

Diversity and inclusion in the workplace

Creating a more inclusive workspace for everyone.



Have you ever walked into a room and felt like you stood out noticeably? Perhaps you were the only person of colour, the only woman in the room, or the only person with a disability. This can be uncomfortable and isolating.

Now think, what if the opposite were true? What if you were part of a team that valued your unique abilities, perspective, and experiences? That's what diverse and inclusive workplaces do: they create an environment where everyone feels welcome, valued, and respected.

Diversity is a fact, inclusion is a choice

Though diversity and inclusion are separate terms with different meanings, they're often paired because they must work together to have a positive impact.

Diversity refers to the presence of different types of people (or groups of people) with varied characteristics, backgrounds, and experiences. Diversity can be based on a variety of attributes, including race, gender, religion, disability, and sexual orientation.

Inclusion is about creating workplaces where diverse people feel valued, supported, and involved—and where individuals' culture and identity are recognized and celebrated.

In many Canadian workplaces, diversity is now an everyday reality. But acknowledging diversity is the easy part. It can take work to foster and maintain an atmosphere of inclusion and belonging—and doing so is a conscious choice made by everyone at the workplace.

A check-in about privilege

To better understand diversity and the importance of inclusion, it's also useful to understand what privilege is. Though different people have different understandings of the concept, privilege broadly refers to the unearned benefits or advantages that individuals have in society due to an aspect of their identity, such as their race, gender, sexual orientation, language, or religion. It exists because society assumes that certain groups are "normal," so people who fit into those groups are treated better and given more opportunities.

Jennifer Khan, Vice President of Inclusive Diversity at EllisDon, gives an example of privilege in the workplace: Imagine you're in a meeting with five people of the same race. None of them look like you. These five have the privilege of sharing a common racial background and feeling connected. You may struggle to connect and feel seen. You might not receive the same level of respect or attention, simply because you don't fit the norm.

This same scenario can play out with other aspects of diversity, such as disability, sexual orientation, and religion. Privilege reveals the inequalities in how others are perceived and treated based on an aspect of their identity. Recognizing and addressing these biases can help create a more inclusive workplace for all.

Every person is affected by privilege in some way, big or small. Depending on the circumstances, you may benefit from privilege or you might be negatively impacted by the privilege of others.

By understanding where you hold privilege, Khan says you can better understand the experiences of those who don't have the same advantages—and use that understanding to help others. You can use privilege positively by:

- Speaking up when you see unfair practices or biases at work.
- Being aware of your own biases and working to overcome them.
- Ensuring diverse perspectives are taken into account when making important decisions.

Khan emphasizes that there's no single solution for dealing with privilege and its challenges. Instead, it's an ongoing process of letting go of what you can't control and trusting in your own resilience.

"I've gotten to this point where I've literally made a career out of it," she says. "I've learned to accept that not everyone will agree with me, so I focus on finding support from those who I can connect with in some way."

Promoting diversity and inclusion

Workplaces can offer that support by setting strong expectations about behaviours and attitudes. This can come in the form of policies and procedures that address everyone's needs and take into account everyone's unique circumstances.

"Employers should create strategies, events, and learning opportunities," says Khan. "Make an effort to celebrate diversity and ensure every employee feels included and part of all events."

Individual workers can also be part of the solution by taking a positive, open-minded approach to inclusivity.



Be curious

When you approach diversity with an open mind and a willingness to learn, it becomes clear that no single culture, lifestyle, or race is superior to others. Inclusion is about seeing everyone as equals and treating them that way.

Assume positive intent

When discussing different perspectives, assume that everyone has good intentions, regardless of whether they're in the minority or majority. "Most people want to do their job well, not cause trouble. Be open to their ideas and try to understand where they're coming from," Khan says.

Become an ally

The language people use to talk about diversity and inclusion is changing: they're using new words and phrases to describe a fairer and more equal society. One of these words is "ally." Being an ally means more than just saying you support someone—it's about showing up and being willing

to listen, learn, and grow. Even if you enjoy greater privilege, make mistakes, or don't always say the right thing, you can nonetheless make a difference with your voice and actions.

Address invisible diversity

Invisible diversity refers to characteristics that are not immediately obvious, such as certain disabilities, neurodiversity, and gender identity. Progress has been made in acknowledging these differences, but there is more work to be done—by individuals, by workplaces, and by society as a whole.

Diversity is a fact, but inclusion is a choice. Employers and workers can choose to ensure that diverse and underrepresented groups at our workplaces feel included, respected, and heard, just like everyone else.



Jennifer Khan, Vice President of Inclusive Diversity, EllisDon



Learn more about diversity with IHSA



LISTEN to Episode 84 of the *IHSA Safety Podcast* to hear more from EllisDon's Jennifer Khan about how organizations can promote inclusivity at the workplace: ihساسafetypodcast.ca

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