



A Guide for Canadian HR and People Leaders

Equity at Work

Part 1

What employers need to know to make a difference



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Introduction

The dawn of diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) has gained global attention.

However, the question we should be asking ourselves is:

Why is it essential for everyone to heed the call for diversity, equity and inclusion?

Social media channels, news programs, and podcasts are awash with heated debates over equity. As experts argue about the implications of equity, universities and corporations are hastening to respond to ever-growing concerns among their students, faculty, staff, and the public. Likewise, HR departments are struggling to make sense of the terminology around equity so they can devise and implement practices that benefit their employees. And importantly, executives are trying to grasp the implication of NOT sufficiently putting their support behind actionable policies that will create equitable workplaces.

Despite the media polarization, it's evident that most people care about fairness, justice, and inclusion at their workplaces. Movements such as #MeToo, tragic news events involving racism, and an increasing wealth gap underline how critical it is to address equity issues. As a result, we're seeing a high level of public interest in seeing organizations define and formalize equitable work practices.

If the discussion of equity often feels unsettled and divisive, it's not because the concept isn't well defined.

Rather, the idea is taking time to filter through organizations and individuals. In other words, a shared understanding is still evolving. Considerable work has been done to define equity and situate it in relation to the concept of equality and define their counterparts: inequity and inequality. Definitions are being fine-tuned thanks to the work of scholars and researchers. Language is evolving as ideas gain traction and are distilled into learning institutions and workplaces. In other words, **progress is happening**.

But still, we need to ask ourselves:

Does organizational leadership DEEPLY understand the impact of an inequitable workplace?

Answering this question depends on many variables. As organizations and communities refine how they think about equity, it's time for employers to take the lead in communicating what an equitable workplace is and how it can help employees thrive.

This guide explains how you and your organization can work to achieve greater equity.

Fundamental Principles

What is equity?

The dictionary definition of equity is “fairness or justice in the way people are treated.”¹ 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 aims to ensure that everyone has the same opportunities and achieves proportional results.

There is sometimes confusion between equity and equality. At a glance, the two terms look similar. And when people mistakenly interchange them, that adds to the confusion. Here is the distinction:

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 in such a way that everyone has a fair outcome. To continue the allowance analogy, it would be equitable for each of the three children to receive the allowance they need for their activities. The youngest 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.

The distinction between equity and equality is significant. It means we can’t simply dispense resources to everyone and treat them in a cookie-cutter fashion. Instead, we need to understand the details that underpin their status in the world. These may include cultural background, race, sex, gender, orientation, age, ability status, and unique barriers and intersectionalities. In addition, we need to pay attention to people’s “lived experience” and how it affects their sense of belonging, psychological safety, and opportunities for success in the workplace.

Many leaders take a checklist approach to achieving workplace equity. They set equity objectives without fully understanding the intersectionalities of their workforce, which compromises their efforts. Leaders across all organizational levels need to ask:

To what extent do we understand our workforce’s diversity? And how are we considering individual differences to inform our strategic position in addressing equity gaps?

Can you have equity without equality?

You can have equality without equity — equal treatment and distribution of resources — but you **can’t** have equity without equality. When you give people equal treatment and resources, you are not considering their unique differences, challenges, barriers, and advantages. But when you treat people as individuals and consider these factors, you can determine an equitable allocation of resources. Everyone won’t get the same things or treatment, but they will get what they need to thrive equally. In effect, equity is a strategy for achieving equality of outcomes.



The notion of equity can seem alarming to people at first. The principle of equal treatment is so ingrained in us that we automatically want to give everyone the same allocation. Our instincts tell us that it's unfair to give some people less and others more.

But upon examination, this is overly simplistic. So here's a reality check:

- Equity does **not** mean giving more to one group at the expense of another.
- Equity does **not** mean taking opportunities away from specific groups.
- Equity does **not** mean hiring people who aren't qualified.
- Equity does **not** mean relaxing standards or ignoring employee infractions.
- Equity is **not** zero-sum. Resources are not a finite "pie" that gets divided up. Giving a larger slice to one person or group doesn't mean that other persons or groups won't have enough pie!



For example, giving everyone the same workstation assumes they all have the same needs and will benefit from the same set-up. But as you can see in this illustration above, this is problematic. It's hard for some employees to reach the keyboard, and the ergonomics are poor. This results in inequity, as employees with an ill-fitting workstation will not be able to work to the same level as employees with a workstation that fits them.

