



A Guide for Canadian HR and People Leaders

Equity at Work

Part 2: One for all and all for one

Building equity into Canadian workplaces



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Introduction

Employers are becoming more aware of diversity and inclusion. In recent years, many organizations have implemented diversity and inclusion initiatives, and it's increasingly common to see a diversity statement on a company's website.

Companies are also becoming more aware of the concept that underpins diversity and inclusion — equity. Leadership teams are educating themselves on what equity is, what it means for a workforce, how it differs from equality, and why it's critical to build equity into all levels of an organization.

What is Equity?

The dictionary definition of equity is “fairness or justice in the way people are treated.” However, our understanding of this definition has developed over time. We now recognize that achieving equity is not simply a matter of giving everyone equal treatment or the same resources. Equity is much more complex than that. Equity ensures that everyone has the same access to opportunities and achieves proportional results.

Despite this progress, many employers are still struggling to implement equity programs. Hurdles to implementation vary in nature, but they exist at most organizations to at least some degree.

This guide is a companion to *Equity at Work — Part 1: What Companies Need to Know to Make a Difference*, which discusses what equity is and why organizations must achieve it. This guide aims to examine the barriers to implementing a workplace equity program, explore real-world examples of how organizations are dealing with barriers every day, and provide strategies to overcome them.

Barriers to Implementation

Time

One of the most significant barriers for even the most well-intentioned employers is **time**. Employers are busy with day-to-day operations. They have deadlines to meet and only so many hours.

Capacity

Another hurdle is **lack of capacity**. Depending on an organization's size, there may be insufficient human resource capital to dedicate to implementation. Employees work on equity issues when they don't have other pressing work. When "regular work" is busy, equity often falls to the side.

Reactivity

Organizations are often **reactive**, with little capacity to think ahead about equity. For example, when prompted, they respond to situations involving inequity, and they may publish an equity (or diversity and inclusion) statement on their websites. Still, they do not think about equity proactively.

Inability to see the bottom line

Companies are concerned with return on investment. They may see equity as an expense versus something that can contribute to profits. Thus they may invest dollars in only those projects and initiatives that have historically resulted in gains. They need help to see the connection between equity and ROI.

Comfort with the status quo

Some employers feel they've always had fair policies. As a result, they become defensive when asked to examine those policies to ensure they're equitable. They may even feel attached to the status quo. If dominant identity groups dominate the C-suite, leadership may even feel threatened by the idea of equity.

Equity vs. Equality

Equality means that assets are divided equally among a given set of people. For example, three children in a family may each receive \$10 per week as an allowance.

Equity means that assets are distributed so that everyone has a fair outcome. For example, the youngest child might receive \$5 per week, the middle child \$10 and the eldest child \$15, but the net result is that all three have enough spending money. In other words, the arrangement is just for all three.

Confusion

Like so many people, employers contend with a maelstrom of definitions around equity. Often, they do not have the willingness or the time to make sense of equity. They may even feel afraid of making a misstep. So they stick with the practices that have been working for them.

Lack of data

Years of “colour-blind” thinking have resulted in a lack of quantitative and qualitative data about the people who constitute the workforce. Employers are finding they don’t truly know the identity-group makeup of their various departments. There may be glaring disparities — for example, a shortage of women in the C-suite — that aren’t recognized or discussed. Employees may never have been surveyed to get their perspectives on whether the organization is diverse, inclusive, or equitable.

Lack of employee input

Along with a lack of data comes a lack of opportunities for employees to provide input on how they perceive the organization. These opportunities could include employee resource groups, forums where employees feel safe sharing their stories, and tools such as surveys.

Lack of champions

Equity cannot happen without champions. At any organization, there are potential champions who, with the proper resources, can lead an equity initiative. But many organizations have not identified these change agents or equipped them with resources.

Equity cannot happen without champions.

Lack of a path forward

Lastly, employers may not perceive a path forward. Building equity into their workforce may be new territory to them. They may need help getting started with an equity initiative, developing goals, and evaluating their progress. Managers may require training to understand the importance of equity and how to communicate it to their teams.



