

Striving for Workplace Equality

DOES ANTI-DISCRIMINATION LAW CREATE AN INCLUSIVE WORKPLACE?

By Alison Grenier

The issue of discrimination in the workplace is an ongoing point of discussion and contention. From the evident gender pay gap to the advancement of visible minorities into C-suite positions, the market continuously experiences dialogue as it works toward the goal of equality in the workforce.

The Canadian government has made an effort to establish anti-discrimination law that speaks to this long-term goal. *The Employment Equity Act* specifically strives for equality in the workplace and sets the precedent to correct the disadvantages experienced by women, visible minorities and others in the workforce by making it clear that employment equity requires special measures.

Although anti-discrimination law is a promising first step towards equality since it places pressure on organizations to take action, it does not directly produce inclusive workplaces.

So how can employers move the needle towards workplace equality where idle employment law cannot?

YOU CAN'T CHANGE WHAT YOU DON'T MEASURE

Implementing policies and programs that support workplace inclusion is part of a larger process, which requires understanding and evaluation. Measuring success involves much more than quota systems, which can be ineffective and even counter-productive. Collecting workplace demographics can help an organization understand the personal characteristics of employees and whether these have any impact on measures such as retention rates, promotions, rewards and recognition. Although 51 per cent of organizations define measurable objectives and milestones pertaining to diversity, only seven per cent measure the effectiveness of their diversity policies on employees, which illustrates there is work still to be done.

anti-discrimination law



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DIVERSITY TRAINING BEGINS AT THE TOP

To ensure your organization's diversity and inclusion work is implemented in a holistic fashion, it is important to provide related training to all employees. Organization-wide training should include a review of discrimination and harassment policies, education on the use of respectful (versus harmful) language, and detail what an employee should do if they experience or witness discrimination or harassment. Manager training should include all this, plus specific training on identifying and eliminating unconscious bias that may affect hiring and promotion decisions. Executive training must emphasize the critical role that leaders play in fostering an inclusive workplace. Above all, training should be reinforced with appropriate behaviours modelled at all levels of the organization (especially the leadership level) to ensure your initiatives are embedded in the day-to-day functioning of the organization.

PUT YOUR MONEY WHERE YOUR MOUTH IS

The best way to show support for diversity and inclusion is to make it part of an organizational structure, and this includes

providing a budget. This shows that an organization recognizes the business and social value of fostering an inclusive workplace. Financial support for training ensures everyone in your organization is aware of your organizational commitment to creating an inclusive workplace. Financing ERGs encourages inclusive social events and initiatives. Financial support for inclusive benefits helps people feel valued and cared for in the workplace.

While anti-discrimination law is a promising first step towards inclusion in the workplace, organizations must be the main drivers of practical, tangible change. Effective diversity and inclusion initiatives must be multi-faceted, integrated and stem from a sincere belief that diversity in all its forms is a competitive advantage. Diverse perspectives drive creativity, innovation and foster a feeling among employees that their opinion matters, which encourages them to give their best effort and stick around. ■

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