

Diversity Works

Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion in
the Supported Employment Sector (SES)

ROUNDTABLE SUMMARY REPORT

August 2022

INTRODUCTION

Between November 2021- August 2022, the Canadian Association for Supported Employment (CASE), in partnership with the Center for Community Based Research, led a community-based research study to explore the employment journeys of Black, Indigenous, People of Colour who experience disability (BIPOC-D). Findings from this study shed light on the barriers BIPOC-D job seekers face and the strategies they use to find and keep work in a racist and ableist labour market. As part of exploration of strategies, the study examined the accessibility and quality of supported employment services (SES) for BIPOC-D job seekers.

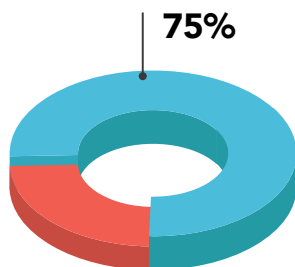
The full Diversity Works research report offers a nuanced discussion of BIPOC-D experiences with supported employment services. This report is focused on two broad messages from the data:

1. BIPOC-D job seekers face multiple structural barriers that diminish their access to supported employment services.
2. Though assessments of SES were positive overall, criticisms of services, including those from service providers, raise concerns about a) unconscious bias in service delivery, and b) the sector's capacity to address both racism and ableism.

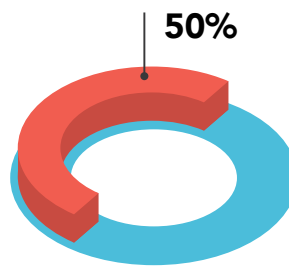
The state of equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) in the SES sector was not the focus the Diversity Works research, however, our engagements with service providers included a few questions about EDI in their organization. Below are some of the key related findings.

Service Providers believe their organization...

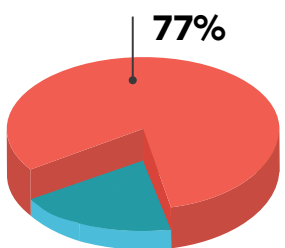
values EDI in the work place



provides adequate EDI or anti-racism training

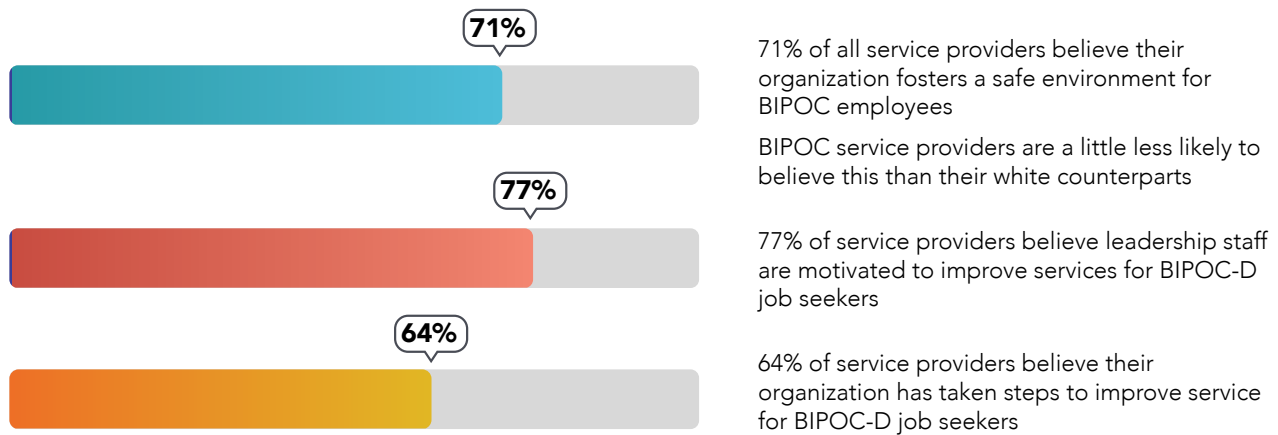


employs a racially diverse group of service providers



BUT less than half of service providers (48%) believe their organization employs a racially diverse group of managers or directors