Identifying Barriers for Equity-seeking Groups

One of the steps to developing an equity program is to identify **equity-seeking groups** and the barriers that exist for them in the workplace.

The Canadian Council for the Arts defines equity-seeking groups as:

“those that identify barriers to equal access, opportunities and resources due to disadvantage and discrimination and actively seek social justice and reparation.”

Equity-seeking groups include those who are marginalized because of ethnicity, nationality, race, religion, socio-economic status, sex, gender, transgender status, ability status, and mental health status. The Canadian government has also identified Indigenous Peoples as a key equity-seeking group marginalized because of colonization and colonialism.

Barriers

Let's define what a barrier is. A barrier is anything that creates an obstacle that stands in the way of an individual thriving and being successful. Barriers hinder people from showing what they can do and performing to their true potential. And barriers prevent organizations from dealing with injustices as they arise. Barriers are not always easy to perceive, but organizations must make an effort to identify them and dismantle them.

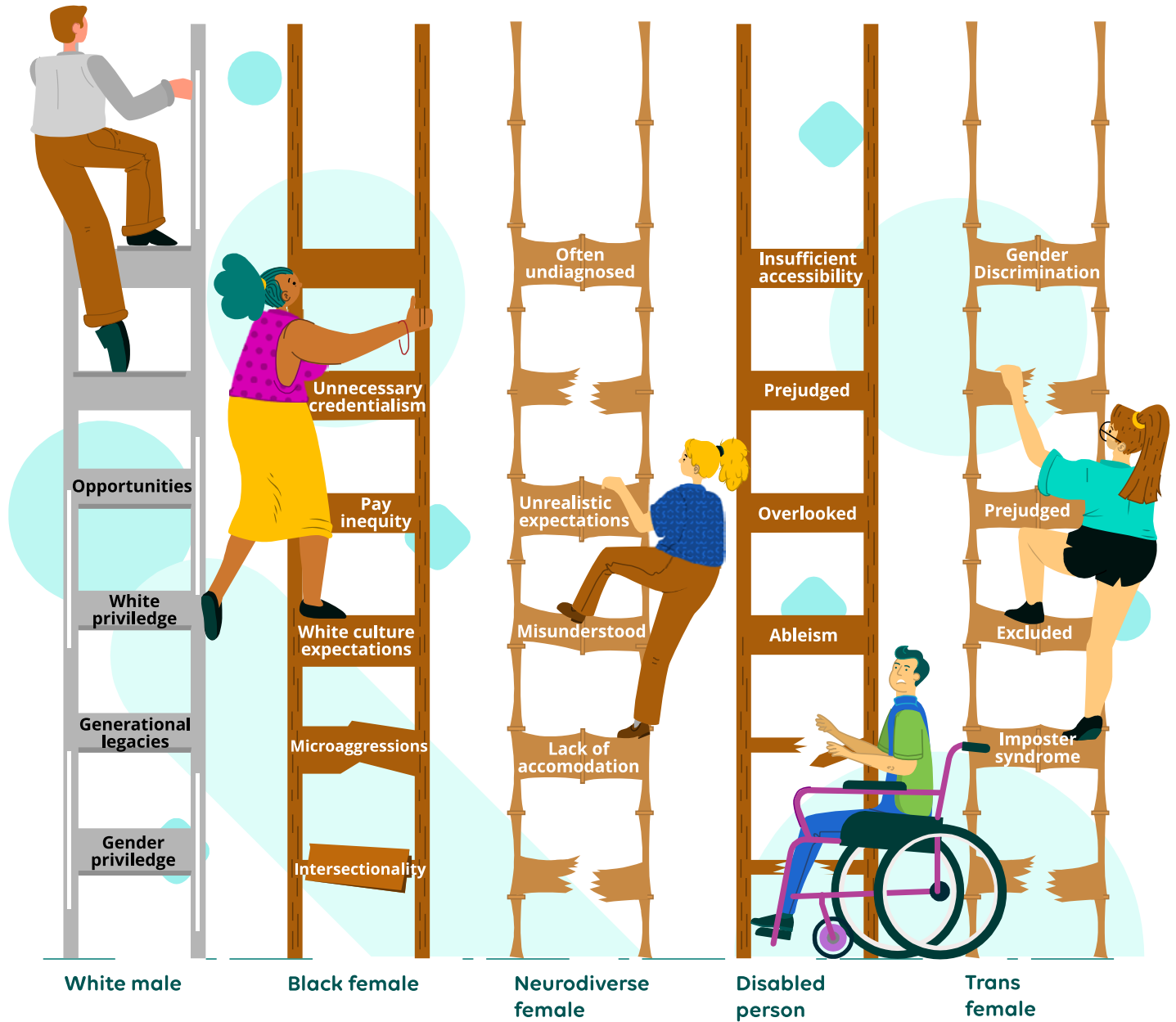
There are multiple barriers as far as equity, diversity, and inclusion. Here are some of the most glaring ones:

- **Attitudinal barriers** — individuals bring personal biases to the workplace, affecting how they interact in work-related matters and socially.
- **Cultural barriers** — employees from non-dominant cultures may feel isolated.
- **Communication barriers** — people who do not speak English as a first language may feel isolated and left out of conversations.
- **Physical barriers** — employees with disabilities navigate a world not built for them; this may contribute to stress and a sense of isolation.
- **Gender barriers** — evidenced by the gender pay gap and the impact that childbearing and raising a family has on a woman's career trajectory; barriers also include obstacles posed by cisnormativity.





Decision-making table



This illustration represents the different experiences people of different identity groups may have at work. Certain identity groups (on average) receive better supports and access to opportunities. Other identity groups may face challenges and barriers, represented by broken rungs on the “corporate ladder.” While not every person’s work experiences will align with this image, it is good statistical approximation.

How do barriers impact employees and organizational culture?

For employees who recognize the barriers that stand in their way, work can be frustrating. For people of colour who have experienced discrimination, it may not be the first time. It may also be the case for other identity groups who have contended with barriers their whole lives. However, if barriers are constant or occur repeatedly, this frustration can lead to malaise, depression, and burnout.

On the employer's side, employee barriers lead to diminished productivity, poor morale, absenteeism, presentism, and high turnover.

To overcome barriers, employers need to recognize the power imbalances that barriers cause. If an employer recognizes not just that barriers exist — but that they are a critical issue for the entire company and not just the individuals involved — it's a first step to correcting them.

Disability advocates often describe a choice:

- You can **remove** a barrier
- You can go **around** a barrier.
- You can go **through** a barrier.

This philosophy applies to any workplace barrier.

It starts with **reviewing barriers**. Where do they exist in the organization? Do they reside in individuals, in their attitudes and behaviours? Or are they systemic? Is there a policy or procedure that can affect a change? How can leadership act to remove the issue or prevent the problem? Failing that, how can they support employees through it?



Some Useful Tools

- **Send out a survey to the organization asking about the barrier types that employees experience.**
- **Categorize and filter the feedback according to barrier type**
- **Communicate the results to staff. Workshop solutions to minimize and/or eliminate the barriers identified.**

Next comes planning:

- Define what needs to be done.
- Create a timeline for doing it.
- Determine and allocate the resources to get it done.
- Monitor the process.
- Regularly review the solution during and after implementation.



That's a lot of project management speak! It really means to decide you're going to do it, then plan it out and take responsibility for getting it done. In addition, employers stand to benefit from creating work environments that are equitable, diverse, and inclusive.

Real-world examples of implementing equity

An employee's career journey begins before they even think of applying to a company. Then it continues through hiring, onboarding, and growing into a career. At each stage of this journey, the employer has opportunities to make the experience equitable.

Begin with the attraction and recruitment process

A candidate's first impression of an employer may be a **job posting**. It's the organization's opportunity to convey that its culture is inclusive, welcomes a diverse workforce, and prioritizes equity.

