

Bridging the Gap Between Identity and Social and Emotional Skills

Black Canadians' Perspectives of Social
and Emotional Skills in the Workplace





The Future Skills Centre – Centre des Compétences futures (FSC-CCF) is a forward-thinking centre for research and collaboration dedicated to preparing Canadians for employment success. We believe Canadians should feel confident about the skills they have to succeed in a changing workforce. As a pan-Canadian community, we are collaborating to rigorously identify, test, measure, and share innovative approaches to assessing and developing the skills Canadians need to thrive in the days and years ahead.

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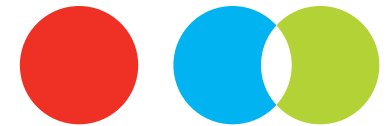
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Key Findings

- Black Canadian respondents often report feeling that they need to change their identity to succeed at work.
- What matters most? Respondents of all racial identities value active listening as a standout social and emotional skill.
- One size doesn't fit all when it comes to the social and emotional skills (SES) that respondents value most in leaders.
- Respondents from different demographic groups value some skills more than others.
- Black Canadian respondents perceive stereotypes as the largest barrier to their ability to communicate effectively in the workplace.

Introduction

Social and emotional skills are highly sought in the labour market. But how do different groups perceive and prioritize them?

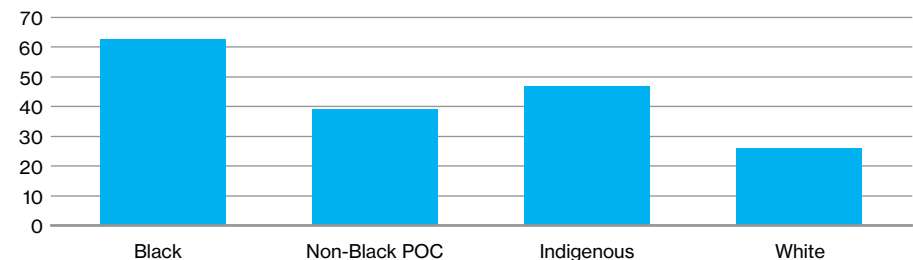
According to previous work by The Conference Board of Canada, the changing nature of work is increasing the demand not only for technical skills, but also for social and emotional skills (SES).¹ SES are associated with employability and include skills like leadership, cultural competence, active listening, problem-solving, resiliency, collaboration, and communication. We surveyed over 9,000 people² to understand how Black professionals perceive the development, expression, and evaluation of SES at work. Our survey also revealed how Black professionals³ viewpoints compare with those of non-Black People(s) of Colour,⁴ Indigenous Peoples, and White professionals. While we recognize that all equity-seeking people may have unique experiences of SES, this briefing focuses mainly on Black Canadians' perspectives.

We found that 62 per cent of Black professionals reported feeling discriminated against at work. This is significantly more than the 39 per cent of non-Black People(s) of Colour, 48 per cent of

Indigenous respondents, and 26 per cent of White respondents who feel the same way. (See Chart 1.) Survey respondents were asked, "Have you ever felt that you were discriminated against at work?" Black respondents who answered "yes" indicated that they perceive discrimination most often through unequal rules or policies (55 per cent), unequal measures of success (38 per cent), and/or unequal access to work assignments (32 per cent). One-fifth of Black respondents (20 per cent) also expressed that they perceived discrimination through being unable to display their identity at work.

Chart 1

Black Canadians Are Most Likely to Report Discrimination at Work
(percentage by race)



Note: Percentage, by race, indicating "yes" to the question: "Have you ever felt that you were discriminated against at work?"

Source: The Conference Board of Canada.

1 Giammarco, Higham, and McKean, *The Future Is Social and Emotional*.

2 The survey sample included 9,232 individuals across Canada, including 1,071 Black respondents; 2,206 non-Black People(s) of Colour; 218 Indigenous Peoples; and 6,186 White respondents. Because of the complex nature of racial identity, multiple responses were permitted. Participants who identified with multiple racial identities were counted for each identity selected, for a total of 9,681 responses.