What does equity mean in the workplace?

Equity is about modifying practices so that every employee can shine, regardless of their identity group or systemic barriers. Equity sets the stage for fairness and justice. In a corporate setting, equity ensures:

- Proportional numbers of employees are represented from a range of identity groups employed at all levels of the organization (diversity).
- Resources are distributed to close gaps that exist between identity groups.
- Staff have an awareness of and willingness to foster equity in the workplace.
- HR and management have processes and training to promote and create a shared understanding of equity.
- Historical injustices are taken into consideration, as is historical privilege.
- Deliberate actions are taken to remove barriers and promote inclusion.
- Language is intentionally inclusive and shared with employees as a best practice.
- Everyone can reach their full potential.



A better option! Giving each person a personalized workstation enables everyone to work comfortably. In this scenario, the desk is at the correct level for each person, and there is the option to roll a wheelchair underneath, make space for a service animal, and stand if preferred. Even the person whose workstation mostly fit in the first example can benefit from some personalization. Without barriers to working, everyone can do their best work. That's equity.



Did you know? Facts about workplace inequity

- *Non-Indigenous Canadians earn \$7,600 more per year than their Indigenous counterparts.²*
- *On average, LGBTQ2+ people have significantly lower earnings than non-LGBTQ2+ people.³*
- *60% of Black employees report racism and micro-aggressions in the workplace.⁴*
- *Black Canadians make up 3.5% of the Canadian population, yet they represent only 1% of senior executives.⁵*
- *36% of people over 40 believe their age stands in the way of getting a job.⁶*
- *Female employees aged 25–54 earn 13.3% less than their male counterparts.⁷*

Myths & Misconceptions About Equity

"Equity is a fad."

Those who argue that equity is a fad may be getting their information from unreliable or incorrect sources. The truth is that equity is part of a constantly evolving process of awareness building. Think back to 30 years ago to when "firemen" were renamed "firefighters." At the time, people commented that the term would never catch on. The occupation was (and is still) dominated by male workers. Many people found the name change absurd and laughable. But here we are in 2022, where the word firefighter is the unquestioned standard.

"Equity benefits underrepresented groups at the expense of dominant ones."

Equity isn't about taking something away and redistributing it. It's about ensuring that all groups have access to the same opportunities and achieve proportional representation. Think of elections as an analogy. We all want to see ourselves and our interests represented. It's just fair and natural. And equity overwhelmingly benefits everyone at an organization.

"Equity programs are divisive."

There is little evidence to support this statement. When a company approaches equity in an intentional, well-thought-out manner and provides training to employees, equity becomes a positive aspect of the culture for all employees.

"There are not enough qualified candidates from underrepresented groups."

Again, this belief isn't supported by facts. Similarly, there is little evidence to support the assertion that standards need to be lowered to support equity. It simply isn't the case.

"Equity has nothing to do with employees in the majority groups."

Untrue! For an equity strategy to succeed, it needs the buy-in of all employees at an organization. It's an opportunity to convey to everyone that their input is valuable.

"Equity is expensive."

It doesn't have to be. Many companies have employees who are passionate about equity. Give them the resources and guidance to do it, and they'll gladly participate in an equity strategy. It costs little to make small but meaningful tweaks to corporate culture, advertising, social media communications, and hiring practices. Anyone concerned about this should consult with an equity, diversity, and inclusion specialist to get the facts.

"Equity is about bullying white people."

This is perhaps the most pervasive myth. Podcasts and discussion threads abound with stories about "struggle sessions" in which white people confess to their prejudices. This isn't an approach most DEI consultants would endorse. The idea is to bring everybody along! It's a team effort.



Did you know?

*Canadians with disabilities are **less likely to be employed** than those without disabilities and **more likely to be living in poverty**.⁸*

— Limeade Institute

Equity 101

We've examined what equity and equality are and how they relate to each other. Now, let's explore some of the fundamental concepts related to equity.

Justice

Research shows a positive association between employee satisfaction and a sense of **justice**. This combination may result in reduced absenteeism and employee turnover, better compliance with policies and procedures, and higher productivity. There may also be a greater sense of employee cohesion, a sense of being “all in it together.”