Make your job posting accessible:

- Write your job posting in **plain language**. Not all candidates speak English as a first language. Some candidates don't wish to read lengthy tomes full of complex language. Make your job posting a pleasure to read. Aim for a grade 8 reading level.
- Use **inclusive language**. Don't use "we're looking for a rockstar technician." This language can deter women and groups that don't identify as heteronormative. Instead, try: "we're seeking a highly qualified technician."
- **Include** must-haves and **exclude** nice-to-haves. Studies show that when a job posting has a string of additional qualifications (nice-to-haves), women and marginalized groups apply less often. So instead, list only the capabilities needed to do the job.
- Offer **different ways to apply**. For example, not all candidates have a computer and a printer. In addition, not everyone can navigate a web-based application. Check that your application process has many options, so you don't miss out on good candidates because your application is a barrier.
- Put your **equity, diversity, and inclusion statement** on the job posting. For many applicants, this is a sign that your company strives to create "safe spaces." If you don't have a formalized statement yet, commit to developing one.
- Indicate on the job posting that candidates **can request accommodations**. It is more concrete than simply stating a commitment to equity. It demonstrates to candidates that you mean it when you say your organization is accessible.



Some Useful Tools

- Have an honest reflection on workplace policies and processes and whether they reflect different aspects of justice.
- Engage in collecting quantitative and qualitative data that will uncover the true nature of your workplace, and areas that need attention.
- Identify change agents who will become objective observers and a go-between for both management and employees.

Use a skills-based hiring approach

The last few decades have featured increasing reliance on credentialism. The talent pool is teeming with people who've completed university degrees and other certifications. But not all countries have the same educational stepping-stones for various positions. When you include specific educational attainments in your job postings, you may miss out on good candidates from other countries. They may not apply because their credentials are not an exact match. Likewise, older candidates may be deterred from applying because credentialing regimes for a given position were established years after they joined the workforce.

Here's what to do:

- Take a **skills-based** approach. Not everyone has access to education. The question is — can the candidate do the job?
- Emphasize **skills and previous work experience**. What has the candidate done before? Assess this to see if they can do what your company requires.
- Recognize high-potential candidates. If you get an applicant who doesn't have a degree, your company may have the opportunity to **help them earn it**. Chances are, they'll appreciate it and become a loyal employee.

Be transparent about compensation

- Include the **pay range** for the position.
- State your **commitment** to closing the gender pay gap on the job application and description.
- If your organization has **pay bands**, make sure employees understand them.
- Provide **inclusive incentives**. Some employees may not be able to take advantage of tickets to a hockey game or events featuring alcohol consumption. Your best bet is a financial incentive or recognition.

Provide equity of access

Consider whether your company gives equitable access to everyone on staff. For example, can they all access the resources they need to succeed? During the hiring and onboarding process, communicate to candidates that you are committed to providing equity of access.

- Provide **accommodations** for employees with disabilities.
- Check workstations, meeting areas, break areas, and restrooms to make sure they are **accessible** to all.
- Provide **technology** to help employees succeed.
- Provide **equitable benefits**. For example, same-sex partners should have access to the same spousal health insurance package as heterosexual couples. In addition, extend parental benefits to mothers and fathers alike.

Most accommodations cost less than \$500 to implement, and many cost nothing.

Provide leadership and support

Empower your employees by providing resources, letting them know they have access to these resources and getting their feedback.

- Support employees to form **employee resource groups**.
- **Represent** a diversity of employees in newsletters and customer-facing materials.
- Problem-solve and evaluate your equity practices on an **ongoing** basis.

Building Equity into Organizations

The suggestions above are simple steps that an organization can take to create equity in its workforce. But it's essential to go beyond piecemeal efforts; organizations must have an equity strategy.

Like any project of significant scope, an equity strategy must contain critical project management elements, including goals, scoping, a timeline, a budget, resource allocations, team designations, and leadership.