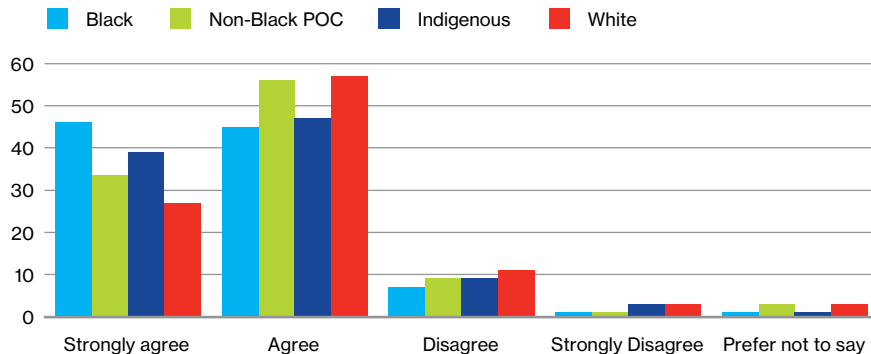
3 Although we recognize the diversity within the Black community, the Indigenous community, and the communities of other People(s) of Colour, we use general terms such as "Black Canadians," "People(s) of Colour," "Indigenous Peoples," "non-Black Canadians," and "BIPOC" to report on quantitative findings in aggregate and to protect the identities of research participants.

4 The category Non-Black People(s) of Colour includes Latino; Asian; South Asian; Person of Colour; Mixed Race, Multiracial, or Biracial respondents, as well as those who identify as "Other". This category does not include respondents who identified as Indigenous peoples.

As demand for SES grows across sectors, the relationship between identity, SES, and perceptions of discrimination could lead to divisions in the workplace. Ninety-one per cent of Black Canadians, compared with 86 per cent of non-Black Canadians, strongly agree or agree that their SES are valued. (See Chart 2). However, our survey indicates that Black Canadians don't feel they can meet SES expectations at work unless they alter some aspect of their identity. These findings underscore how important it is for workplaces to recognize diverse perspectives of SES and create spaces where people feel that they can safely express their skills regardless of their identity.

Chart 2
Black Canadians Are Most Likely to Agree That Their SES Are Valued

(percentage by race)



Note: Percentage, by race, indicating how strongly they agree with the statement: "My social and emotional skills are valued at work."
 Source: The Conference Board of Canada.

Authenticity

Black Canadian Respondents Often Report Feeling the Need to Change Their Identity at Work

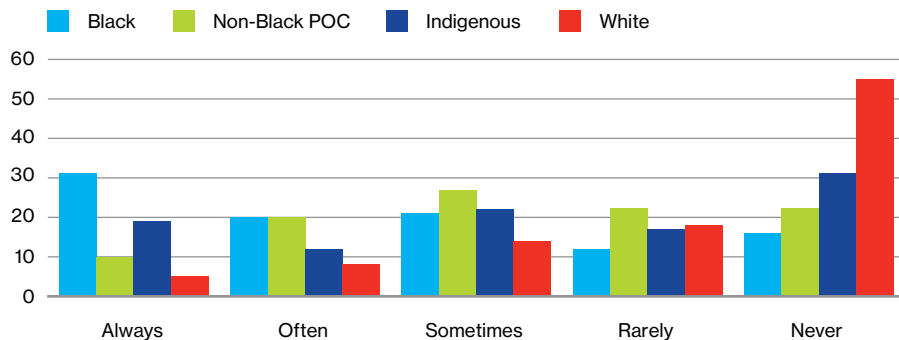
We found that 65 per cent of Black professionals said their skills were rated higher than their colleagues' skills (compared with 55 per cent of non-Black respondents). However, 51 per cent said they always or often felt the need to alter their identity to meet SES expectations at work. In contrast, 30 per cent of non-Black People(s) of Colour, 31 per cent of Indigenous Peoples, and only 13 per cent of White respondents said they changed their identity for the same reasons. (See Chart 3.) This identity altering could involve changes in communication styles—including speech, tone, word choice, personality characteristics, or in behaviours.⁵ We find that the impulse to alter one's identity most often results in changes to verbal communication. For example, 52 per cent of all respondents who edit their identity report changing the way they speak at work. Respondents are more likely to say that they change the way they speak than they are to report changing their body language or their personal appearance.



5 Deloitte, *Black in Canada*; Thorpe-Moscon, Pollack, and Olu-Lafe, *Empowering Workplaces Combat Emotional Tax for People of Colour in Canada*; Banerjee, "An Examination of Factors Affecting Perception of Workplace Discrimination."

