

Diversity at Work

Creating an inclusive and supportive work environment

Once an organization has successfully modified their recruitment and hiring practices to reach a more diverse audience, the next step is to successfully engage and support them as employees.

Visit the following HR Toolkit sections for information on HR practices that support an organization's ability to engage and retain diverse teams. These practices are not exclusive to diversity and inclusion efforts but are considered particularly important to the successful engagement and retention of diverse talent.

[Orientation](#)

[Employee engagement and retention](#)

[Performance management](#)

[Flexible work arrangements](#)

[Interpersonal communication](#)

[Learning & development](#)

The following are additional considerations to ensure that organizations create, support and nurture diversity:

1. [The workplace culture](#)
2. [Diversity training](#)
3. [Mentoring](#)

The workplace culture

When individuals feel that they cannot be themselves at work, they will not engage fully as part of the team or in assigned work. For example, an employee may feel that sexual orientation or a hidden disability cannot be revealed due to fear of reprisals. This type of 'closed' environment can significantly impact an individual's involvement in the organization, potentially resulting in low staff morale, increased absenteeism, decreased productivity and retention difficulties.

Organizational leaders play an important role in setting the tone for the shift towards increased diversity and inclusiveness in an organization. **Open, effective communication, as well as clear channels for feedback** optimizes the opportunity for discussion of issues related to inclusion and discrimination. Every organization starts from a different place and in a unique context, but all have room for improvement.

An **educational approach** can help to negate many fears that people have when it comes to addressing diversity. Both managers and employees fear that they may say the wrong thing, be perceived as discriminatory or be stifled by rigid rules of political correctness. Employees need to know that while there are standards and expectations for appropriate behaviour in the workplace, a focus on diversity isn't about being *perfect*. Diversity and inclusion is best nurtured in an open workplace where mistakes can be used for learning – not for embarrassing or shaming individuals.

Ideas for embracing diversity in the workplace

- Learn about the cultural backgrounds, lives and interests of employees outside of the workplace. Building relationships through increased understanding and trust helps to foster inclusion
- Include opportunities for staff to interact in settings outside of work so that employees feel more comfortable. Be creative, flexible and look for new ways of doing things
- Ensure all employees have the opportunity to take part in decision-making and planning for social activities
- Organize collective meals where employees can learn about one another's cultures by sharing food
- Be aware of, and provide time off for, culturally significant events and holy days. Consider offering a float day for employees to use at their discretion to observe such events or days
- Recognize and acknowledge special days and events such as International Day of Persons with Disabilities (Dec 3), International Day to End Racism, Gay Pride celebrations, etc.
- Create Intranet-based multicultural calendars to avoid scheduling important meetings on major cultural holidays
- Permit flexible schedules so that employees who observe religious practices can arrange their schedules around their beliefs
- Acknowledge all faiths present in your workplace

Guidelines for creating a GLBTTQ inclusive workplace culture

Tips for creating a GLBTTQ inclusive environment

- Don't assume everyone is heterosexual
- If specific significant days or events are highlighted for other employees, annual Gay Pride celebrations (usually held during the month of June) should be similarly marked
- Acknowledge the relationships of staff equally by ensuring that anniversaries, births and marriages/union ceremonies are celebrated in the same way
- Use the term 'partners' when inviting spouses to social activities. This is a more inclusive and non gender-specific term, and includes same-sex couples
- Never reveal a GLBTTQ person's sexual orientation or gender identity without permission
- In training or information sessions for employees or managers, use concrete examples of situations that pertain to GLBTTQ persons (e.g., when addressing legal issues related to financial matters of opposite-sex couples in a pre-retirement course, discuss those that apply to same-sex couples as well)

Links and Resources

Out and About: Towards a better understanding of gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered persons in the workplace. This online resource aims to:

- Broaden the concept of diversity
- Challenge some of the stereotypes associated with GLBTTQ persons
- Suggest concrete means for improving their well-being at work
- Offer basic information on the individual rights and obligations of all employees in a workplace that respects diversity

Building inclusion for employees with disabilities

All employees should be able to participate in, and contribute to, the progress and success of an organization. When an employee identifies a need, they should be asked how the environment or means of communication can be adapted to ensure inclusion.

Supporting a transitioning employee

When a transgendered person presents as a female, use feminine references (she, her, hers). When a person presents as a male, use masculine references (he, him, his). In uncertain cases, use the person's first name.

