acces
employment

Solutions and Strategies to Move the Dial and Build EDI Capacity in Employment

INTRODUCTION

In early 2021 ACCES Employment received funding from Canadian Heritage to launch the Diversity in Canadian Workplaces Initiative. This innovative project incorporated feedback from ACCES alumni and employers to explore the barriers and challenges faced by many new Canadians and other racialized individuals in their pathway to successful labour market integration. The goal was to identify areas where small to medium-sized employers need support to develop and enhance their Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) strategies, with respect to the hiring, retaining, and career mobility of racialized and newcomer employees. Research shows that cultivating a diverse workforce within an equitable work environment is a core building block for driving innovation and business success. It is estimated that the global gross domestic product would increase by $8 trillion USD by 2028 if countries raised their innovation mindset by a mere 10% (Accenture, 2019).

With the aim of creating helpful resources and solutions, we began by gathering information. ACCES held three roundtables with employers of varying sizes from various sectors as part of our environmental scan. These engaging conversations highlighted themes relating to recruitment, retention, and career development where EDI training could support employers in developing strategies and leveraging best practices. This was followed with an in-depth EDI survey completed by 143 ACCES alumni respondents, along with a focus group comprised of ten of our most engaged alumni. Their responses provided us with important insights into the challenges racialized and newcomer employees face, as well as the strategies and resources they used to overcome those challenges to achieve success in their careers. Finally, we held a focus group with ten ACCES staff members who focus on employer outreach, to gather their perspective on how employers prioritize EDI, what hurdles and potential challenges they face, and what resources would be most beneficial to support them.

Through our research and discussions, it was clear that many employers, particularly smaller organizations, need assistance in understanding how to foster and support a diverse workforce. Small businesses often have few opportunities for advancement, and they lack resources to initiate and support changes to EDI policies and procedures (Ellevate, 2021). Our research findings were compiled and analyzed to identify key considerations for the development of training workshops that would be relevant and effective in supporting employers.

KEY THEMES & RECOMMENDATIONS

Our goal was to provide employers with information and resources that would assist them to establish and maintain an inclusive work culture, promote effective teamwork and improve equitable hiring and advancement practices. We formulated the following recommendations:

Create Equitable Recruitment Practices

Recognizing and understanding bias, including how prejudices and discrimination can affect judgement and decisions in recruitment and selection , lays the foundation for creating more equitable and accessible recruitment strategies. The costs of not having equitable recruitment practices in place go well beyond the direct expenses of lost productivity to include quantitative measures around lost institutional knowledge and reduced morale of the workforce (Hall, 2019). Some suggestions include evaluating the language and terminology of job postings, valuing international education and experience, structuring resume review and interviewing processes based on an objective point system, as well as examining selection criteria used to hire individuals with diverse backgrounds and experiences. Engaging with community agencies and partnering with post-secondary institutions will help to create diverse hiring pipelines.

Common interviewing and selection processes may include biases that are difficult hurdles for diverse candidates. Recruiters tend to focus on "best fit" for company culture, which is often informed by unconscious bias (Agarwal, 2019). The shift from "culture-fit" to "culture-add" requires focusing on transferable skills and education and highlighting the importance of job aspects that are "must-have" rather than what may be "nice-to-have." This transition will attract more diverse candidates and expand talent pipelines. Employers should have diverse hiring panels, with people who are familiar with different work experiences and backgrounds of diverse candidates and can relate. In addition, training hiring teams to create a comfortable interview environment and providing guidelines for generating structured interview questions that are consistent and inclusive. Also, timely review and feedback should be provided to candidates.

Develop Inclusive Leadership

Hiring diverse talent is only the initial step. The Belonging Principle stresses the importance of fostering inclusion and belonging in supporting both recruitment and retention. Adopting measuring tools, such as the Employee Net Promoter Score (ENPS), can allow businesses to assess how employees are feeling about the organization and what can be done to improve employee satisfaction (Bell, 2021). Maintaining employee satisfaction through creating an engaging, EDI-informed culture benefits businesses of all sizes.