This finding mirrors existing research that addresses the challenges that Black professionals face with being authentic at work. For this briefing, authenticity refers to the ability to display all aspects of one’s social identity, including race, ethnicity, gender, and sexuality.⁶ Other studies similar to ours conclude that Black workers feel that they can’t bring their authentic self to work to succeed.⁷ These workers often alter or edit their experiences and social identities because of how they believe they will be assessed by their non-Black colleagues. This occurs mostly in sectors that require high levels of social and emotional skills.⁸

Chart 3
Black Canadians Are Most Likely to Feel the Need to Alter Their Identity at Work
 (percentage by race)



Note: Percentage by race responding to the question: “How often, if ever, do you feel like you need to alter your racial, ethnic, or gender identity to meet social and emotional skill expectations at work?”
 Source: The Conference Board of Canada.

6 Kernis and Goldman, “A Multicomponent Conceptualization of Authenticity.”
 7 A few recent North American studies on Black professional workplace experiences and authenticity include Grandey, Houston, and Avery, “Fake It to Make It?”; Sisco, “Race-Conscious Career Development”; Hall, Everett, and Hamilton-Mason, “Black Women Talk About Workplace Stress”; and Armstrong and Mitchell, “Shifting Identities.”
 8 Hasford, “Dominant Cultural Narratives.”

Active Listening

Respondents Value Active Listening

Survey respondents see active listening as the most important SES. (See Chart 4.) Over 60 per cent also see others’ lack of effective active listening skills as a challenge at work. Active listening refers to “giving full attention to what other people are saying, taking time to understand the points being made, asking questions as appropriate, and not interrupting at inappropriate times.”⁹ These findings build on previous Conference Board of Canada research that reveals active listening as a standout SES strength among tourism and hospitality workers.¹⁰ Active listening is also the most in-demand skill for desirable job transitions across industries.¹¹

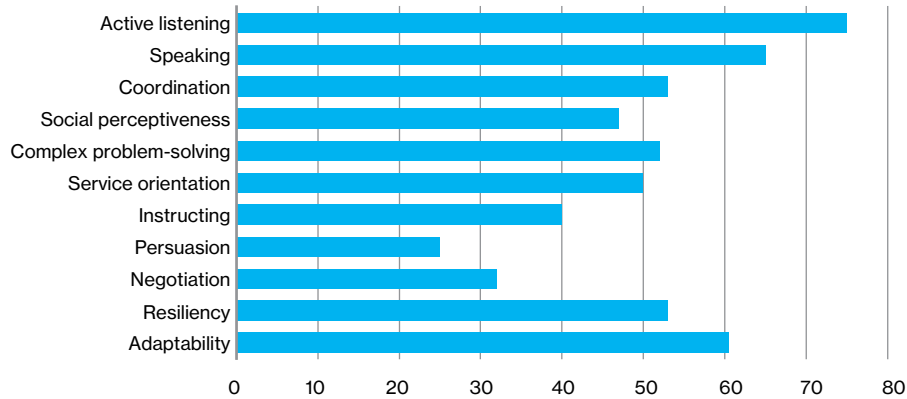
While respondents agree that active listening is necessary for workplace success, the way they value the skill varies. For example, respondents from all demographic groups agree that active listening is very important. But a higher number of Black professionals see this skill as more valuable than other skills: 84 per cent rank it as very important compared with 76 per cent of non-Black Canadians. In addition to valuing active listening to a greater extent than other skills, Black respondents assess their own active listening skills very strongly: 63 per cent of Black professionals say they have very good active listening skills in contrast to just 47 per cent of non-Black professionals. (See Chart 5.)

9 O*NET OnLine, “Skills Search.”
 10 Gorea and Fadila, *Searching for Strengths*.
 11 Hindle, Rao, and Gabler, *A Path Forward: Job Transitions in Canada*.

Strong active listening can increase workers' employability. It can also help build inclusive organizations, as it fosters understanding, empathy, and anti-racism in the workplace.