There are **three** kinds of workplace justice:

1. **Procedural justice** – procedures and policies in place at an organization, and the standards and rationale it uses to allocate resources (e.g., job aids, assets used on the job, opportunities to progress).
2. **Distributive justice** – the sense that resources and rights are distributed equitably and fairly.
3. **Interactional justice** – the way employees are treated. For employees to feel their work environment is just, they need to feel treated with respect and dignity.

In the context of equity, justice means that employees need to understand and support how rights, responsibilities, resources, and privileges are allocated. Establishing this buy-in may require increased transparency on the part of an employer. Leaders may need to improve how they communicate their decision-making processes and promote opportunities. Importantly, they need to communicate that they can implement an equity program without causing employees to feel threatened. This meaningful communication will create buy-in and get internal traction with the program.

The flipside to justice is an uneasy sense that an organization isn't fair or just. This sentiment can lead to sick calls, burnout, reduced morale, and reduced productivity. For this reason, organizations must pay attention to justice and take steps to put effective HR practices in place to promote it.



Did you know?

A man is 1.5 times more likely to be hired than a woman when both are equal-performing candidates.

— builtin.com

Diversity

Like equity, **diversity** is a buzzword in corporate and institutional settings and in society at large.

For multiple reasons, organizations are paying extra attention to diversity these days. In addition to becoming more mindful of historical injustices and inequities, employers realize that diversity is better for productivity, employee morale, corporate reputation, and the bottom line. Diverse workplaces are considered attractive places to work and may attract a larger pool of high-quality applicants.

There are **four** types of diversity.⁹

1. **Internal diversity** — refers to characteristics a person was born with.
2. **External diversity** — refers to characteristics acquired environmentally.
3. **Organizational diversity** — refers to the range of roles within an organization.
4. **Worldview diversity** — refers to diversity of thought (views and perspectives that employees hold.) A diverse workforce is an equitable workforce in that it provides employment opportunities to diverse groups of people. In addition, respect for individual differences leads to increased levels of cultural awareness among employees and a higher degree of comfort with self-expression. These factors can lead to higher creativity and innovation levels.



Did you know?

Employees who feel their work environment is inclusive are 43% more committed to their company and 51% more likely to recommend it as a great place to work. In addition, they tend to stay with their company three times longer.

— Limeade Institute

Younger generations of employees are especially attuned to diversity; for them, a diverse workplace is more than just “the right thing to do”; it appeals to them. They often consider diversity a key criterion when job hunting. If employers are similarly attuned, they will benefit by attracting these talent pools, enhancing their corporate reputations, and widening their customer bases. Developing a diversity plan in tandem with their equity strategy is key to their future success.



Inclusion

While diversity measures an organization's makeup, **inclusion** focuses on how employees experience the organization. It is trickier to measure than diversity, but it still demands a deliberate and meaningful approach on the part of HR departments.

Here are some characteristics of an inclusive work environment:

- Employees feel **valued** for who they are. They feel appreciated for their characteristics — not “tolerated” or pressured to fit in.
- Employees feel **heard**. They have a voice. They feel welcome to contribute and collaborate.
- Employees feel they **belong**. They feel they are part of the organization and connected to others. If they are new to the organization, they feel confident they will be welcomed.
- Employees feel **supported**. They can access employee resource groups to support their wellbeing. In addition, their employer provides learning and development opportunities to help them thrive.



Did you know?

Companies that practise inclusion have a 35% higher likelihood of above-average ROI. They experience 6x more innovation and a 20% increase in the quality of decision making.¹⁰

— BlackNorth Initiative x BCG Racial Equity Playbook

Privilege

To understand equity, it's crucial to recognize and understand **privilege**. Essentially, privilege refers to imbalances of power, which may or may not be visible to those who possess the power.

Some privileges in life are formal and overt. For example, a doctor may have “hospital privileges” — the ability to admit, care for, and discharge patients from the hospital while also having a clinical practice outside of the hospital.

The other type of privilege is implicit, and this is the type we are concerned with here. Privilege refers to benefits that accrue to people because they belong to a particular identity group. For example, a person may have, or not have, privilege because of race, religion, sex, gender, orientation, socioeconomics, and ability status, among other things.



Privilege provides an advantage to those who possess it. Even if the possessors wanted to get rid of it, they couldn't do so. Those who do not possess privilege may experience the counter side, oppression, because they do not have access to the same resources and power.

In the workplace, privilege plays out in numerous ways. It may look like preferential treatment. It may look like microaggressions. It may look like biased standards of professional dress or grooming.