The list below outlines some additional practices for supporting a transgendered employee through the transitioning stage:

- Open communication is important. Learn as much as possible and educate the workforce about transsexuality
- Management needs to lead by example and demonstrate respect to the transitioning employee
- Make a single-use washroom available instead of separate male and female washrooms.
- If relevant, discuss workplace uniform/dress codes openly
- Accommodate time-off for medical procedures
- Refer to the transitioning employee by preferred name and pronouns
- Once the employee has completely transitioned, make an official name change for human resource and administrative records (for example, pensions, medical and dental and government filing)

Guidelines for increasing inclusion of employees with disabilities

If an employee is blind or has a visual impairment

- Identify yourself and anyone else with you
- If you have met before, state the context of the previous meeting to jog the person's memory
- If you are speaking in a group, name the person to whom you are speaking
- Speak in a normal tone of voice
- Clearly indicate if you are moving from one place to another or the conversation has ended
- Clear paths of obstacles
- Describe the surroundings to advise the person of their environment. For example, say 'There is a chair one metre to your right.' or 'Step down.' or 'The door is to your right.' or 'There are some obstacles in front of you on the left'
- If offering to act as a guide, invite the person to take your arm and walk about a half a step ahead of the person. Then listen or ask for instructions
- If appropriate, offer to read written information
- Guide dogs are working dogs: speaking or interacting with the dog is distracting and inappropriate
- Plan ahead to allow adequate time to prepare printed material in alternate formats (e.g. Braille, large print, audiocassette, or digital format)

If an employee is deaf or hearing impaired

- When securing sign language interpreter services, specify the language(s) required
- Attract the individual's attention before speaking
- Speak clearly and at a pace that allows the sign language interpreter to interpret for the person who is deaf and to allow this person to respond through the interpreter
- Don't shout
- Consider captioning
- Write notes or use gestures for one-on-one discussions
- Face the person to facilitate lip reading. Keep hands and other objects away from your lips when speaking
- Speak clearly, slowly, and directly to the person, not to the interpreter

- Don't assume that the individual knows sign language or can read lips
- Reduce or eliminate disruptive background noises (e.g. tapping pens or shuffling paper), since amplification devices are very sensitive to ambient noise. Converse in a quiet environment, or move to one, in order to facilitate communication

If an employee has a physical disability

- Rearrange furniture or objects in a room to accommodate wheelchairs, scooters, or other mobility aids
- Avoid leaning on someone's mobility aid
- If you need to have a lengthy conversation with someone in a wheelchair consider sitting so that you can make eye contact
- Know your workspace. Be aware of what is accessible and not accessible to people who use mobility aids
- Push someone in a manual wheelchair only when asked
- Give directions that include distance and physical obstacles. (For example, you might give a location as 20 metres away, or mention that there are stairs or a curb or a steep hill)

If an employee has a developmental or learning disability

- Offer and provide needed assistance
- Repeat information when necessary
- Speak directly to the person and listen actively
- Use plain language
- Provide one piece of information at a time
- Ask the person to repeat the message back to you to confirm they understand
- Be patient as some may take longer to process information and respond
- Try to provide information in a way that takes into account the person's disability

If an employee has a language or speech impediment

- Be patient - don't interrupt or finish the individual's sentences
- Don't assume that an individual with a speech impairment also has another disability
- Try to allow enough time to communicate with the individual as they may speak more slowly

If an employee has a mental health illness

- Get to know the person so that you can include the individual in social or organizational events
- Be confident, calm and reassuring
- If the individual appears to be in crisis, ask them to tell you the best way to help
- Help in crowded, noisy environments or high-stress situations

Links and Resources

Local advocacy groups and organizations that provide services to people with disabilities or websites for national organizations (like the [Canadian National Institute for the Blind](#) or [Canadian Mental Health Association](#)) can also provide helpful resources about understanding or accommodating specific disabilities.

[Back to top](#)

Diversity training

An inclusive environment requires **both individual diversity awareness skills and effective organizational systems** that support diversity and inclusion. Diversity training is one way to develop awareness and to increase

employee knowledge and sensitivity to diversity issues. It also provides workers with a set of skills that allow them to deal effectively with workplace diversity.

Often diversity training will focus on developing employees' cultural competence. Cultural competence is a set of attitudes, skills and behaviours that enable organizations and staff to work effectively in cross-cultural situations. Below are some common areas that exemplify how cultural differences impact how people work and interact with each other.