Chart 4
Survey Respondents See Active Listening as the Most Important SES
 (percentage of respondents)

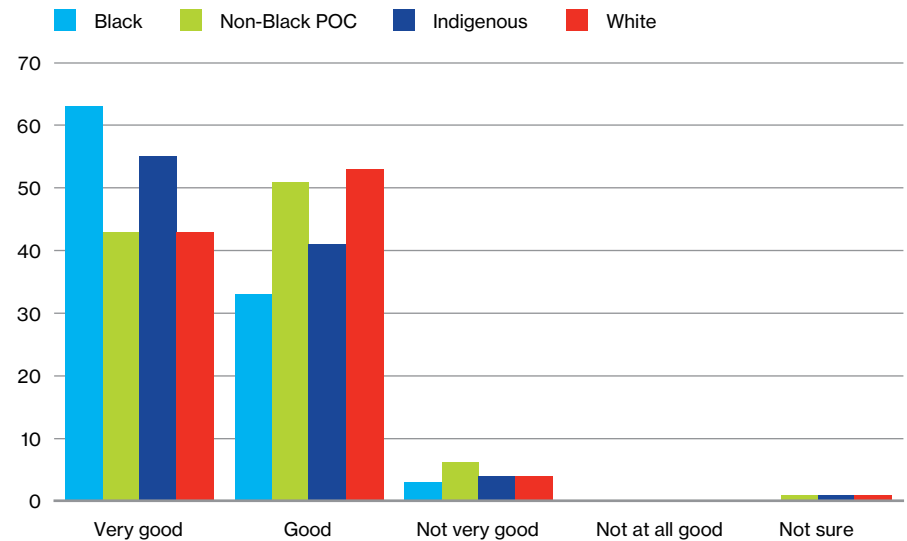


Note: Percentage who indicate which SES they see as very important when asked: "How important are the following skills in your current role?"
 Source: The Conference Board of Canada.

These results have significance for individual workers and organizations alike. Strong active listening can increase workers' employability and help facilitate job transitions.¹² It can also help strengthen other cognitive skills like problem-solving and decision-making.¹³ Additionally, active listening can help build inclusive organizations, as it fosters understanding, empathy, and anti-racism in the workplace.¹⁴

¹² Gorea and Fadila, *Searching for Strengths*.
¹³ Ibid.
¹⁴ Deloitte, *Support Your Black Workforce*.

Chart 5
Black Canadians Are Most Likely to Say That Their Active Listening Skills Are Very Good
 (percentage by race)



Note: Percentage of respondents by race who rate their own active listening when asked: "Please rate your own active listening skills"
 Source: The Conference Board of Canada.



Leadership

One Size Doesn't Fit All

We find that while respondents value skills differently, they also define them inconsistently. For example, when asked which traits they most associate with an effective leader, respondents across all demographic groups identify conflicting traits. Eleven per cent say being informal is essential to strong leadership, while 8 per cent say leaders should be formal. However, respondents from all the different demographic groups surveyed indicate that they value specific leadership traits more than others.

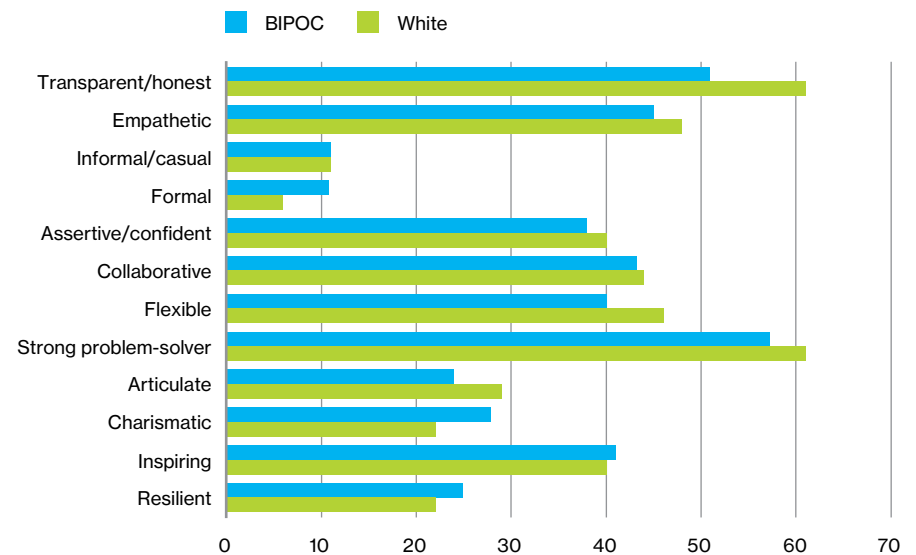
While a large proportion of White respondents see transparency (62 per cent) and strong problem-solving (61 per cent) as necessary to strong leadership, Black, Indigenous, and People of Colour (BIPOC) respondents associate a wider range of traits with leadership. These traits include being collaborative (43 per cent), inspiring (41 per cent), and empathetic (45 per cent) in addition to being transparent (52 per cent) and a strong problem-solver (57 per cent). (See Chart 6.) These differences show that when identifying which SES make a strong leader, a one-size-fits-all approach doesn't work: social and emotional skills are as diverse as the people who possess them. This finding also aligns with research that indicates leaders need to adapt their behaviours depending on whom they're working with to foster employee growth and trust.¹⁵

