canadian companies.

To address these inequities, respondents point to diversifying recruitment teams in order to attract more diverse candidates. The issue of Canadian experience was raised again, with respondents believing that ending the favouritism of Canadian experience over international credentials would open many doors for hiring and advancement without any other changes being required. Within companies, respondents believe increasing mentorship and sponsorship are key, with a focus on the importance of sponsorship. As ACCES alumnus, Jemi, explains, “While you need a mentor, you also need sponsors. Sponsorship is the act of using one’s social capital to propel the career advancement of an individual. Sponsors provide exposure, visibility, and experience through opportunity—you need people to talk about you especially when you’re not in the room.” In addition, respondents would like to see more employers having an open-door policy for ongoing (sometimes uncomfortable) conversations with employees about their expectations, career goals, and potential opportunities.

CONCLUSION

While our survey results highlight an insightful combination of progress made in the workplace and evidence that ACCES programs are successful in helping job seekers navigate the Canadian job market, there is still more work to be done to create a truly diverse, equitable and inclusive workforce. The final phase of our Diversity in Canadian Workplaces Initiative will focus on “Solutions and Strategies to Move

the Dial” towards more equitable workplaces. We have used findings from our roundtable discussions with employer partners and our EDI survey to inform the development of EDI training modules and sessions, which will be available to all employers within ACCES’s employer network in the future.

Our final white paper will review the development, facilitation and observations of the three training modules centred around equitable recruitment, retention and inclusive leadership, and career progression and succession planning to offer solutions going forward. We will integrate all results from this project to identify gaps in our program content, enhance our services to reflect EDI themes, all to ensure continuous improvement of the user experience. We will continue to evolve our training modules and live workshops to enhance our internal capacity at ACCES and reach a wider employer network to better support both job seekers and employers well beyond hiring to make workplaces spaces of true belonging

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