---

[1] A video explanation for this can be found here: Understanding unconscious bias | The Royal Society - YouTube

Inclusive leaders will create and foster a culture of belonging that will support the needs of racialized and newcomer employees. Providing tools on how to support the development of inclusive leadership is paramount as illustrated in a 2020 study by Deloitte, which identified a "readiness gap" when it comes to developing a culture of belonging. Of respondents polled, 79% said fostering a sense of belonging was "important" or "very important" to organizations within the next 12 to 18 months, but only 13% of organizations felt ready to address this need (Volini, 2020).

A 2020 Harvard Business Review article written by Juliet Bourke and Andrea Titus describes organizational practices that can help leaders become more inclusive and enhance the performance of their teams. This study also highlights the cluster of traits shared by inclusive leaders, including the most important one—a leader's visible awareness of bias. To build inclusive leadership capacity is about acknowledging your own cultural competence and ability to empathize with different individuals.

Traditional leadership focused on managing group needs, as opposed to individual needs, whereas inclusive leadership addresses the importance of recognizing employees as individuals with different goals and objectives. This style of leadership assures that all team members are valued, and feel they are treated with respect and fairness. This helps leaders understand how to recognize the talent of each team member and shift the focus away from 'group think.' Here are two videos to support and deepen the learning around inclusive leadership and how to foster inclusive leaders:

1. Inclusive Leadership with Steve Jones.
This experiential session explores the key elements needed to become an inclusive leader and create a dynamic organizational culture: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AYwUww2aWBY

2. The Power of Inclusive Leadership with Bonnie St. John.
An inspiring presentation by this influential businessperson, Paralympian, and author, discussing the importance of inclusive leadership: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vJwJTLQrpPI

Further, building a culture of community and awareness, and creating time and space for dialogue around EDI-related topics, is essential to creating a culture of belonging. Building and collaborating with Employee Resource Groups (ERGs, BRGs or Affinity Groups) creates a network of diverse professionals and encourages allyship. One example, which profiles the ERG group Women@GoogleCloud, illustrates how they have created an empowering global network of traditionally underrepresented professionals:

3. Empowering Inclusion Through ERGs with Google:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J1_0D72Jzls

Enhance Internal Mobility Practices

Beyond recruitment and retention, it is essential to recognize and support racialized employees with ongoing career progression. This will increase diversity and inclusion at all levels of the organization, including the senior leadership level. Creating an equitable talent development strategy will overcome systemic and personal bias and enhance transparency and accountability across the organization. When focusing on equitable career development and planning for a diverse workforce, you may want to consider the following elements:

Career Discussions

Set inclusion as a priority with executive endorsement, and consistently enforce the expectation with performance goals that hold leaders accountable to creating inclusion in their domains.

Equitable Access

Support innovation through cognitive diversity and providing equitable opportunities to all employees through visibility, stretch assignments, mentorship, and sponsorship. Look beyond the current definition/perception of "star candidates" in your organization or network and consider different forms/styles of performance and leadership.

Skills Assessments & Gaps

This requires working with hiring managers and employees on individual plans to ensure you are creating opportunities that align with the individual's career goals.

Education & Learning

Provide direct training on inclusion, while also ensuring that EDI is integrated in all training and learning opportunities. This includes Inclusive Leadership Training involving language and communication styles, promoting flexible culture (remote and virtual work considerations), and rewards for inclusive management (Executive scorecards).

Recognizing Opportunities for Sponsorship

Sponsors are senior-level executives who advocate for certain individuals and provide them with project opportunities that showcase the employee's work throughout the organization. This is different than a mentor who acts as an advisor. Sponsorship requires intentional commitment at all levels of the organization along with training on cultural competency. Organizations that create sponsorship opportunities, should ensure there are leadership opportunities available to employees for which they can strive and prepare.

STRATEGIES AND SOLUTIONS

Aligned with the key themes outlined above, ACCES Employment has designed training modules and workshops that provide valuable insights and resources to help employers develop an inclusive workplace which fosters the growth and success of their employees. Identifying and eliminating barriers and biases in the workplace that cause employee disengagement and turnover can have a significantly positive impact on the business.