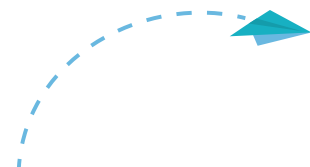


Service providers' assessments of EDI in their organization were positive overall. Our comparison of responses from BIPOC service providers to those of White service providers did not reveal significant differences in their assessments, with three exceptions:

- ▶ 65% of service providers worked regularly with BIPOC-D job seekers. However, BIPOC services providers (75%) were more likely to work with BIPOC-D job seekers than their white counterparts (58%).
- ▶ More BIPOC service providers (80%) felt comfortable talking about racism with employers than white service providers (67%).
- ▶ 71% service providers agreed or strongly agreed with the statement, "My organization fosters a safe environment for BIPOC employees." BIPOC service providers were a little less likely (65%) to agree with this statement when compared to their white counterparts (77%).

This preliminary picture of the state of EDI in the SES sectors was the starting place for the roundtable discussion presented in this summary. In August 2022, the Diversity Works research team facilitated a roundtable with a small group of leaders in the supported employment sector. The purpose of this event was to explore and document participants' thoughts about EDI in the supported employment sector with a focus on anti-racism. The structure of the event considered criticisms of institutional EDI evaluations and policies for their failure to de-centre whiteness. The discussion with service providers explored the following themes:

1. The state of racial diversity in the SES sector;
2. White dominance (e.g., white privilege) in the SES sector and the experiences of BIPOC staff in the sector;
3. Addressing white privilege in the sector.



DISCUSSION SUMMARY

A collective and critical reflection on EDI

To open the roundtable, we asked participants to share their own definitions and feelings about EDI. Most participants agreed that under the broad umbrella of EDI, racism stands out as an important focal point for service providers in the Supported Employment Sector (SES), and all were supportive of our decision to confront white dominance. One participant believed EDI movements should be led by BIPOC communities. She went on to say that structural change “has to start with anti-racism. Racism is essentially the foundation for all kinds of segregation that’s happened over time.”

One participant believed that the evolution of EDI theories and practices includes the appropriation of BIPOC worldviews. In her words:

“EDI is how a lot of BIPOC communities used to live until colonization happened. This is how a lot of Indigenous communities and BIPOC communities from around the world, and also a lot of Indigenous communities within European framework existed. People had shared values. That’s how they lived, and so they didn’t need these inclusion factors which we need now.”

However, participants understand that EDI has become an important part of organizations in order to foster accountability. It targets bias and discrimination, aims to develop helpful policies and practices that removes barriers. For one participant, EDI offered a space to recognize peoples’ individual experiences without making it divisive.

The state of racial diversity in the SES sector

Participants were asked to reflect on the state of racial diversity in the SES sector. Overall, participants described the sector as predominantly white and were surprised to learn that most service providers in our study believed staff at their organizations were racially diverse. In the words of one participant:

“I was surprised that there was the level of diversity, even with direct service providers. There’s more racial diversity there than I thought there would be, which is promising, but makes it even more troubling that the same level of diversity doesn’t exist in leadership roles.”

Participants were concerned that this tokenizing effort to concentrate BIPOC service providers at the frontlines forced BIPOC staff to carry the burden of addressing racism as well as racial diversity in the sector.



Participants commented that exclusion at the leadership level is both race- and gender-based. This assessment of inequities in promotion is reflected in one participant's description of the diversity (or lack thereof) at different levels in the sector:

"My experience in the disability sector, in and outside of employment is historically, frontline staff are BIPOC women and middle management are white women and upper management are white men".

This conversation quickly moved beyond diversity to identify the need to promote racial equity within SES. With transparency and humility, the participants of the roundtable shared a "willingness to start a conversation, not knowing where it's going to lead, not having a mapped-out destination, but being willing to start." There was agreement that advancements toward a more racially just workplace should begin with recruitment and hiring, and then extend to promotion into leadership.

The impacts of white dominance (e.g. white privilege)

1) Training

Fifty percent of the service provider survey respondents in the Diversity Works research study believed their organization provides adequate EDI or anti-racism training. There were mixed reactions to this finding in our roundtable discussion. Some were surprised and disappointed to know that half of service providers felt inadequately trained in EDI. As demonstrated in the quote below:

"For this go around I was struck by one of the recent slides, where 50% were not provided with adequate training that struck me as a pretty significant gap."