- **Concepts of time.** Depending on the culture, time moves forward and is measured precisely, or time is cyclical and is measured by events. Some cultures are more punctual and time-oriented, while others are more flexible and casual.
- **Physical contact and personal space.** In some cultures, individuals are less inhibited about engaging in public displays of affection or physical contact. In others, individuals are expected to behave modestly. In some cases, for example, it is inappropriate for a stranger to shake hands with a member of the opposite sex.
- **Styles and patterns of communication.** Some cultures are more accepting of silence during conversation whereas in others, individuals prefer continuous conversation and 'small talk.'
- **Self-identity or self-orientation.** In some cultures, members are more focused on self and meeting their individual needs, whereas in others, the community's needs take precedence.
- **Dealing with conflict.** In some cultures, conflict is dealt with immediately and directly. In others, the favoured approach is to avoid confrontation in order to preserve personal and group honour and dignity.
- **Relationships with nature.** Some cultures value being in harmony with nature while others view mastery over nature as more important.

Links and Resources

There are many local training providers, as well as on-line training resources that include video series, webinars and facilitated on-line courses. Some examples of training resources include:

[Hire Immigrants Ottawa](#), a community-based initiative that brings together employers, immigrant agencies and stakeholders to enhance employers' ability to access the talents of skilled immigrants in the Ottawa area. Beyond online tools and information, they also provide information sessions for employers and cross-cultural competency training modules.

The Provincial Health Services Authority in BC developed the [Indigenous Cultural Competency Training](#) program, a facilitated online training program for people to gain self awareness and develop skills towards working more effectively with Aboriginal Peoples.

[The Calgary Catholic Immigration Society](#) (CCIS) facilitates Cultural Diversity Dialogues (Learning Circles) and Cultural Diversity Workshops

[hireimmigrants.ca](#) hosts regular webinars on topics relevant to successful hiring and integration of internationally trained workers as well as an ongoing video series. These resources are free, easy to access and geared to Canadian employers.

The [Aboriginal Human Resource Council](#) provides on-line learning tools, videos and Aboriginal inclusion training resources.

[Diversity in the Workplace](#) provides news, views, webinars, best practices, and how-to information to organizations.

[Back to top](#)

Mentoring

Mentoring can be an important way to integrate, develop and retain employees. Mentoring involves the pairing of a more skilled or experienced employee with a new employee to encourage dialogue and information sharing. Such programs can help all new employees but may be particularly valuable to internationally trained workers for cultural acclimatization – understanding workplace norms, expectations and values.

Please visit the [Learning & Development](#) section of the HR Toolkit for more information.

Mentors also benefit from these relationships. In addition to the intrinsic satisfaction gained from making a positive and long-lasting impact in another person's life, mentors benefit by developing:

- An ability to impart skills and knowledge, as well as to enhance analytical and interpersonal skills
- A greater understanding of issues and problems from another person's perspective
- An appreciation of cultural differences, personal and professional values, and how these affect the workplace

Links and Resources

In small organizations, it may be necessary to look outside of the organization for mentors. Some examples of established mentoring programs in communities across Canada include:

[The Mentoring Partnership](#) in Toronto and the [Mentoring Collaborative](#) in Calgary bring together skilled immigrants (mentees) and established professionals (mentors)—who are often skilled immigrants themselves—in occupation-specific mentoring relationships.

[The Halifax Connector Program](#) facilitates links between established professionals and new immigrants by introducing them to three people in their networks. Those three people are each encouraged to provide three more introductions. In this way, immigrants build and strengthen their professional networks.

MESH, a network for young nonprofits professionals in the National Capital Region has introduced [mentormatch](#), a different approach to mentoring that encourages people to seek out and connect with each other to share ideas, exchange expertise and learn from each other.

[Ottawa Community Immigration Services Organization](#) offers a career mentoring program that matches volunteer career mentors with internationally educated professionals (IEP) to try and help IEPs obtain employment in their field.

The [Women in Leadership Mentorship Program](#), launching in Vancouver, Toronto and Montreal is designed to increase women's participation in management or leadership positions in Canada by combining mentorship and leadership skills development.

[Canadian Council for Aboriginal Business](#) offers a mentorship program that provides Aboriginal business people with a mentor to guide and support them in their business goals.

Next section: [Inclusive language guidelines](#)

[Back to top](#)