Many studies confirm that organizations which employ individuals with diverse experiences and backgrounds, will demonstrate higher productivity, performance, innovation, and creativity. When employees feel they belong, they report greater creative potential, lower turnover intentions, and higher engagement in their work (Paikeday et al., 2019).

Equitable hiring practices will root out systemic bias and support businesses with progressing beyond simply achieving a diversity quota to creating an environment where employees can bring their whole self without apprehension or fear. Hiring and managing teams inclusively provides businesses with a competitive advantage that is essential for attracting and retaining talent.

The impact of COVID-19 on business operations will also influence the direction and focus of internal EDI strategies and initiatives. Ensuring communications are accessible for all employees working in remote or hybrid situations will continue to be a priority, as will identifying the additional barriers and amplified, pre-existing inequities the pandemic has created for racialized employees and women. Implementing flexible supports to ensure they can effectively maintain their positions will be imperative for organizational success (Ellingrud et al., 2020). For ACCES Employment specifically, we are now in a position to review the structure and content of our programs using a more refined EDI lens.

CONCLUSION

As more companies recognize the importance of developing EDI strategies, it creates greater momentum for networking, collaborating, learning, and growing within and between industries. Encouraging organizations to look beyond recruitment numbers to build an inclusive environment where diverse employees can do more than just survive—to truly thrive—will benefit employees and engender organizational success.

Achieving EDI goals requires ongoing work; it is a process, not a destination we can reach quickly. This process will change and evolve as more voices are brought to the table. At ACCES, we will continue our research and program development through additional grant-funded initiatives and collaboration with employer partners. We are optimistic our collaborative commitment and efforts will generate new and innovative ways to support the growth and diversification of Canada's workforce.

REFERENCES

Accenture, (2019). EQUALITY = INNOVATION, Getting to Equal 2019: Creating a culture that drives innovation. Retrieved from https://www.accenture.com/_acnmedia/Thought-Leadership-Assets/PDF/Accenture-Equality- Equals-Innovation-Gender-Equality-Research-Report-IWD-2019.pdf

Agarwal, Pragya. (2019). How to Minimize Unconscious Bias During Recruitment. Retrieved from https://www.forbes.com/sites/pragyaagarwaleurope/2019/02/20/how-to-minimize-unconscious-bias-during-recruitment/?sh=42222ffd5fd9

Bell, D. (2021). Why and How to Measure Your Company's Employee Net Promoter Score. Retrieved from https://www.forbes.com/sites/forbestechcouncil/2021/10/18/why-and-how-to-measure-your-companys-employee-net-promoter-score/?sh=7c706f377323

Bourke, J & Titus, A. (2020). The Key to Inclusive Leadership. Retrieved from https://hbr.org/2020/03/the-key-to-inclusive-leadership

Ellevate, (2021). How to Challenge Resistance to DEI Change. Retrieved from: https://www.forbes.com/sites/ellevate/2021/06/03/how-to-challenge-resistance-to-dei-change/?sh=3f3256666331

Ellingrud, K et al for McKinsey and Company, (2020). Diverse Employees are Struggling the Most During Covid-19 Here's How Companies Can Respond. Retrieved from https://www.mckinsey.com/featured-insights/diversity-and-inclusion/diverse-employees-are-struggling-the-most-during-covid-19-heres-how-companies-can-respond

Hall, J. (2019). The Cost of Turnover Can Kill Your Business and Make Things Less Fun. Retrieved from https://www.forbes.com/sites/johnhall/2019/05/09/the-cost-of-turnover-can-kill-your-business-and-make-things-less-fun/?sh=6988feef7943

Paikeday, S. et al. (2019). "Unleashing the power of diversity through inclusive leadership." Harvard Law School Forum on Corporate Governance and Financial Regulation. Retrieved from https://corpgov.law.harvard.edu/2019/05/20/unleashing-the-power-of-diversity-through-inclusive-leadership/

Volini, E, et al for Deloitte Insights. (2020). Belonging: From Comfort to Connection to Contribution. Retrieved from https://www2.deloitte.com/us/en/insights/focus/human-capital-trends/2020/creating-a-culture-of-belonging.html