There are five types of privilege: ¹¹

- **White privilege** — assumptions and defaults based on the racial majority of white people; might be unconscious.
- **Gender privilege** — lower opportunity and compensation based on gender.
- **Religious privilege** — societal defaulting to Christian holidays and other historically Christian norms.
- **Heterosexual privilege** — assumptions and defaults based on the heterosexual and cisnormative majority.
- **Socio-economic privilege** — hierarchical phenomenon based on complex factors.



Did you know?

*"Black sounding" names are as much as **12 times less likely** to get a callback in the resume-screening process.¹²*

Bias

A **bias** is a prejudice toward one thing or against another. **Unconscious bias** refers to prejudices we are unaware of. Either type of bias may lead to unfair assumptions and actions in the workplace, but unconscious bias is more insidious than overt bias. It's hard to challenge someone who's not even aware of having bias. Bringing up the topic of bias in the workplace may make people defensive; they may deny having bias. And they may — accurately or inaccurately — point out that having bias is not the same as acting on it.

The bottom line is that we should strive to be aware of bias. That doesn't mean putting people under the spotlight and asking them to confess to a bias. However, it does mean engaging with people to help them do some soul searching about their decisions, the actions they take and don't take, the attitudes they hold, and the underlying assumptions that cause them to do what they do and feel how they do they feel. This type of self-discovery doesn't have to be uncomfortable. We all have a bias of one kind or another, and we can benefit from being aware of it.



Here are just a few types of bias that may show up in the workplace:

- **Affinity bias** — the tendency to connect with people similar to yourself.
- **Conformity bias** — the tendency to behave similarly to the people around you.
- **Gender bias** — the tendency to give preferential treatment to one gender over another (typically male over female, but also cisnormative over non-binary).
- **Ability bias** — the tendency to give preference to people who do not have a disability.
- **Name bias** — the tendency to prefer names that sound like they come from a similar background to your own.
- **Age bias** — the tendency to favour people of specific age ranges and to feel negatively toward others.
- **Beauty bias** — the tendency to favour traditionally attractive people.
- **Height bias** — the tendency to favour people who fall within an average height range.



Did you know?

*The human brain consciously processes **40 pieces** of information per second. Unconsciously, it processes **11 million pieces**.*

— Forbes¹³

Fragility

White fragility, a term coined by Robin DiAngelo¹⁴, refers to discomfort and defensiveness that white people experience when confronted with information about racial inequality, inequity, injustice, and their own privilege. DiAngelo's point is that white people often fail to acknowledge their participation in a system that discriminates based on the colour of people's skin. She argues that "colour-blind" approaches further entrench existing systemic racism and that acknowledging white fragility is a way to become an ally to people of colour.

DiAngelo's assertion has been controversial, not least because it deliberately seeks to arouse discomfort. However, this should not distract from the reality of privilege and bias in our society and our workplaces.

It is vital that you begin to be aware of your belief system and its contribution to your bias. So often, our biases in the workplace emerge from our environment, which is where core beliefs are developed.

Conclusion

Equity is a concept that's gaining traction in society and across organizations. But it's still misunderstood by many people. It's often confused with equality, which can lead to misconceptions about the implications of equity strategies for workplaces and employees' sense of fairness and justice.

As employers start to embark on equity strategies, they must crystallize their definition of equity to communicate it effectively to their teams. In addition, they must address misperceptions and misunderstandings about equity, particularly when these lead to stagnation on equity strategies.

This guide contains information that employers can share with their teams about equity, including definitions, how equity is distinct from equality, and why it's so essential to implement an equity strategy. And it's not just important for individual employees – it's necessary for an organization to thrive and grow in a society that has shown itself ready to embrace equity.

There are excellent resources for organizations that would like more information on 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.

What's **your** next move to get started with an equity strategy?

[Click here for Part 2 of this guide that offers practical steps your organization can take to build a more equitable future.](#)



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About UKG

At UKG, our purpose is people. As strong believers in the power of culture and belonging as the secret to success, we champion great workplaces and build lifelong partnerships with our customers to show what's possible when businesses invest in their people. Born from a historic merger that created one of the world's leading HCM cloud companies, our Life-work Technology approach to HR, payroll, and workforce management solutions for all people helps 50,000 organizations around the globe and across every industry anticipate and adapt to their employees' needs beyond just work. To learn more, visit ukg.com.

About the author

[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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