Leverage data

A company can't set goals without establishing where it is right now and where it would like to go. Thus, step one is data collection. Metrics are a common way of assessing an organization's diversity profile and, by extension, how equitable its makeup, compensation structures, and practices are. But quantitative metrics can only go so far. To truly determine how equitable an organization is, it must survey employees to get a window into how they experience the workplace. This qualitative data can answer questions such as:

- Do they feel fairly treated?
- Do they receive praise, constructive feedback, and opportunities to develop themselves on par with other employees?
- Do they feel their compensation is fair for their roles and experience, and is it on par with company standards?
- Do they feel just as welcome to contribute as other employees?
- Do they see a proportional representation of various identity groups at all levels of the organization?
- Do they feel represented?

Surveys are just one method of collecting qualitative data. Other ideas include regular check-ins with a manager, team meetings specifically on the topic of equity, and employee focus groups. If there are employee resource groups, members should be asked for feedback on their perceptions of equity or lack thereof.

The process of data collection needs to be free of prejudice and fear. Data collection design, analysis, and reporting can be subjective if not independently conducted.



Research

Before laying out a plan or taking action, get familiar with equity, diversity, inclusion, and anti-racism resources. An internet search will immediately pull up numerous links that employers can use to educate themselves and their teams.

Ensure your sources are credible. Then, share them with your executive team. To get their buy-in, leaders need to understand the research around equity.



Make an action plan

Once quantitative and qualitative data have been assessed, and teams are up to speed on equity, it's time to decide on specific actions. What needs to get done will depend on the findings from the research phase. It could be that hiring needs to improve. Or expectations need to be set for employees. Or communications need to be enhanced to ensure that everyone understands and gets behind the equity strategy.

A good plan has measurable targets. They don't necessarily have to be percentages or other numerical targets. Instead, the targets may be qualitative — for example, increased reports of belonging and job satisfaction among traditionally marginalized employees. Whatever targets are chosen should be formalized in the action plan to keep leadership accountable.



Scope out the strategy

Set a timeline and allocate a budget. Identify who will be on the planning and implementation team. Be intentional about it — it shouldn't be done off the side of anyone's desk. Create an outline of what will get done, when, and the anticipated results. Make sure everyone involved understands the logic of the strategy so they can fully get behind it.



Make a public commitment

At this point, your organization may be ready to make a formal equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) statement. Many companies include an EDI statement in their job postings and on their websites and customer-facing communications.

This statement shouldn't be perfunctory. Employers should think carefully about it and convene a diverse group to craft it. Get input from all under-represented groups. Adopt the philosophy "nothing about us without us" — don't make decisions on behalf of a group without consulting members of that group.

Communicate the equity statement to employees. Solicit their feedback and be willing to iterate before going public with it.





Educate

The best way to get buy-in from employees is to educate them. Credible information will avoid misunderstandings of what equity means and the implications of an equity strategy.

Companies may decide to create a manual, hold an internal workshop, or intentionally build an equity agenda item into meetings. Post materials or use social media channels to spread the word.

Your organization may also benefit from reaching out to an equity, diversity, and inclusion consultant or a learning development consultant who can develop eLearning or workshops on the subject of equity.

Conclusion

Equity isn't something that employers can ignore. Systemic bias is a reality that employees, customers, and the public are increasingly aware of — and unwilling to tolerate. Employers are responsible for addressing inequities in their workforces and establishing meaningful strategies to ensure equity is prevalent throughout the organization.

Achieving equity isn't easy. It represents an ongoing commitment to engage with the delicate subject of discrimination, solicit feedback from employees, and iterate as conditions change. In other words, it is an ongoing project.

The rewards of this project are potentially significant, though! **With greater equity comes higher job satisfaction and morale, increased productivity, and decreased turnover — all solid contributors to return on investment.** And with those benefits comes the knowledge of having done the right thing.

There are excellent resources out there for organizations that aren't sure where to start regarding equity. Do a Google search, look for case studies of successful organizations with equity, inquire at industry associations, and network for ideas! Also, don't hesitate to get in touch with an equity, diversity, and inclusion consultant. Often, a consultant can get an equity strategy moving if it's stuck in the planning stages — or help develop one from the ground up.

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[Parris Consulting](#) is a diversity, equity, accessibility, and inclusion-focused consulting firm based in Vancouver, Canada. We are dedicated to assisting organizations across North America build equitable, diverse, and inclusive workforces.



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