15 Francisco and Nuqui, "Emergence of a Situational Leadership."

Chart 6

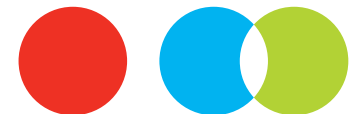
Respondents Indicate That They Value Specific Leadership Traits More Than Others

(percentage of respondents by race)



Note: Percentage of respondents who associate different traits with effective leadership when asked: "Which of the following traits do you most associate with an effective leader? Please select up to five (5) traits."

Source: The Conference Board of Canada.



A lack of consensus on how to define effective leadership, however, could lead to perceptions of inequitable skill evaluation. For instance, if an employee perceives the company's leadership style as formal, but their organization values informal leadership, the employee may feel that their leadership skills are not recognized or evaluated fairly. While we didn't survey this link directly, this connection will be further explored in an upcoming briefing. When asked to rank how strongly they agree with the statement, "I perceive my social and emotional skills as being evaluated fairly," those who disagree or strongly disagree report that unfair assessment of their skills could create barriers to career advancement. Fifty-four per cent of BIPOC respondents who feel their skills were evaluated unfairly perceive wrongful assessment as a barrier to promotion and salary increases. Over half (54 per cent) see it as an obstacle to leadership opportunities. Sixty per cent of Black respondents specifically report that perceptions of unfair SES evaluation impact leadership opportunities the most.



Communication

Black Canadians Perceive Stereotypes as the Largest Communication Barrier

Respondents view communication skills such as active listening and speaking as the most important SES at work. They also consider effective communication, or the ability to clearly convey one's opinions and ideas, as essential. However, other research suggests that communication barriers, including virtual communication challenges, lack of direction, miscommunication, and language and cultural barriers—can affect workplace success.¹⁶

While over half (56 per cent) of Black respondents report always or often facing barriers to effective communication at work, 41 per cent of non-Black respondents indicate that they always or often face these barriers. In fact, Black respondents are more likely to report barriers to communication than respondents of any other individual demographic group, including non-Black People(s) of Colour (41 per cent), Indigenous respondents (45 per cent), and White respondents (34 per cent). (See Chart 7).

There's also a divide between the specific challenges that Black and non-Black respondents view as barriers to communication at work. When asked, "Are any of the following barriers to effective communication at work,"¹⁷ Black respondents are most likely (65 per

¹⁶ Stich, Tarafdar, and Cooper, "Electronic Communication in the Workplace"; Cheng and others, "Identifying English Language Use."

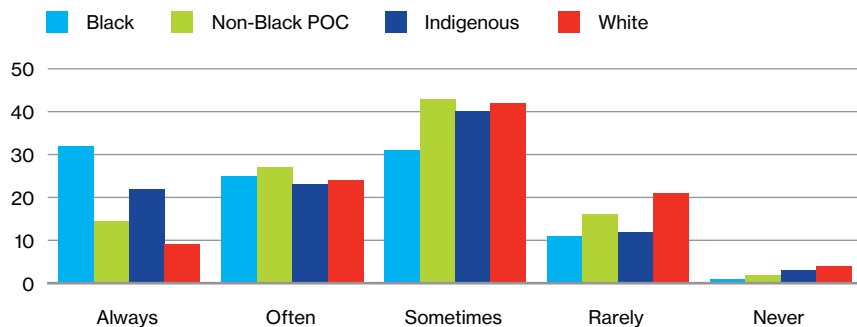
¹⁷ (Q12a) Are any of the following barriers to effective communication at work?

