

## Building an Inclusive Workplace: Diversity in Canada

A conversation with JB Aloy, Employee Research Expert, Ipsos Reid

*Q. Over the past year, you've been studying employee engagement and the state of the workplace in Canada. What have you uncovered when it comes to the issue of diversity?*

**JB:** As a nation, Canada takes great pride in its diversity of cultures and people. But do Canadian employers value diversity, especially from the viewpoint of staff? How inclusive is the Canadian workplace today? And is it free of discrimination? To get a grasp on diversity in the workplace, these were some of the questions we felt needed answers.

Based on one of the largest employee polls ever conducted – 50,000+ interviews conducted worldwide in July and August of 2009, including a representative sample of 4,100 Canadian employees – Ipsos was able to make a solid assessment of the diversity question from both a global and Canadian perspective. And what we found was that 56% of Canadian employees feel that diversity is valued in their workplace.

*Q. Compared to other countries, how does the Canadian workplace fare on the diversity question?*

**JB:** When it comes to the issue of diversity in the workplace, Canada fits in well with the rest of the Americas, as results for Canada are comparable to those in the U.S. and South American countries. Canadian results have proven to be more favourable than European and Asian average scores, although some of the best scores are found in Europe, especially in Denmark and Switzerland. Close to three respondents out of four in Denmark feel that their employer truly values the diversity of its workforce.

Compared to 2007, however, the Canadian score is stable showing no significant change. These factors tend to indicate that there is still room for improvement across all of North America, including Canada.

*Q. Are there significant differences by sub-groups of Canadian employees?*

**JB:** Results are rather even across industries and categories of staff. Members of visible minority groups also fall in line with the national average score. That having been said, there are some differences. We found a 10-point gap between the perceptions of senior managers and workers and a 5-point difference between females and males, with females having a more positive view of how their employers view diversity in the workplace. Age is also a factor, and one that shows a negative correlation: employees under 25 have more favourable perceptions than employees over 45. This trend is partly a reflection of the focus placed on diversity in many recruitment campaigns and on-boarding sessions.

*Q. What about the concept of equal opportunity within the workplace?*

**JB:** Overall, Canadians quite strongly feel that their workplace does not block opportunities – a little less than two in three Canadian employees consider their employer to be an equal opportunity employer. Globally, Canada is in the highest echelon of countries where employees feel that their employers embrace equal opportunity. The highest scores for this were registered in the U.S. and Australia, followed by Denmark (again!), the UK, and then Canada. But of note, when we compare to these findings to our 2007 study, the Canadian score is slightly down, a trend reflected in a majority of countries including the U.S. and UK.

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And the results are remarkably consistent across industries and job levels, between SMEs and large organizations, between visible minority groups and the rest of the workforce. Concerning the latter element, though, this trend contrasts with the situation in the U.S. where the sentiments of visible minorities score 6 points below the national average.

In Canada, employees under the age of 25 express some of the most critical opinions regarding equal opportunities in their workplace. Nationality is not a neutral variable either: “expatriate” employees’ results are 6 points below the Canadian average.

But the most discriminating factor is one’s language: there is a 12-point gap between Anglophone and Francophone sentiments. Bilingualism appears to be a persistent issue in regards to equity in the Canadian workplace.

### *Q. Do Canadians feel any type of discrimination on the job?*

**JB:** Discrimination is an ugly reality in that still exists in the workplace, and our study showed that 14% of Canadian employees felt that they have been discriminated against at their workplace in the past year. This score is similar to those found in the U.S. and Europe, but more favourable than what we found in South American and Asian workplaces.

Obviously, no country is absolutely free of discrimination, but still, employees in certain countries report lower levels of discrimination. For instance, less than 10% of Dutch and German employees reported feeling some sort of discrimination in their workplace. The discrimination question is something we only started to study in the past year, so at this time we cannot provide a comparison, but we will track this indicator in future surveys.

Across Canadian employee sub-groups, once more the results are consistent across sub-groups with two notable exceptions: foreign employees and members of visible minority groups.

The proportion of employees who felt discriminated against is 21% for members of visible minority groups and 24% for foreign employees. This difference is less significant than in the U.S. but raises serious questions about workplace cohesion in Canada.

### *Q. What does all this say about the Canadian workplace today?*

**JB:** Overall, the Canadian workplace tends to be rather inclusive compared to other countries and the majority of Canadian employees feel that they are provided with equal opportunities. Nevertheless, significant proportions of employees still need to be convinced – there are numerous “fence sitters” – and language remains a sensitive national issue.

The potential risks come from the fact that no progress in employee perception was registered over the past 2 years, despite the increasingly diverse nature of the Canadian workforce in that same time. Diversity has been high on corporate HR agendas for more than a decade and some employers have invested considerable efforts in this area, but the economic downturn has undoubtedly impacted employee perceptions.

Overall, corporate policies to encourage and celebrate diversity seem to be in place in Canada. Still, day-to-day practices are not exempt from discrimination. For example, the fairness of management practices and the quality of interaction with colleagues are less positively rated by members of visible minority groups. The challenge is therefore to diffuse diversity guidelines in organizations and to ensure that they are consistently implemented.

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