Others were not surprised given the lack of diversity in the sector. One participant wondered if this statistic spoke to lack training or the quality of existing training. She questions both in her quote below:

"Are those trainings really doing their job? Then why are white people not making space for people of colour?"

2) Perpetuation of white dominance in leadership

Participants were asked to think about why white men continue to dominate leadership roles in the sector. One participant believed white men have dominated these roles for so long that the sector now associates the traits of leadership with those of white men. In her words:

"I think there is still a lot of white men in leadership in the nonprofit. If the leadership is older white men, then we're defining the traits of leadership to be those stereotypical traits".

Another participant corroborated this theory with her suggestion that, "the systems were designed by white men, so they're not exactly open to the new changes... if they [BIPOC] don't have the leadership traits, then that's why we're not hiring them, because we're defining leadership based on the current leadership kind."

3) White privilege is protected by White Fragility

Some participants were aware that white privilege in the SES sector is protected by white fragility. One participant foregrounded this discussion of white fragility with this description of how racism is expressed in Canada: “racism in Canada is very polite - it’s very patronizing, and I think that what people miss are the little things.” In this context, participants agreed that confronting white privilege and racism creates discomfort for some white people. The participants quoted below described these kinds of reactions to racism and acknowledged them as common microaggressions that shape racial dynamics in the sector:

“...sometimes when we talk about this, people say ‘racism’, it’s such a big word, it’s all encompassing for most folks. They’re going to go ‘I’m not a racist’ and you know they take it so personally - those tiny examples of microaggressions that are demonstrated day in and day out, that demonstrates that fear is built over time”.

White participants in the roundtable were reflective about their responsibility to address racism in ways that will challenge white fragility.

“If I bring up racism in the workplace, I’m going to get so much backlash from other white employees, and this kind of comes to the heart of white fragility, which is why we’re here, which is why we’re taking this focus on whiteness today, so that the sector can reflect on their own fragility and move the conversation forward.”

Participants agreed that these difficult conversations about racism in the sector need to happen, and people should be open to listening, reflecting, and holding themselves accountable. Participants were also aware of the complexity of these conversations and the need to reflect on intersecting identities and their relationship to white privilege. In the words of one participant:

“Whiteness is not just about white people. It’s about our proximity to White privilege.”

Finally, one participant talked about her struggle to “better understand the role of an ally.” Specifically, they wondered how to respectfully advocate for BIPOC communities or colleagues as a white individual.

“How do I speak on behalf of a community that I’m not a part of? How do I advocate respectfully?... If I’m a white leader of a white organization having conversations about racism, there are clearly voices missing. Not that staff aren’t recognizing the importance of it but they’re not clear yet or unsure or don’t have the training to understand how you have those conversations in a respectful productive ways that still recognize their own privilege”

Participants agreed that there is a lot of learning to be done through training, workshops and other forms of reflection, including research.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS ON CHANGE:

To effect change within the SES sector, there must be ongoing, anti-racist education and dialogues. As one participant suggested, “a culture of learning is what we need to focus on, because we are not going to eradicate this problem.” This participant believed that real change begins “on a very foundational elemental level, so that people, allies, for example, are getting anti-racism training and not assuming.” Participants believed that real commitment to organizational change is often compromised by structural barriers in the sector, including a lack of funding. Another participant confirmed that organizations are too stretched and do not have the time or money to dedicate to meaningful EDI work:

“I think a lot of organizations are also in survival mode. They’re getting just enough funding to deliver on what they promised to a funder for a specific project. We talk about unrestricted funds as the Holy Grail in nonprofit. But it’s really hard for most organizations to access resources to provide EDI training if they haven’t managed to secure some unrestricted funds.”

For participants, the most important next step was to move this conversation to spaces of dissent in the sector. One participant described the roundtable as a discussion among the converted. It was her view that preaching to the choir will not shed light on the real barriers to change in the sector. She went on to close the roundtable with this parting advice:

“We cannot afford to cancel anyone. We need everyone in this revolution... How do we make that happen? We can apply the same principles of inclusion but have BIPOC folks lead it and see what happens. To think that one training will change everything is not true. It should be an emerging process led by BIPOC folks, designed by BIPOC folks. But we need to change this attitude that we have to cancel someone. We can’t afford to cancel anyone. How can we all value equity? What will it take for the sector to really value anti-racism?”