- a. Virtual communications (email, chat, video calls, etc.), b. Reading others' body language,
- c. Others' judging/stereotyping my communication style, d. Others' lack of effective speaking skills
- e. My own lack of effective speaking skills, f. Others' lack of effective listening skills
- g. My own lack of effective listening skills, h. A lack clear direction/management
- i. Difficulty understanding others' cultural communication norms
- j. Others' difficulty understanding my cultural communication norms

cent) to say that others' judging or stereotyping the way they communicate is a barrier to effective communication. Less than half (48 per cent) of non-Black respondents feel the same way. When asked which of the following skills are most negatively impacted by racial, gendered, cultural, sexual orientation, age, and/or role-based stereotyping, Black respondents reported that their ability to perform in a team (45 per cent), speak with others (43 per cent), and interpret others' words and actions (40 per cent) were most negatively impacted.

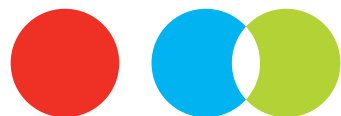
Chart 7
Black Canadians Are Most Likely to Face Barriers to Effective Communication at Work

(percentage by race)



Note: Percentage of respondents by race when asked: "How often do you face barriers to effective communication at work?"

Source: The Conference Board of Canada.



Conclusion

Our results indicate that Black professionals feel the need to manage their professional identities to meet SES expectations and succeed at work. But despite this finding, most Black respondents (91 per cent) feel that their skills are valued. The next stage of this research will build on the themes identified in this briefing through an analysis of over 50 one-on-one interviews.

Specifically, we will expand on the questions we explored in this briefing to better understand how identity impacts perspectives of SES expression and evaluation, the extent to which Black professionals feel they can be authentic in the workplace, and whether they feel their skill strengths are valued. Perceptions and self-reported experiences of SES at work will contextualize survey findings and deepen our understanding of these themes. Findings of this nature are critical for leaders and employers, as they give insight into how organizations can best support employees to reach their full potential. This research will result in a more nuanced sense of how social identities and work environments impact SES, which could help inform anti-racism strategies and mitigate barriers to success for Black professionals.

Appendix A

Methodology

Background

This project was developed to address the critical need for a diversity lens in Canadian SES research. By engaging a diverse community of professionals across the country, the objectives of this research are to understand the similarities and differences between Black Canadians' and non-Black Canadians' experiences of SES. An additional purpose is to establish if and how Black professionals perceive discrimination as impacting the development and assessment of their SES.

Survey

We engaged the market research firm Environics Research, to survey 9,232 individuals across Canada. The survey sample engaged people who were employed at the time of completion. Because of the complex nature of racial identity, multiple responses were permitted. Participants who identified with multiple racial identities were counted for each identity selected, for a total of 9,681 responses. The survey included:

- 1,071 Black respondents
- 217 Latino respondents
- 965 Asian respondents
- 955 South Asian respondents
- 218 Indigenous (First Nations, Métis, Inuk/Inuit/Inuvialuit) respondents
- 155 Person of Colour respondents
- 212 Mixed Race, Multiracial, or Biracial respondents
- 6,186 Caucasian/White respondents
- 193 respondents who identified as "Other"

The gender breakdown of respondents included:

- 4,845 women
- 4,304 men
- 31 gender-fluid people
- 30 non-binary people
- 18 Two-Spirit people
- 4 people who identify as another gender

The age breakdown of respondents comprised:

- 754 18–24 year-olds
- 2,617 25–34 year-olds
- 1,991 35–44 year-olds
- 1,741 45–54 year-olds
- 1,560 55–64 year-olds
- 569 people aged 65 or older

The sample included respondents from:

- Newfoundland and Labrador (141)
- Prince Edward Island (42)
- Nova Scotia (255)
- New Brunswick (194)
- Quebec (2,267)
- Ontario (3,570)
- Manitoba (329)

- Saskatchewan (283)
- Alberta (1,060)
- British Columbia (1,091)

Because this research aims to understand how Black professionals experience SES evaluation, development, and expression, surveying both Black and non-Black Canadian workers allowed us to identify gaps in SES experiences. Survey questions were divided into five sections:

1. Screening questions
2. Demographics
3. SES definitions and importance
4. SES self-assessment and understanding
5. Perceptions of discrimination in the workplace

To analyze the data, we used descriptive statistics that included mean; frequency of responses to a question; standard deviation; significance tests; differences in group-to-group and within groupings, based on segmentation information; standard and population proportion-weighted averages for Likert scale questions; and agree/disagree questions.

Appendix B

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